

Political Islam: Trends, Trajectory and Future Prospects

By Hussein Solomon¹

'The white man crushes us underfoot while we teach our children about his civilisation, his universal principles and noble objectives ... We are endowing our children with amazement and respect for the master who tramples our honour and enslaves us. Let us instead plant the seeds of hatred, disgust, and revenge in the souls of these children from the time their nails are soft that the white man is the enemy of humanity, and that they should destroy him at the first opportunity'

- Syed Qutb²

Abstract

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, journalists, academics and policy makers were all asking the crucial question whether Islam is compatible with democracy, whether common ground can be found between the secular and the sacred? This paper begins by providing an overview of political Islam and argues that in its current manifestation it is fundamentally antithetical to liberal democracy. The one year rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt proves this assertion as does the over two decades Islamists have been in power in the Sudan. It is, however, argued that the very failures in Islamist governance have intensified the search for a middle ground between Islamist theology and the Westphalian state. The paper also explores the instrumentalization of religion in the case of Somalia and warns against the labeling of a conflict as religious on the mere basis of its religious overtones.

Key words: Islam, Islamism, secular, Egypt, Sudan, Somalia

Introduction

Across Africa, there seems to be a resurgence of political Islam, or what is sometimes referred to as Islamism. In its most militant form, political Islam has seen Al Qaeda's presence in at least 19 African countries³. Across North-West Africa, we have witnessed the strengthening of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram (Western Education is Forbidden) in Nigeria, Ansar Din (Defenders of the Faith) in Mali and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa. Meanwhile, in Somalia Al Shabab (The Youth) has attempted to run their own Islamic state according to a strict interpretation of Islamic shari'a law. In Egypt

and Tunisia, following the tectonic changes accompanying the so-called Arab Spring, we have seen Islamist parties in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood and An Nahda coming to

the fore. Political Islam has also come to the fore in post-Gaddafi Libya (think here of the various Islamist militias controlling certain parts of the country) and in a more muted form in Morocco. In Sudan, meanwhile, an Islamist government has been in power for over two decades.

What this paper seeks to do is first to explore the phenomenon of political Islam and to examine its manifestation on the African continent. It also seeks to provide a constructive alternative to the existing paradigms regarding the future of political Islam.

Understanding Political Islam/Islamism

Political Islam or Islamism has been described by Zeynep Kuru and Ahmet Kuru⁴ as “... *an ideology that emerged in the twentieth century in reaction to colonialism and modernization. Political Islamism aims to create an ‘Islamic state’ ruled according to the Shari’a. Although political Islamist movements can be characterized as part of the Islamic religious resurgence, these movements are primarily political. Political Islamists regard the foundation of the Islamic state as the sine qua non for the attainment of a complete Muslim life. The key ideological components of the political Islamists programme are: taking the Quran as the source of political, legal and social systems; and claiming to return to the example of the Prophet Muhammed*”.

The Islamic tradition of tolerance has been increasingly displaced by what Abdul Hadi Palazzi⁵ terms ‘Islamism’ or Political Islam with its obsession regarding the capture of political power. Islamism is a 20th century totalitarian ideology that seeks to mould Islamic religious tradition to serve narrow political ends of domination. Khaled Abou El Fadl also refers to this as a ‘puritanical’ tradition within Islam noted for its ‘*fanatical reductionism and narrow-minded literalism*’⁶. Whilst having been moulded and coming together as a somewhat coherent ideology in the 20th century, its theological roots go all the way back to the 13th century to the time of Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah (CE 1263-1328)⁷. As with other totalitarian ideologies of that blighted century, Islamism shares more characteristics with Nazism and Fascism than it does with the Qur’anic teachings alluded to earlier. Islamism capitalizes on

feelings of humiliation and powerlessness that Muslims started feeling in the early 20th century with Western encroachment and colonialism, the dismantlement of the Ottoman Caliphate and the economic backwardness of their societies in relation to their Western

counterparts. In this one could draw parallels with how Adolf Hitler manipulated the feelings of humiliation experienced by the German people at the end of World War I following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.

As with other totalitarian ideologies, Islamists do not tolerate difference or accept the proverbial 'other'. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (CE 1703-1792) famously declared all those who did not conform to his purist vision of Islam to be apostates and worthy of death⁸. This intolerance was also vividly portrayed when the Taliban desecrated the giant Buddhas that were sculpted out of the walls of Afghanistan's mountains between the third and fourth centuries⁹. It is also seen in the desecration of Sufi shrines in northern Mali, Somalia and Nigeria as well as the repeated attacks on churches in Egypt, Pakistan and Indonesia. Intolerance is also seen in the virulent anti-Semitism of Islamists – another characteristic they share with the Nazis. Notions of Jews controlling the world feature prominently in their discourse as a perusal of the Hamas Covenant will testify to. It seems that Muslims have forgotten that the Prophet married a Jewish woman, that he attended the funeral of a Jewish man and that he left his armour with his Jewish neighbour for safe-keeping – the latter being symbolic of the utmost trust he had in his neighbour.

