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ISLAMISM: ROOTS AND PROSPECTS

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1. Origins of Political Islam

The emergence of a political ideology based on Islam is commonly attributed to Jamal Eddine al-Afghani (1838-1898) of Afghanistan, Mohammad Abduh (1849-1905) of Egypt and Abdurrahman al-Kawakibi (1849-1902) of Syria. These early Muslim intellectuals are called "reformers," because they advocated a reversal of what they perceived in their era as a slow but inexorable decline of Islam. In their views, this could be accomplished only through a purification of the faith and a return to strict observance of the word of Allah (i.e. the Koran) and imitation of His prophet's behaviour (i.e. the *Sunna*). But at the same time, those thinkers believed that Muslims should not shun science and knowledge even if they came from non-Muslims. Thus saved from decay and decadence, the reformed and renovated Islam could inaugurate a period of renaissance (*nahdha*) that would allow it to join and participate in the economic and social transformations that were under-way in the West.

Paradoxically, those ideas were espoused by various secular parties and movements in the Arab world in the early twentieth century, but were rejected by Muslim intellectuals and political activists as being too influenced by the West to be authentically Islamic. Thus, figures such as Muhammad Rashid-Ridha (1865-1935) of Tripoli (future Lebanon) and Hasan al-Banna (1906-1948) of Egypt opposed this reformist ideology in favour of one that was more conservative and closer to the Wahabism that had established itself in the Arabian Peninsula.

In 1929 al-Banna founded an organisation which he called Muslim Brotherhood to promote the strict observance of Islamic law (*sharia*) in public life. From the outset, the new movement was targeted at the lower middleclass and the poor rather than the intellectuals. Furthermore, it was not designed as a merely intellectual movement, but became actively involved in politics. Thus during World War II the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) sided with the Axis powers as a way of protesting against British colonial rule in Egypt. It was also during that period that the MB created an armed branch which began carrying out terrorist acts (e.g. killing two Egyptian Prime Ministers), sent volunteers to Palestine to fight Zionists, and contributed to the downfall of King Farouk in 1952. By that time the MB had become a large political movement in Egypt, and had prompted the emergence of similar movements in a number of Arab countries.

In 1949 the movement had become sufficiently threatening to justify official reactions. Some 4,000 members of the Brotherhood were arrested and al-Banna was assassinated, allegedly by government agents. However, this did not neutralise the movement. Under the leadership of the far more radical Sayid Qotb, the MB became a militant movement openly advocating the use of violence to overthrow the "infidels" who were governing Egypt. Joining deeds to words, it took part in the coup that brought down the monarchy

and put the military into power, first under the leadership of General Negib and then under Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954).

2. Emergence of Radical Islamism in Egypt

After assuming power, Nasser quickly realised that the powerful Brotherhood could be a danger to him and moved to neutralise it. Most of its leaders – as well as other opposition figures – were promptly jailed, and those who escaped arrest went underground. This brought a few years of relative calm, but in the early 1960's the MB resumed its activism. This prompted Nasser to launch in 1964 a campaign against it which culminated in the trial of the movement's leader, Qotb, who was charged with conspiracy against the state, found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. The sentence was carried out on August 26th, 1966.

The same pattern of accommodation and persecution was followed by Anwar Sadat. When he came to power, one of his first decisions as head of state was to liberate all members of the MB imprisoned by Nasser (October 1971). The move was an attempt by the new president to counterbalance opposition from the left (Marxists and Nasserists), which was particularly strong on campuses and in the bureaucracy. However, this was not very successful. In 1977 the left organised what was to become the largest social uprising in Egypt's history; it took place to protest against the President's policy of economic liberalism (*infitah*) This forced Sadat to introduce some political reforms, such as the formation of opposition parties (the foundation of the liberal Wafd, the leftist Tagammu and the socialist Labour goes back to that period).

