



مؤسسة قرطبة  
*The Cordoba Foundation*

## Government “Review” into the Muslim Brotherhood in Britain: *Unravelling the Motives*

28 May 2014 - Royal Overseas House



The Cordoba Foundation convened a timely and important seminar at the Royal Overseas League, Green Park in London, which analysed the British Prime Minister’s decision to conduct a “review” into the Muslim Brotherhood in Britain. The seminar examined the motivations and the potential outcomes of the review.

A distinguished panel comprised of Lord Ken Macdonald QC, journalist Peter Osborne, Dr Maha Azzam, Chair of Egyptians for Democracy UK, Mona al-Qazzaz, Muslim Brotherhood spokeswoman and Dr Anas Altikriti, CEO of The Cordoba Foundation, addressed the topic from numerous angles and took questions from the floor.

The packed audience included academics, policy-makers, reporters and journalists, diplomats, campaigners, and faith and community leaders.

## THE PANEL

### Lord Ken Macdonald QC

The Warden of Wadham College and one of the founders of Matrix Chambers, he was Director of Public Prosecutions from 2003 to 2008, the first leading defence lawyer to have been appointed to that post. In 2007, he was knighted for services to the law. *The Times* editorial described him as 'an exemplary figure' who had transformed his office into a 'respected public role'.



### Dr Maha Azzam

A prominent academic specialising in research on Political Islam, Islam and globalisation, Middle East politics and Islamist groups in the Middle East with particular reference to Egypt. She is the Chair of Egyptians for Democracy (UK) and Deputy Head of the International Coalition for Egyptians Abroad (ICEGA).



### Dr Anas Altikriti

Founder and CEO of The Cordoba Foundation, Director of the Nyon Process - UN Alliance of Civilisations; Global Strategy Consultant and a Hostage Negotiator having, successfully secured the release of 11 hostages, including Christian peace campaigner Norman Kember.



### Peter Osborne

Chief Political Commentator of the *Daily Telegraph* and reports for Channel 4's *Dispatches* and *Unreported World*, he is the author of *The Triumph of the Political Class*. He was voted Columnist of the Year at the Press Awards in 2013.



### Mona Al Qazzaz

A PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge and a human rights advocate, she is a spokeswoman for the Muslim Brotherhood in the UK. Her father and brother are detained in Egyptian prisons following the military coup in July 2013.





## KEY POINTS FROM THE PANEL

**Dr Anas Altikriti** framed the discussion by saying that the seminar was intended to analyse and understand the purpose, aims and motivations of the government review into the Muslim Brotherhood and the likely outcomes. Importantly, the seminar sought to look at ways of “moving forward whatever the outcome of the ‘review’”. He seized the opportunity to remind the audience that The Cordoba Foundation is neither affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, nor a lobby group for the movement. He characterised the Muslim Brotherhood as a “representative idea” of moderate Islam that renounces violence. He also expressed that the Egyptian situation should be “taken as a case study to form the response of European governments to what happens in areas as sensitive as those in the Middle East”.



**Mona al-Qazzaz** spoke about the historical context of the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and their aims as a group devoted to reviving the Islamic faith and supporting personal and social development through a “holistic understanding of Islam”. She stressed that the Muslim Brotherhood does not endorse any particular school of thought, and that “it believes in education, civic engagement and campaigning to instigate change.” It supports grassroots activities such as alleviating poverty and fully condemns violence”.

She described the military coup which forcefully removed President Morsi as the “worst massacres in history” experienced by the Muslim Brotherhood. Over 41,000 political prisoners languish in Egyptian jails, resulting in a state of fear, violations of human rights and widespread corruption, added al-Qazzaz. “We had a years of hope that was plunged into darkness”.

Al-Qazzaz reminded that the Muslim Brotherhood is fully involved in the democratic process,

and participated as often as possible in elections. She quoted the ousted Egyptian president, Dr Mohammad Morsi who remarked, “Democracy is an idea for which I am prepared to die for.”

She also explained that in 2011, the UK Government was among the very first countries to which Egypt sent an official delegation. Moreover, shortly before the coup, President Morsi had received an official invitation from the British government to visit London. Al-Qazzaz stressed that whatever foreign governments decide, it will not influence young Egyptians, 40% of whom “still support President Morsi”, and are not “willing to support dictatorships again.”

**Lord Macdonald** addressed the precise nature of the UK government’s “review”, which he explained was not an investigation but an “internal review of the philosophy, the impact, the influence at home and abroad of the Muslim Brotherhood”. The Prime Minister is expected to receive the report in late July and will make a public announcement afterwards.



Lord Macdonald stressed that “the review should take in to context that the Freedom and Justice Party was founded in the aftermath of a revolution following elections that were deemed free and fair. Mohammad Morsi then won presidential elections with 51 per cent of the vote. There was a seizure of power by the military in July 2013 and the democratically elected government was ousted”. He explained that many of those who were active in the government were imprisoned under conditions which were far from due process and President Morsi himself was imprisoned and has not yet been brought to trial.

He further pointed out that the review should also take into account the kidnapping, torture and farcical mass trials, mass death sentences, during which some of those being charged were not even present when they were condemned to death by hanging during “farcical court hearings”.



Quoting analysis by the BBC's Kevin Connolly Lord Macdonald noted that the regime had "overdone it" during the elections and alienated Egyptians across the country. When the UK government considers evidence for the review, it should take into account three things:

- o The UK has a long history of giving refuge to political exiles
- o The British state is committed to peaceful and democratic politics
- o The British government is committed to the encouragement of these values around the world.