Discussion, dialogue and open debate are anathema to these Islamo-fascists. Maulana Abul Ala-Maududi (CE 1903-1979) the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami organization in Pakistan and the ideological father of the Taliban movement in Pakistan is perhaps the best exemplar on the use of force and coercion to dealing with difference. He had this to say, '*... force may be used, in fact should be used to prevent people from doing wrong. Non-Muslim countries and cultures cannot be allowed to practice immoral deeds*'¹⁰. What is important to note here is the emphasis on non-Muslim countries and societies. Indeed Maududi himself was to call for a universal jihad. In this Islamists, too, share another characteristic with the Communists, Fascists and Nazis of the past – that of global domination¹¹. Maududi argued, that '*Islam does not want to bring about the revolution in one country or a few countries. It wants to spread it to the entire world. Although it is the duty of the Muslim Party to bring this*

*revolution first to its own nation, its ultimate goal is world revolution*¹². Similar sentiments were also expressed by the Egyptian Hassan al Banna (1906-1949), founder and Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, *'It is the nature of Islam to dominate and not to be dominated, to impose its laws on all nations and to extend its power to the entire planet'*¹³.

Like Fascism and Nazism, Islamism is utopian¹⁴. They put forth a vision of an ideal society drawing inspiration from an idealized 7th century Arabia which is more the result of myth than the product of historical fact. Consider the myth around the so-called 'rashidun', - the four rightly guided caliphs - to succeed the Prophet Muhammed. What Islamists politely omit in their discussion of the reign of the first four caliphs is the fact that three of the four caliphs were assassinated; that nepotism, political unrest and outright civil war plagued their reign¹⁵.

As with other totalitarian ideologies, Islamists are quite adept at blaming others for their problems. It hardly needs reminding that the Muslim world was already in decline by the time Napoleon entered Egypt in the eighteenth century. Indeed it was precisely because of their internal decay that allowed much of the Muslim world to be colonized so speedily. More contemporaneously, this attitude is seen in Islamists refusing to take responsibility for the ills of their own country or region and prefer conspiracy theories such as the West wanting to undermine Islamic nations. As Thomas Friedman put it so succinctly, *'Is it America's fault that Korea had the same per capita income in the 1950s as many Arab states but Korea has managed its development so much better since that it now dwarfs all Arab economies'*¹⁶. This is indeed the core of the problem of Islamists. We know what they are against (almost everything) but what are they for? I am all for an intifada for an independent Palestine, but what should an independent Palestine look like? For that matter, what about an intifada for women's rights, democratic governance, press freedom and an end to nepotism and corruption, cronyism, and the persecution of minorities in Muslim countries?

Coupled with their desire to not look at their own warts, Islamists also betray a selective amnesia of history. When looking at the glory days of Muslim influence on world history they tend to omit the fact that this period also coincided with a period when the Muslim world was at its most open – not closed. As Friedman again notes, *'The Muslim world reached the zenith of its influence in the Middle Ages – when it preserved the best of classical Greek and Roman teachings, and inspired breakthroughs in mathematics, science, medicine and*

*philosophy. That is also when Islam was at its most open to the world, when it enriched, and was enriched by the Christian, Greek and Jewish communities in its midst*¹⁷. A similar case of historical amnesia is Osama bin Laden's lament of the passing of the Ottoman caliphate. However, the Ottoman caliphate was derived less from Islamic principles and more on the Byzantine model of absolute monarchy¹⁸. Despite their affinity to the caliphate, Islamists

would do well to recall the sagely words of Sheikh 'Abd ar-Raziq, *'The caliphate was not only neglected by the Qu'ran, which never so much as evoked it, but also by the Sunna which does not mention it at all*¹⁹.