Whatever benefits he may have derived from that decision were quickly squandered when he signed the Camp David accords in 1978. Leftist opposition to those accords was so strong that Sadat could neither ignore nor deal with it without political support. The only group with which he could hope to negotiate was the Muslim Brotherhood. This is not to say that the Islamists were favourable to Camp David, but they needed Sadat to gain readmission to the political scene. Aware of that, Sadat offered them a few concessions: the possibility of an indirect participation in political life, amendment of the constitution to bring it in line with the *Sharia* and freeing of jailed Islamists.

The tactic seemed to have worked. For a few years the situation appeared to have quieted down, so much so that in 1981 Sadat felt that he had things sufficiently under control to be able to do away with a group that he viewed as a threat and had never really trusted. Therefore, he decided in September to move against the MB and other opposition movements.

In the meantime, the Muslim Brotherhood had come under the leadership of Abdessalam Farag after the execution of Qotb. Farag's ideas proved to be even more radical than his predecessor's. Among other things Farag proclaimed that it was the duty of every Muslim to wage a *jihad* (holy war) against rulers who did not abide by the *Sharia* and who, for that reason, could be considered as *kuffar* (plural of *kafir*, unbeliever or infidel). Therefore, *jihad* is not restricted to the classical form of organised group warfare but could be undertaken by any Muslim acting individually.¹

¹ This is also the view currently held by members of the Palestinian Hizbullah, who send kamikaze to Israel and who consider that those volunteers are not committing suicide (an act strictly forbidden by Islam) but are *mujahedeen* (soldiers in a *jihad*) who die in battle and who, therefore, will go directly to

However, such ideas were removed from the mainstream ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, Farag decided to set up a splinter group which he called *Takfir wal Hijra* (Penance and Exile).²

Sadat launched his campaign against the Islamists in September 1981; he was assassinated on October 6, 1981. Farag was charged with having masterminded that act and executed in April 1982. It was established later that the officer who shot Sadat was in fact a member of another Islamist group, Jihad, whose leader at that time was Abboud al-Zomar. This group was probably formed in the late 1970's, and the first major act it organised was the uprising that was still under way in Assiut just as Sadat was being shot in Cairo.

It was also around that period that another Islamist faction was formed. Called Gamaa Islamiya (Muslim Association), its spiritual leader was Omar Abdel Rahman, a sheikh who became notorious when he was charged in the United States with instigating the bombing of the World Trade Centre on February 26, 1993.

When Hosni Mubarak came to power in 1981, he too followed the same pattern of accommodation and repression of the Islamists as had his predecessors. Confronted with a relatively moderate mainstream movement – the Muslim Brotherhood – and three radical groups – Takfir wal Hijra, Jihad and Gamaa Islamiya – he tried to eradicate the radicals while placating the moderates. Thus, while pursuing a relentless campaign against the former, Mubarak allowed the latter to be active in politics without, however, going so far as to allow them to have their own political party.

In response the MB chose two main tactics. On the one hand, they began to implant themselves in various professional associations and trade unions (lawyers, doctors, engineers...). Within a few years they achieved heavy representation in those organisations, if not their outright control. On the other hand, they made alliances with authorised political parties whose banners they used to participate in various elections. Some of those alliances were short-lived, such as the one Wafd made in 1984. However, the alliance made with the socialist Labour party in 1987 proved more durable, if not totally harmonious.

Originally, the Labour party (LP) was a traditional socialist party. But after the crackdown on the left and the emergence of Islamism as the main opposition movement, the party's Secretary General Adel Hussein, who had been a hard-line Marxist under Nasser and was a moderate socialist under Sadat, proposed in 1987 a coalition with the MB. Politically – if not ideologically – the deal made sense: the LP had a legal status but little popular support, whereas the MB had popular support but it could not transform it into political power. In any case, the 1987 legislative elections showed that the alliance was a success: Labour won 78 seats, becoming the largest opposition group in Parliament and its President, Ibrahim Shukri, the official opposition leader.

Heaven without having to stand before God on Judgment Day as most other mortals will. The rules of *jihad* will be discussed further below.

² *Takfir* means expiation, atonement or penance as well as a charge of unbelief. Presumably, the name was chosen to urge genuine Muslims to leave all other political formations and join the group to expiate for their sin of having previously associated with heathens, as well as to sit in judgment of, and punish, unbelievers (*kuffar*).