He added that the review should usefully contrast the reaction of the Muslim brotherhood and the FJP to the ousting of power to the reactions of the military regime in Egypt currently. Questioned about the trade links between the UK and Saudi Arabia, Lord Macdonald agreed that "the commercial interests often outweigh the philosophical interests" and that there is a need to question the "alliances with governments so hostile to democracy and human rights."

Dr Maha Azzam described the Muslim Brotherhood as the most important, significant and widespread social and political movement in a vast number of Muslim majority countries throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. "This tells us about the breadth and importance of the organisation. The group is intrinsically connected to society".

The movement has been subjected to attacks from dictators for decades because it stood against corruption, dictatorship, autocracy, hypocrisy and repression. Such regimes feel "threatened by the equation of Islam and Democracy because it may affect their lack of accountability, lack of transparency and the corruption". Claims by dictators that the Muslim Brotherhood is alien to society

are part of the general attacks of dictatorships on society. The fact that the situation in Egypt is “not a struggle between democracy and Islam but between democracy and authoritarianism”, clarified Azzam.

The Muslim Brotherhood remains “the strongest voice for freedom and electoral politics in the Middle East”. That is why an understanding of this movement is so important, stressed Azzam.



In terms of the commitment of the Muslim Brotherhood to the ideals and principles of democracy, Azzam argued the movement's record is clear. Despite being subjected to violent repression, castigation as an extremist and terrorist organization, amongst other things, the movement engaged in the political process whenever there was an opening for engagement. “Many were parliamentarians. Its members and leaders participated in free and fair elections playing by the rules of the game”. They were the ones who came out on top every time people voted, and they stuck to the principles of the democratic process. “They upheld democratic values, they admit to certain mistakes and they did not try to bring down the democratic process”. After the coup the Muslim Brotherhood and their coalition partners came out in peaceful protest, insisting on peace and calling for a return to democracy.

Strikingly, it is the Brotherhood's commitment to democracy and peaceful engagement, Azzam adds that led to “regional governments and regimes [feeling] threatened by the combination of Islam and democracy because it could bring about greater transparency and end corruption, the values that the Brotherhood upheld”.



Azzam provided further insight into President Morsi whilst in power briefly. “One of Morsi’s first visits after his elections was to Saudi Arabia to develop Egypt’s economy – not to export the Muslim Brotherhood, because they recognised a need to put Egypt’s economic interests first”. Egypt has high levels of corruption. The rise of the Brotherhood through free and fair elections created fear in those who did not want to see reform in Egypt or the region. The fear of the Brotherhood was not a fear of Islamist politics but a fear of development. In the case of Egypt, the challenges to all democrats come from the corruption and the decaying institutions.

With the above in mind, Azzam advanced the need for a review into UK policy towards the Middle East and Egypt in particular. The idea that values and interests are separate to UK foreign policy needs to be re-evaluated. The UK and democratic societies need to realise that this is a struggle between democracy and autocracy, not democracy and the Muslim Brotherhood.



**Peter Osborne** opened his presentation by expressing his support and solidarity with “all journalists held in Egyptian jails”, and demanded their swift release. He described the current situation in Egypt as “outrageous”, and that the regime is disgracing itself as a pariah state by holding journalists captive.

He talked about the lack of relevance of UK’s foreign policy, so much so that Prime Minister Cameron “does not know what he is talking about quite a lot of the time when it comes to foreign policy”. This was a reference to the misunderstanding concerning the Muslim Brotherhood, despite it being “a democratic form of Islam”. He also stressed that there is “a problem about the engagement of mainstream British politicians and mainstream British Muslims.” He recalled attending Britain’s largest Muslim event last year, the Global Peace and Unity Event by the Islam Channel in London Docklands, where there was no engagement of mainstream British MPs and or government figures. Likewise, the government was not engaging with important Muslim organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain.



On the issue of the government review into the Muslim Brotherhood, Osborne argued that the fact that John Jenkins being in-charge of the review clearly shows the pressure from Saudi Arabia. “Saudi Arabia is scared of democracy compared to their autocracy”, said Osborne and that “there is a clear connection between the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and the general treatment of Muslim organisations”.



**Dr Anas Altikriti** ended by reminding that the key question is “whether Western democracies are comfortable with the outcome of democratic processes in the Muslim world, whatever the outcome is”. Responding to questions as to why there is a fear of the government review into the Muslim Brotherhood if it has nothing to hide, Altikriti echoed remarks of Azzam and others, explaining that any negative characterisation of the Brotherhood – for example elements of the movement maybe “extremist” or “violent” - will cast aspersions on the whole movement and its school of thought. This will be conveniently used as a pretext by lazy journalists, academics and those bent on tarnishing the movement and Muslims in general in a negative light. It would not be surprising if this in turn leads to further distrust by British Muslims of our government, and also contribute to radicalisation amongst some sections of the community because they will view this as yet another unfair attack and portrayal of Muslims and Islamic organisations.

Altikriti concluded that “we are not opposed to the review itself but the terms and process involved. It is hoped that the concerns raised in tonight’s meeting as well as the explanations offered by our distinguished panel members are useful and pertinent. We are happy that the official position of the Muslim Brotherhood in Britain is for engagement and cooperation with the review. It would make for a better resolution should the British government reciprocate this by engaging the Brotherhood directly to better-understand the movement and its influence in Britain and elsewhere”.

*The event ended with a thought-provoking panel discussion, where members of the audience were able to put questions to the speakers and engage in discussion.*

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