Islamists also share other characteristics with their fellow ideologues to the right and left of the political spectrum. Violence and intimidation are part of the tools of the propagation of their creed. Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed, *'Whatever good there is exists thanks to the sword and in the shadow of the sword! People cannot be made obedient except with the sword! The word is the key to paradise, which can only be opened for holy warriors*²⁰. For Maududi the act of religious worship lost its spiritual purposes and was merely militarized. Thus he noted, *'The prayers, fasting, charity and pilgrimage have been prescribed to prepare and train us for this purpose of jihad. All the governments in the world give their armies special and specific training, their police and civil service too. In the same way, Islam also trains those who join its service – then requires them to go to jihad and establish the government of God*²¹. Indeed Maududi argued that jihad was the central tenet of Islam. No scholar or cleric before him made such a claim – placing jihad on equal footing as the Five Pillars of Islam²². In the process, Maududi was more than just interpreting Islam – he was reinventing it! A few years later, the Egyptian Mohammed Abdus Salam Faraj penned a treatise entitled *Jihad: The Absent Obligation* where he stated, *'It is clear that jihad is now obligatory upon every Muslim*²³. Suddenly Islam moved from having five pillars to six with the inclusion of jihad – and the Islamists idea of jihad at that. Of course both Maududi and Faraj were borrowing from Ibn Taymiyya here. In 1300 already he wrote, *'To fight in defence of religion is a collective duty; there is no other duty after belief than fighting the enemy who is corrupting our life and our religion*²⁴.

Indeed, more than re-inventing, Islamists were corrupting Islam at almost every turn. Qur'anic prohibitions on hostage taking and treatment of prisoners were jettisoned whether

by Iranians taking American hostages in Tehran or Hezbollah and Hamas in Lebanon and Gaza respectively. Qur'anic verses 2: 178; 8: 168; 24:34 and 47:5 forbid the taking of hostages except during a conventional war. Even then, these should be treated with dignity and respect and should be freed as soon as possible with the captor obliged to contribute to the ransom from his own resources²⁵. Were the Islamist Chechens who entered the elementary school in Beslan on 1 September 2004 keeping hundreds of young children captive for three days aware of these Islamic prohibitions or did it not matter? Some of these children died from dehydration as a result of the summer heat, others were killed when bombs were detonated, collapsing the roof and igniting a raging fire²⁶.

This is not the only Qur'anic proscription that Islamists flout. Mohamed Hafez, for instance, points out that suicide terrorism violates at least three Islamic prohibitions: that against suicide, against the killing of innocents, and against the killing of Muslims²⁷. How did these Islamists justify this? Ayatollah Fadlallah, the recently deceased spiritual mentor of Hezbollah, disingenuously justified such acts as hostage-taking and suicide terrorism on the bases that extreme circumstances require extreme acts²⁸. This sounds depressingly similar to the end justifies the means argument and like that argument is equally morally bankrupt. How can we as Muslims justify such just moral relativism is beyond my comprehension.

Again and yet again, Islam is corrupted and betrayed by these Islamists. The Wahhabi predilection to brand other Muslims as apostates, infidels, unbelievers or heretics was denounced by none other than Al-Wahhab's own brother Sulayman who pointed out that it violates at least fifty-two traditions of the Prophet and that of his Companions. In other words, it is a sin to accuse a Muslim of heresy or being an unbeliever²⁹.

Organizationally, too, they share common features with other totalitarian organizations. The organizational structure of many Islamist organizations, for instance, bears striking similarities with the Leninist ideal of the vanguard party. Here it was Syed Qutb more than any other thinker who injected the notion of a vanguard party into the prevailing Islamist discourse. *There should be a vanguard to set out with this determination [to achieve world dominion for Islam]*, he had declared on the eve of his execution by Egypt's Nasser³⁰. This notion of the vanguard party is clearly seen in the current recruitment and structure of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Becoming a fully-fledged member of the Brotherhood can take

up to eight years as aspirant members move from *muhib* (follower) to *muayyad* (supporter) to *muntasib* (affiliated) to *muntazim* (organizer) to *ach'amal* (fully-fledged Brother)³¹. Throughout this period, Eric Traeger³² noted prospective members are observed for their loyalty to the cause and also indoctrinated in the Brotherhood's curriculum.

Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949)³³, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has subsequently spawned several other Islamist groups, clearly demonstrated his disdain for democracy when he opposed to the establishment of political parties and wanted to have all civil servants undergo religious training. This was a sure way towards a one-party state and something I am convinced that both Hitler and Mussolini would have felt comfortable with.

As with Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler, Islamists seek to capture state power in order to herald their New Order. This is despite the fact that radical political Islamists who seek to capture state power with a view to transform it into an Islamic state would do well to review Islamic history with a sense of humility – a history where kleptocratic political elites pursued narrow interests dressed up in Islamic rhetoric. Caliph Harun al-Rashid (CE 786-809), for instance, referred to himself as the 'Shadow of God on Earth' and got religious scholars and clerics to argue that the duty of citizens must be to obey the caliph irrespective of his religious credentials³⁴.

This latter point is best illustrated in contemporary Iran where we see a tiny theocratic elite willing to murder young students on the streets of Tehran in order to remain in power³⁵. Where politics merge with religion, religion inevitably suffers and we are all spiritually poorer. This is the real significance of the theological justification that Ayatollah Khomeini came up with - the concept of *velayat-e-faqih*- the rule of the supreme jurist³⁶. Thus, according to Articles 56 and 57 of the Iranian Constitution, the guardian or supreme religious leader holds God's absolute sovereignty over the world and man. In the process, elections and the democratic will of the people that it represents become so passé.