Fully aware that Labour had become a de facto Islamist party, the Muslim Brotherhood tried to gain control over it and its newspaper, al-Shaab. Whether out of conviction or by sheer opportunism, Adel Hussein helped the Islamists in that endeavour. He became a forceful proponent of their ideas, gave them space in the party's newspaper to express themselves, and sidelined party members who opposed the growing control of the MB over the party. The term Socialist was dropped from the party's name, and some even proposed that it be called the Islamic Labour party. Al-Shaab slowly became an Islamist newspaper. It began attacking not only government policies but also high officials and anyone who did not share Islamist ideas, going so far as to publish private addresses and telephone numbers of opponents and urging readers to use them to threaten those people.

Exasperated by those excesses, in May 2000 the authorities resolved to suspend the party and its newspaper. A number of conditions for its return to normal activities were set: that it revoke its alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood (which had never received a legal standing), adopt a more moderate tone and stop making unproven accusations against officials and intellectuals.

The death of Adel Hussein in early 2001 and the designation of his nephew Magdi Hussein (who was already publisher of Al-Shaab) as Secretary General of the party may facilitate the resolution of the crisis. Less influential and less powerful than Adel, Magdi may yield to pressure from the party leadership to loosen the grip of the MB on Labour. However, the Brotherhood is certain to oppose and resist any move in that direction. At the same time, the government may find it politically risky to opt for a definitive dissolution of Labour, even if the current standoff persists.

3. The Spread of Radical Islamist Movements in the Muslim World

Following the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, various radical Islamist movements (RIMs) appeared in most parts of the Muslim world, such as al-Nahdha (Renaissance) and al-Dawa (Predication) in Iraq, Hizbullah (Party of God) and Hamas (Fervour) in Lebanon and Palestine, al-Jabha al-Islamyia lil Inqadh (Islamic Front of Salvation or FIS) and its different splinter groups in Algeria and al-Adl wal Ihsan (Justice and Charity) in Morocco. In many cases, such movements emerged and grew despite efforts of ruling regimes to repress them. But in other cases, particularly in North Africa, they emerged mostly at the behest of governments in power as a way of thwarting the growth of secular opposition groups which were contesting those governments and demanding major social and political reforms. As social and economic problems increased in number and intensity, and as the inability of governments to resolve them became more and more evident, societies in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world had only two alternative ways of expressing their disenchantment: either take to the streets or turn to the only structured and effective political opposition available, namely, the Islamists.

When the popular appeal of the Islamists became too threatening, regimes moved to crush them by force while simultaneously implementing what they perceived to be the main demands of those groups. However, both moves proved to be counterproductive. On the one hand, the use of violence served only to radicalise the Islamists and to give them greater legitimacy in the eyes of the local populations. On the other hand, many changes imposed by regimes to conform with the *Sharia* have led to the gradual

transformation of Arab societies into de facto theocracies, and are cancelling any achievements that may have been made in earlier periods, particularly in the area of human rights.

Yet, this apparent solicitude for Islam brought no political dividends for the new protectors of the faith. Not only was its opportunistic and manipulative nature too obvious to be taken at face value, but it was based on the erroneous assumption the popularity of the Islamists derived mainly or exclusively from religious considerations. In fact, citizens turned to the Islamists at least as much for political as for religious motives. What they wanted first and foremost was an alleviation of the problems they confront in their daily lives – poverty, unemployment, deprivation, illness and ignorance. They also wanted to have a say in the adoption of decisions that would affect their lives. Finally, they yearned for the dismissal of corrupt regimes that seem to want to rule for ever.