Indeed the Islamist's ideal state increasingly resembles Stalin's gulag. Here it is important to understand what Maududi's government of God consists of. According to Maududi, *'In our domain we will neither allow any Muslim to change his religion nor allow any other religion to propagate its faith. Whenever the death penalty for apostasy is enforced in a new Islamic state, then Muslims are kept within Islam's fold. But there is a danger that a large number of*

hypocrites will live alongside them. They will pose a danger of treason. My solution to the problem is this. That whenever an Islamic revolution takes place, non-practicing Muslims should, within one year, declare their turning away from Islam and get out of Muslim society.

After one year, all born Muslims will be considered Muslim. All Islamic law should be enforced upon them. They will be forced to practice all the tenets of their religion and, if anyone wishes to leave Islam, he will be executed³⁷.

It is important to recognize that whilst there are differences between Al Qaeda's terrorists and the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, for instance – their overall objectives remain the same. Moreover their rejection of political pluralism and the proverbial other is deeply ingrained. Having examined, in brief, the underlying ideology of Islamism, we now turn to some concrete case studies to examine its manifestation on the African continent.

Egypt: Between the Ideal of Political Islam and the Reality of Political Desolation

When President Morsi and his Muslim Brothers came to power over a year ago, some commentators such as myself were ecstatic. While recognizing the dangers inherent in their Islamist ideology, I thought that like Turkey's Islamist AKP party, they would self-moderate. After all, all politics is about compromise. I also assumed that the Muslim Brotherhood's ascent to power might also hold promise further afield – in that they would also get Hamas to moderate their stance. For a time, my analysis seemed correct. After all, it was Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood who brokered the cease-fire between Israel and Hamas³⁸. Ultimately, however, my analysis was wrong.

Unfortunately, the honeymoon between the Egyptian people and Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood was not to last. Far from breaking with 6,000 years of Egyptian authoritarian rule, Morsi was perpetuating it. Fareed Zakaria referred to this as an 'illiberal democracy' which he defined as "...the troubling phenomenon of elected governments systematically abusing individual rights and depriving people of liberty³⁹". Far from attempting to reach out to the 48 percent of the electorate who did not vote for him, Morsi behaved as if he was accountable only to the Muslim Brotherhood⁴⁰. He also seemed to have forgotten that the 52 percent of the electorate who had voted for him also included many liberals who did not wish to vote for the other candidate – a former Mubarak-era Prime Minister. Worse, under Morsi,

the distinction between party and government became blurred with many key decisions being taken in the office of the Muslim Brotherhood's Supreme Guide⁴¹. Given the polarised nature of Egyptian politics, it would have been politically astute for Morsi to reach out to the political opposition. Instead, he sought to ensure that almost every key position was filled by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. One of his more controversial appointments was the selection on 16th June 2013 of a member of the Islamic Group to the position of Governor of Luxor. In 1997, this person took part in a massacre of Coptic Christians, police and 58 foreign tourists in Luxor⁴². To say that his appointment was insensitive to the citizens of Luxor would be an under-statement!

At every step, the authoritarian impulse of the Muslim Brotherhood was self-evident. His attempt to undermine the independence of the courts, the media, a neutral civil service, army and police was deeply resented. His attempt to legislate through a Senate which only represented 10 percent of voters was widely condemned⁴³. His decree to place himself above the judiciary repulsed many while the Brotherhood's decision to adopt a new constitution without consensus alienated ever more Egyptians⁴⁴. Worse, still, was the general incompetence of the Muslim Brotherhood whilst in power this past year. Foreign exchange reserves and the Egyptian currency have both plummeted, whilst inflation spiraled upwards. Youth unemployment passed a staggering 40 percent under Morsi's watch, whilst electricity blackouts and petrol shortages became the norm. Crime, meanwhile, soared with the murder rate having tripled since the revolution. It was however, not only urban dwellers who suffered under the incompetence of the Muslim Brotherhood. Farmers, too, were not being paid for the wheat that they produced⁴⁵. Religious minorities also expressed great unease under Muslim Brotherhood rule. When armed thugs would attack Coptic Christians and Shia Muslims, Morsi remained silent⁴⁶.

Faced with mounting criticism and public protest, Morsi remained defiant. In November, 2012 the chief of Egypt's armed forces – General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi - attempted to break the impasse between the Muslim Brotherhood and the political opposition as well as various civil society formations by inviting Morsi to a lunch together with other political and civil society leaders. Morsi, however, spurned the invitation very publicly - earning him the ire of the military⁴⁷. Under the circumstances, the youth mobilized under the banner of Tamarod (meaning rebel) launching a signature campaign calling on Morsi to go. By June 29th 2013,

22 million signatures were collected⁴⁸. Morsi's continued defiance resulted in people going to the streets once more. 14 million Egyptians took to the streets calling on Morsi to leave⁴⁹. Morsi's continued recalcitrance in the wake of another appeal from the military to reach an accommodation with the opposition, resulted in his eventual ouster.

In retrospect it is clear that my initial optimistic assessment of the Muslim Brotherhood was based more on hope than hard analysis of the nature of the beast itself – more specifically the ideology driving the Muslim Brotherhood. It is to this ideology that we now turn since the one year the Muslim Brotherhood was in power illustrated, in my view, the failure of political Islam.

Islamists run into problems since only one percent about Islam is actually about politics⁵⁰. Given the paucity of the Islamist intellectual project they have turned to virtue. Leaders are chosen on the basis of their virtue (their piety really); the state exists to create virtuous Muslims, etc. The French social scientist Olivier Roy⁵¹ is scathing about this: "*There is no true Islamist political thought, because Islamism rejects political philosophy and the human sciences as such. The magical appeal to virtue masks the impossibility of defining the Islamist political programme in terms of the social reality*". Consider the following: whilst Islamists spend much of their energy on the capture of political power, they have not reflected on the nature of political institutions and how they are supposed to function. Similarly, whilst the amir or leader occupies central space in the Islamist polity, there is little thought on how he is to be selected (other than piety), what mandate he has, whether he has term limits, mechanisms of accountability and so forth. Should we then perhaps be surprised at the incompetence displayed by the Muslim Brotherhood once in power?

Even more importantly, for the subject of our discussion, is the centralizing, authoritarian tendencies displayed by Islamists – seeking to monopolize all power, whilst stifling dissent. Imbued with the arrogance of those who believe that they speak on behalf of God, the party model often adopted by these latter day fascists is the Leninist model, "*...presenting itself as an avant-garde aiming to conquer power and denying legitimacy of all other parties*"⁵². It is in this vein that Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood sought to govern Egypt and failed so dismally. Ultimately the failure reflects the failure of Political Islam. As I write, news reports indicate that Tunisia's Islamists are also facing a popular revolt whilst in Tripoli, the Muslim

Brotherhood's offices have been attacked by crowds of Libyans who are resisting this kind of authoritarianism.

Islamist Sudan: Growing Authoritarianism and Incompetence

Interesting as the case study of Egypt is, Sudan presents a far better perspective on why Islamist governance is incompatible with effective and responsive governance in a

democratic policy. The Islamists here, after all, have been in power for more than two decades. The Sudanese Islamist movement developed as an off-shoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the mid-1940s and in 1954 was formally constituted as the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood Organization. A decade later, in 1964, it established itself as the Islamic Charter Front and sought to lobby for an Islamic constitution for a Sudan ruled by Islamic shari'a law⁵³. The rise of the fortunes of the Islamists in Sudan was intrinsically linked to the charismatic leadership of the Muslim intellectual and Islamist, Dr. Hassan `Abdullah al-Turabi⁵⁴.

The obsession for political power is clearly seen in Turabi's Islamists approach when General Nimeiri seized power in a military coup in May, 1969. Turabi and his party allied themselves with Nimeiri's military government and were soon reaping the political and economic advantages this collaboration provided to them. Islamists soon came to occupy senior positions in various government departments, including its security forces, and Turabi himself was appointed Attorney-General in 1979⁵⁵. Being the only political party to legally operate, the Islamists were able to extend their influence across Sudanese society. Moreover, given their position, the Muslim Brothers were able to entrench themselves in the economic sector from Islamic banking and investment to clothing and trade⁵⁶.

Whilst Turabi's Islamists were enriching themselves and gaining political influence, it came at a tremendous price. Ordinary Sudanese were shocked at the political opportunism displayed by the Islamists and their hypocrisy. Whilst preaching about democracy, they allied themselves with a military junta which undermined the political freedom of every Sudanese citizen. Whilst preaching about social justice, Sudan's Islamists were enriching themselves whilst economic opportunities for ordinary citizens were diminishing. To compound matters, these Islamists not only allied themselves with an authoritarian regime but also one which

was increasingly corrupt and incompetent providing little by way of services to ordinary citizens. Popular disenchantment with the Nimeiri regime hence was also directed at the Muslim Brothers who were his praise-singers.