The Islamists managed to convince citizens that they could meet all such expectations. This success, however, is not attributable to support coming from "born-again" Muslims but from born-again citizens, i.e. people who are no longer content with the status of subjects. The Islamists proved to be politically more astute and skilful than other opposition groups: they chose to speak to people in a language they could understand. In this respect the case of Egypt's Labour Party leader Adel Hussein switching from Marxism to Islamism is neither surprising nor unique in the Arab world. As politicians, Islamist leaders have come to realise that they could not build successful movements by appealing only to intellectuals. Therefore, their message would more likely get through if they referred to familiar Muslim figures and concepts rather than to Marx and Che Guevarra. Undoubtedly, the Islamists were helped in their task by the fact that a large portion of the population is pious; they may even have revived dormant religiosity in some people; but it is unlikely that they created fervour or fanaticism where there was no predisposition for Islam.

What the Islamists have successfully achieved is to convince a large – and growing – number of Muslims that Islam is not just a religion but an integrated social system that governs every aspect of community life ranging from politics, economics and finance to personal behaviour and dress code. Therefore, it is not sufficient for a Muslim to do the practices ordered by God (praying, fasting the month of Ramadan, etc.), but he must also ensure that members and leaders of his community obey all the rules and practices laid down in the Koran, i.e. the *Sharia*.

Generally speaking, and until recently, most Muslims believed that on the Day of Judgement they will be held responsible only for their personal acts. That is why they concentrated their efforts on carrying out the orders that God addressed to the individual and considered that it was not their duty to be concerned with, much less to change, the behaviour of others. As for political authority, the issue did not arise, with few notable exceptions, until modern times inasmuch as Muslims have generally been ruled by Muslims. However, when non-Muslims attempt to impose their rule over Muslims, then it is the duty of all members of the community to fight them and to make Islam prevail. If such a resistance requires the use of force, it then becomes a *jihad fi sabil Allah*, a holy war in the name of God.

However, *jihad* is governed by a number of rules. Its objective must be to protect Muslim lands against aggressors such the Byzantines and the Crusaders. It can also be

waged to spread Islam to non-Muslim lands. However, it must be preceded by an appeal to the unbelievers who are not peoples of the Books (i.e. Jews and Christians) to convert willingly to Islam. If they refuse, then force can be used against them. Furthermore, *jihad* must be undertaken by adult males assembled in "sufficient numbers" to undertake the task at hand. This means that *jihad* is a collective act, not an individual one. Lastly, a holy war cannot be waged against Muslims.

Many independence movements in the Mashreq called for a *jihad* against colonial rule. In the Maghreb, Islam was used to mobilise people against colonialism, but by and large independence was achieved without major wars, with the exception of Algeria. But even there the war for independence was rarely labelled as a *jihad*. However, contemporary Islamist movements have widened the common understanding of *jihad* in at least two ways. First, they argue that existing rulers are only nominally Muslim, since their acts and policies do not reflect Muslim values and principles. Therefore, they must be overthrown and replaced by leaders who would apply the *Sharia*. This is what Khomeini did in Iran and what other Islamist leaders purport to do in other Islamic countries, and all the uprisings are labelled *jihad*s despite the fact that the targeted regimes are Muslim.

The second novelty introduced by the Islamists is that a *jihad* can be undertaken by individuals and not just by organised armies, and it can be targeted at other individuals and not just at opposing armies. This is the view advocated by various groups in Egypt, Palestine, Algeria, Kashmir, India and Pakistan, among others, and it is used to justify such acts as hijackings, hostage taking, the use of "human bombs" and the destruction of the New York's World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001.

4. Future Prospects

Future developments in countries where such groups are active ought to be observed closely. In the case of Egypt, and despite the fact that the country's standing in Arab public opinion is not as high as it once was, if social and economic conditions do not improve and the tension attendant upon them is not relieved, the attractiveness of Islamists movements in general and of the Muslim Brotherhood in particular is bound to increase for lack of alternative ways of expressing grievances. Furthermore, if the Muslim Brotherhood is not given a legal status, it may be forced to resort to violence, not only to ensure its survival but also not to be outdone by Gamaa Islamiya and Jihad.

In Egypt, it is a matter of speculation whether or not it is still possible for the Moslem Brotherhood to become a conventional political player, and for other Islamist groups to participate in mainstream politics. The current situation in Palestine, where Hizbullah is attempting to demonstrate that only violence is likely to force Israel out of the occupied territories, and in Algeria, where the army-backed regime has been unable to defeat the Islamists – those situations show that moderates of any political colouring face an uncertain future. What is not a matter of speculation, on the other hand, is that in Egypt and other Arab countries, regimes and Islamist groups are set on a collision course.