Serving as cheerleaders for Nimeiri however served the purpose of getting even greater influence within the government for Turabi who managed to get the regime to Islamize every aspect of Sudanese society culminating in the declaration of shari'a law by Nimeiri in September 1983. Commenting on this Mahmood wrote that: "*The regime's shift to the right*

and its gradual Islamization reached a dramatic climax in 1983 when Nimeiri announced the imposition of the Islamic penal code or hudud. The new harsh and extreme penal measures of limb amputation and humiliating floggings were enthusiastically promoted and implemented by the Muslim Brothers"⁵⁷.

The very success the Muslim Brothers had in getting shari'a law to be implemented in the Sudan was to prove their undoing however. The implementation of shari'a in a multi-religious, multi-ethnic society such as Sudan, which even the majority of Sudanese Muslims did not support, resulted in further popular alienation against the Nimeiri regime and political unrest followed. Too late Nimeiri woke up to the dangers of his marriage of convenience to the Muslim Brothers. He wrongly assumed that dressing his military dictatorship in Islamic attire would give it greater legitimacy. What it did was further undermine its legitimacy. He promptly named them 'radical' and 'satanic' and expelled senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood from his government. Turabi, meanwhile, was jailed⁵⁸. However, this could not save the Nimeiri regime from popular protests which resulted in his regime being overthrown on 6 April 1985⁵⁹ and the subsequent release of Turabi.

The period between 1985 and 1989 witnessed the flowering of Sudanese democracy with previously banned political parties operating freely as well as a number of civil society organizations emerging and the appearance of a number of new newspapers and radio stations. This Sudanese "Spring" however proved too much for the Muslim Brothers who had nothing but contempt for democracy. Once more under the leadership of Turabi, the Brothers re-invented themselves now calling themselves the National Islamic Front (NIF - Al Jabha al-Islamiyya al Qawimiyya) in May 1985 by forging ties with conservative tribal figures

in an effort to stem the tide of secularism unleashed by the overthrow of the Nimeiri regime and the emergence of democratic governance⁶⁰.

The machinations of Turabi and his NIF soon resulted in their finding their way back to power. Turabi and his NIF played a key behind-the-scenes role in another military coup led by Brigadier-General `Umar Hassan Ahmad al` Bashir in 1989. This put an end to the democratically-elected government of Al-Sadiq al-Mahdi, the great grandson of the Mahdi, leader of the Umma Party and, as Yehudit Ronen reminds us, the brother-in-law of Turabi⁶¹.

Once in power, Turabi and his NIF proved their hostility to democracy by curtailing freedom of expression and association. Turabi, imitated Mao's Cultural Revolution in seeking to Islamize the education curriculum and broader society. This proved devastating as educational standards at Sudanese universities plummeted and the economy suffered as the dearth of properly qualified graduates became obvious to all except the NIF. Mohammed Saeed Al Gadal⁶², for instance, observed that "*Khartoum University has become the possession of a political party, because appointments and promotions occur according to party loyalty*". For party loyalty, read loyalty to the NIF.

This, however, was not the only failing of the NIF once in power. Regular attendance of mosque and prayer were considered as the main criterion for promotion for civil servants as opposed to suitable skill-sets⁶³. Under the circumstances, it should come as no surprise that the Sudanese government grew ever more inefficient. Despite the growing incompetence of the state, the impulse of Khartoum, given the underlying Islamist ideology, was to centralize power – this despite the fact that Sudan was a country of more than one million square miles divided into 26 states and hundreds of administrative districts⁶⁴. Under the circumstances the incompetence of the government increased and became all the more apparent. Soon places like Darfur and Beja were to join the South in rebelling against Khartoum's centralization.

Far from attempting to engage in political compromise with these regions and local leadership, the Islamists in control of Khartoum, in keeping with the centralizing impulse of their ideology, sought to reinvigorate the war effort against these regions with the description of the war against the predominantly Christian South Sudan as a "jihad" and the establishment of the Popular Defence Forces (PDF) which consisted of young Islamists

ideologically indoctrinated to prosecute the war effort and protect the Islamist character of Sudan⁶⁵. This, however, proved to be a miserable failure with South Sudan having seceded from the North whilst atrocities in Darfur resulted in President Bashir being indicted by the International Criminal Court. Moreover, the war effort also resulted in a massive increase of military expenditure whilst social expenditure dwindled resulting in popular resentment against both the Bashir regime and Turabi's Islamists⁶⁶.

Popular resentment was further fuelled by the raft of Islamist legislation pushed through by Turabi with his messianic zeal. This included a ban on alcohol consumption, the enforced closure of shops during Friday prayers, segregation of the sexes on public transport and the limitation of the employment of women to the welfare sector⁶⁷. Even prominent Islamists were compelled to admit that in view of popular opposition to the measures, such legislation were counter-productive. `Abdelsalam Al Mahaboub, a leading Sudanese Islamist noted that with the passing of such legislation, Khartoum was treating the whole society as the proverbial `other' – the enemy. In the process, Sudan's Islamists and citizens were isolated from each other and viewed each other with growing antipathy⁶⁸.

In 1995, popular resentment resulted in political unrest against the regime and Bashir in an effort to hang onto power opted to move away from the Islamist project. This resulted in increased tension between Bashir and Turabi. Numerous political prisoners including Al-Sadiq al-Mahdi were released⁶⁹. Various draconian laws were repealed and several Islamic laws were not implemented. Learning the lesson from Nimeiri, Bashir eventually ousted Turabi from power.

What is clear from the Sudanese case study is that Islamists are willing to sacrifice democracy in an effort to create an Islamic nirvana – in the process creating a gulag state. Once in power, though, their supposed piety is a poor substitute for effectively governing modern polities.

The Instrumentalization of Religion

One danger when examining the role of political Islam in the African context is confusing sub-state terrorism with international terrorism. To put it differently many so-called Islamist

movements were first motivated by considerations of a local nature and by narrower ethnic or clan considerations. Al Shabab in Somalia reflects this dynamic well.

Whilst the Somali “nation” forms one of the largest ethnic blocks on the African continent, they are hardly homogenous given the primacy of clan and sub-clan politics. The four main clans are the Dir, Isaq, Hawiye and Darod⁷⁰. Despite the existence of clan leaders having the title of *sultan*, these have little more than ceremonial power. Indeed Somali society has been historically resistant to hierarchical authority that has come to be associated with the modern state⁷¹. This could possibly account for the fact that Somalia has consistently earned the dubious distinction of occupying the poll spot in the Failed State Index year after year.

At the core of Somali society – the ultimate unit is not the clan but the so-called *diya-paying* group. According to Lewis, “*This unit with a fighting strength of a few hundred men to a few thousand men, consists of close kinsmen united by a specific contract that they should pay and receive blood compensation (Arabic, diya) in concert. An injury done by or any member of the group implicates all those who are a party to its treaty*”⁷². Under the circumstances, Somali society remained warlike marked by incessant conflicts between clans, sub-clans and the respective diya-paying units. This is perhaps best captured in the popular Somali proverb:

*‘Me and my clan against the world;
Me and my family against my clan;
Me and my brother against my family;
Me against my brother*⁷³.

However, it should also be noted that the forces of division and anarchy threatening to tear Somalia society apart, were also mediated, to a certain extent by Muslim clerics known as *waddads* or *sheikhs*⁷⁴ who stressed the unity of the Muslim body of believers (*ummah*) as an anti-dote to cleavages of clan within the Somali body politic. It should hardly serve as a surprise then, that Muslim clerics should turn to 7th century Arabia as their model to unite their own warring clans and sub-clans. After all, the warring clans of Arabia – the Beni Bakr, Beni Hanifa, Beni Asad, Beni Tamim, Beni Sulaym, Beni Kinana, and Beni Saida – were all united under the banner of Islam following the Ridda wars under Caliph Abu Bakr⁷⁵.

As in Arabia, Somali religious leaders found the best way to settle internal differences was to direct the *ummah* towards the foreign infidel. In this way, Somali nationalism could only be defined by what it was against as opposed to what it is for – a most destructive means of nation-building. Imam Ahmed Ibrahim al Ghazi (1506-1543), for instance, led Muslim Somalia against Christian Abyssinians (Ethiopians) which resulted in Muslim armies penetrating into the heartland of Ethiopia⁷⁶. In similar vein, Sayyid Mohammed Abdulla Hassan's jihad from 1900 to 1920 against British and Ethiopian colonizers served to foster Somali nationalism and attempting to overcome clan differences⁷⁷.

Latter-day Islamists such as Al Shabab in Somalia have learned these lessons well as they seek to galvanize the Somali population behind them for a united and greater Somalia including Ethiopia's Ogaden, Djibouti and North-Western Kenya. Al Shabab's approach however only served to isolate it and ensure that an Islamist Greater Somalia under Al Shabab leadership will never materialize. Its strict Salafist interpretation of Islam went against the Sufi practices of the majority of Somalis⁷⁸. With the desecration of tombs of revered ancestors from which lineages and clans take their identity, soon Al Shabab had to fight against the Sufi-oriented Ahlu Sunna wa Jama who was allied to both the Mogadishu government and Ethiopia. Indeed, fearful of Al Shabab dreams of a greater Somalia, neighbouring countries have not only acted to thwart Al Shabab but also to promote a balkanized Somalia. Currently, and despite the rhetorical support of the international community for the regime in Mogadishu, there are at least 20 mini-states in Somalia supported by various neighbouring states⁷⁹.