The Islamists claim that their exclusion from the political arena has forced them to use violence to achieve their aims. Established regimes have argued that the Islamists are outright terrorists that must be neutralised by every available means. From the late 1970's on, when a number of spectacular and deadly terrorist acts were carried out

against European citizens and interests, Western governments proclaimed that Islamic Fundamentalism has become a major threat to national security, and a more serious danger than Communism. Therefore, they gave political and material support to regimes that presented themselves as the last bastions against terrorism, much in the same way they had supported anti-Communist regimes during the Cold War period. But in doing so, the West finds itself today, as it did in the past, allied with regimes that are far from exemplary.

In the meantime, intensive efforts were undertaken to resolve the Middle East conflict, and it appeared that one of the main motives for extremism would soon disappear. In late 1995, the Barcelona Declaration was adopted whereby the European Union and twelve Mediterranean partners – including the Palestinian Authority and Israel – promised to work in partnership to create a common zone of peace, security and prosperity.

However, the Middle East peace process quickly collapsed. As a result, the Barcelona process itself faltered not only because of the resumption of violence in Palestine, but also because it proved ineffective in bringing relief to the mounting social and economic problems besetting the region. Predictably, extremists took advantage of this situation to argue that the West is bent on oppressing Muslims in general and Arabs in particular, and that only through *jihad* can its plans be defeated. Whatever its intrinsic validity may be, this argument appears to gain a growing acceptance in the Muslim world.

In the short run, radical Islamist movements (RIMs) are likely to attract more sympathisers and activists. 'Moderate' Islamists who claimed, sincerely or not, their willingness to participate peacefully in the political process, have been largely disavowed, and those who prone confrontation are gaining the upper hand. The crucial question is whether it is still possible to reverse this trend.

The most urgent need is to reach a final settlement of the Palestinian issue. As long as all international resolutions and agreements pertaining to Palestine are not fully implemented, the radical elements within the Palestinian leadership and population will gain greater legitimacy and attract growing support. They will also become a model for others to replicate.

But even if or when the Palestinian issue is resolved, will this lead to the gradual "withering away" of RIMs? The answer depends on whether or not the predicted "clash of civilisations" will have materialised. In this respect, it may be noted that Samuel Huntington's thesis has been welcomed by many Islamist groups who use it to justify their call for an all-out *jihad* against the West. Should the current policy of using force to neutralise those who plan and perpetrate terrorist acts such as those carried out on September 11, 2001 be pursued without simultaneous efforts to tackle the root causes of the growing popularity of Islamist radicalism, then what is being presented as a purely security operation restricted in time and limited in its objective may well become the prelude of a protracted conflict.

Avoiding such a conflict requires a realistic appraisal of the results of past policies as well as a re-evaluation of the future objectives – an exercise that should be undertaken by all parties concerned. First and foremost, it must be realised that what is at issue is not religion but human deprivation. There is a worldwide growth of structural violence in most of its forms: hunger, illness, poverty, unemployment, injustice, inequity, and violation of human rights. When survival becomes a daily struggle, people will turn to

anyone promising a solution to their plight or to anyone who merely acknowledges their misery. In some countries, they are turning back to Communism and Socialism; in others, they are finding refuge in religious fundamentalism.

Pronouncements, actions and policies coming from the West are perceived in the South as inconsistent and contradictory. Individually and collectively, States declare that they want to alleviate or eradicate poverty, but they continue to pursue narrow selfish interests. They proclaim their support for democracy and human rights, but they aid and abet dictatorial regimes. They wage wars on "rogue" States that transgress international law, but take no measures against other States that have acted in a similar fashion for decades.

One hopes that the situation is not irreversible, and that Europe and the US will take appropriate measures to stop the current march towards a quagmire. Failing that, the ultimate losers will be Arab citizens in the short run, and international peace and stability in the longer run.