Moreover, whilst trying to project itself as a Muslim vanguard party, Al Shabab has failed to overcome its own clan demons – drawing most of its fighters from the Hawiye clan⁸⁰. This has only served to exacerbate clan tensions within Al-Shabab. Given Al Shabab's alliance with Al Qaeda and the resultant influx of foreign fighters within Al Shabab ranks, it has also served to introduce tensions between Somali nationalism and Islamist internationalism.

No small wonder then, that Al Shabab finds itself on its back foot in Somalia being forced to resort to terrorism such as the atrocious bombing of the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi to display their relevance in the rapidly shifting sands that is Somali politics.

The Somali case, however, has broader implications for counter-terrorism strategy. It needs to engage in a more critical, comprehensive and historical study of movements and Al Shabab and beyond military responses, it would need to satisfy the demands for a united Somali nation by perhaps looking at softer borders and more inclusive citizenship in the Horn of Africa. The Al Shabab case study also teaches us to be more critical of using concepts such as political Islam to describe such movements. Often political Islam is merely a vehicle for ethnic, clan or nationalist elements.

The Future of Political Islam

Islam, today, is roughly the same age as when Martin Luther pinned his 95 Theses on the doors of Wurtemberg Chapel starting the Protestant Reformation in Europe. What followed were bloody generations of conflict between Catholics and Protestants before a post-religious, secular Europe could develop. Within Islam today a similar dynamic is occurring with both Sunni Wahhabi Islam and Shiite Islam of the Iranian variety pushing for a theocratic state and opposed to a secular Islamic alternative from developing. If Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* is to be averted, these secular forces must be in the ascendancy.

A secular Islam is not a novel phenomenon and there are Islamic traditions one could draw upon to make it compatible with liberal democracy. In Islam one could draw a clear distinction between the religious and political spheres. Karen Armstrong⁸¹, for instance, powerfully argues that the Qur'an insists that the Prophet Muhammed had no political function but that he was simply a *nadhir* ("a warner"). Of course, he did become the head of the first Islamic state but this was more due to the political vacuum existing at the time as opposed to some divine pre-ordained plan.

Also contributing to this separation between religion and the public sphere was that throughout Islamic history there never was a single voice that represented the canons of religion or Shari'ah law. As Khaled Abou El Fadl has asserted: "*Historically, the Islamic faith and Shari'ah law have been represented by several competing schools of theological and jurisprudential thought, the most powerful and notable of these organized into privately run professional guilds. Although the state often claimed to rule in God's name, the legitimacy of such claims was challenged by these professional guilds*"⁸².

A secular state is not an anti-religious one; rather it sets the basis where people of different faiths can co-exist harmoniously. This is especially important in our modern heterogeneous and conflict-prone polities. More importantly Islamic concepts such as freedom (*al-hurriya*), equality (*al-musawat*), justice (*al-adl*)⁸³, and consultation (*shura*) are all norms can be found in a liberal, multi-party, secular polity. Furthermore, the first four caliphs in Islam, beginning in CE 632, were all elected by a majority vote⁸⁴. In recent years, courageous Muslim scholars like Azizur Rahman Patel have built on these Islamic traditions and argued for the “de-Islamization of politics which not only seeks to neutralize the “...*cultural tendency to enforce Islamic codes of morality and religious adherence in the public domain*” but also to support “... *those societal groupings that appropriate and employ more contextual readings of Islamic principles, of justice, liberty, and equality, and compatibility with other cultures and civilizations of the world*”⁸⁵.

There are two reasons to be hopeful for the future of this secular Islam. First, with the rise of globalization, the inadequacy of the state to provide public goods to citizens is becoming obvious to all – including the Islamists. Consequently, the capture of state power, which lies at the core of the Islamist project, is increasingly becoming a chimera to cure the ills of society. Second, and a concomitant of the previous point, given the failures of Islamists in power (alluded to above), there is a search for a viable alternative to the current status quo. In Sudan, for instance, leading Islamists have called for “... *a new Islamic movement, whose main driving force is self-criticism, listening to and communicating with others*”⁸⁶.

However, it is important to acknowledge that powerful forces in Tehran and Riyadh are arrayed against this Islam from emerging and are expending vast petro-dollars to ensure that secular Islam does not take root. Equally, it is important that the West as well as countries like China and India, whose footprint on the African continent is growing, should assist these forces of rationalism, tolerance and political pluralism to nurture and grow in strength. This is not only in the national interest of Beijing and New Delhi which have problems with their own Muslim minorities in their respective polities – not to mention in neighbouring Muslim-dominated states but it is also in the common good of all humanity if a Clash of Civilizations is to be averted.

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