

Re-assessing Political Islam: Part I

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Now that the smoke is clearing in Tahrir Square after two and a half years of upheaval—and thousands of deaths—the meaning of the Arab Spring and the intent of the Islamists is becoming clear. First, the Arab Spring was/is an Islamic Awakening, as confirmed in five elections/ referenda in Egypt, where Islamists consistently won two-thirds of the vote in the freest elections in any country in recent times. Money was not a significant factor thanks to limits on candidates' financing (no corporate or Super PACs a la US, or foreign donations), the brainwashing of the old order no longer worked, and the Mubarak thugs who stuffed ballot boxes were hiding in their holes. We can only envy the Egyptians.

The strategy of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) for 80 years has been to patiently build alternative social structures to the corrupt 'soft state' (especially in education, health, charity), and eventually overthrowing the old corrupt order peacefully through the ballot box. Then to work with other forces, both left and right, to usher in a new Islamic order based on their grassroots experience, where—just as in the first Islamic state under Muhammad in Medina—all facets of society would have their place, where laws and government would conform with sharia, as confirmed by senior Islamic scholars. Foreign relations were shifting towards a more confrontational stance with Israel, and more cooperation with other Islamic governments and movements, in particular Iran, but throughout the Muslim world. President Morsi's first stop was Saudi Arabia, which initially promised support. Qatar's Sheikh Hamad sent a whopping \$8b in aid (\$2b of which was since returned by the coupmakers).

The secular elite's intent is also clear now. Notables such as Mohamed ElBaradei and Hamdeen Sobahi initially made cautious overtures to the Islamists, as their own lack of popular support was also clear from the start. They needed the MB much more than the latter needed them. But when they realized that they would never gain more than a handful of seats in any

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free elections, and when the MB made clear they were no shrinking violets and would pursue an agenda inspired by the Islamic state founded by Muhammad in Medina the seventh century, they 'lost it', betrayed the revolution and threw their lot with the Mubarakite establishment, preferring the neoliberal nightmare of yesteryear, where they could indulge their petty privileges and enjoy their cultural hegemony.

The military's intent was unclear, flipping back and forth between their traditional thuggishness and flagrant violations of human rights (openly killing Copts as Maspero in October 2011, disbanding parliament and stripping the president of meaningful power in June 2012) and showing signs of genuine interest in establishing a more democratic order (supervising elections, even bowing to the popular will after Morsi's election, when Morsi retired the bungling Field Marshall Tantawi and appointed less compromised generals). They only supported the initial uprising in January 2011 because they were furious with Mubarak's intent to put his son Gamal on the throne, inaugurating a pseudo-monarchy *a la* Saudi Arabia. The police were more consistently against the revolution—basically refusing to work at all after the initial uprising, determined that the old order be restored, even if minus their beloved patron, the now geriatric Mubarak.

Egypt's 'allies', the US, Saudis et al were also fence-sitters, wondering what the MB would actually do. Could it be pressured by the economic crisis, the noisy secular spoilers and the still powerful old guard, with its stranglehold on the economy, into acting as a new face for neocolonialism? Would it accept the pillars of the old order—support for Israel, the craven Arab monarchies, and the global capitalist market system, and continued hostility to the only genuine Islamic government (Iran)?

Indications were that they were not doing exactly as they were told by Washington. They delayed and delayed on the 'generous' IMF loan, finally proposing a compromise that included a demand to cancel part of the 'odious debt' from Mubarak years. Morsi defied Israel on Gaza and actually made Netanyahu blink. There were tantalizing indications that relations with Iran would improve as the MB gained its footing in the unstable new order.

We will never know just how far these tentative moves would have developed, at least not in the near future, as the military put an end to this experiment in Islamic democracy, egged on by the secularists in open collusion with the still powerful Mubarakite establishment, who collectively boycotted the MB government and sabotaged the economy. The MB are loudly condemned for not being 'inclusive', pursuing their own agenda without regard for the noisy opposition. But, commented MB official Gehad el-Haddad shortly after the July 2013 coup, "If the National Salvation Front were to send the president a list of their demands on NSF letterheaded paper,

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and the president were to remove the NSF letterhead and put it on a presidential letterhead, and issue it as a decree, they would go to the street protesting against it.”

The Islamists’ constitution was/is a model one, putting the family squarely at its heart, confirming both individual rights regardless of belief, status or ethnicity, *and* responsibilities. The secularists and Christians had lots of input—until they walked out of the constitutional committee and began openly plotting with the military and the Mubarakites. Morsi actually saved LE4b in costs from the distribution of basics to the poor, improving the service using their own volunteers. He obtained commitments of \$10b for the new Suez Canal container terminal, launched 4 major technology-related manufacturing projects with East Asian conglomerates, opened a major set of commercial links with Sudan as the beginning of a new Nile basin industrial corridor, and increased foreign exchange reserves (which had fallen during the original revolution) by \$1b. Egypt had achieved a

trade surplus

(LE15m) for the first time in 50 years during the first half of 2013, according to government statistics, with total exports LE90.5b and imports LE75b.

But the coup put an end to the dreams of the Islamists—except for the pro-Saudi Salafi, who actually backed the coup and now are angling (mentored by their Saudi sponsors) to steal the MB’s supporters, to serve as a quietist pseudo-Islamic facade for the secularists/ military, so essential to the US/ Israel/ Saudi Arabia.

So, was the MB strategy wrong? Was Margaret Thatcher right: There Is No Alternative? Has history come to an end with Bush senior’s New World Order? Should the MB put their Qurans on the bottom shelf along with all the other (now irrelevant) religious texts?

Even as Egyptians mourn their thousands of martyrs, shaking their heads in disbelief at their new military dictator General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and Saudis fume under their pro-US/ Israeli monarch Abdullah, Iran continues to gain admiration among Muslims (both Sunni and Shia) and non-Muslims for its principled defiance of empire, confirmed in a smooth transition to a more relaxed but still very much Islamist regime under President Hassan Rouhani. It stared down the US and Saudis in Syria, and looks poised to end the 34-year US-Israeli campaign of subversion against its revolution. Yes, Iran is Shia, and we all know about Sunni-Shia rivalry and sectarianism. But Egyptians can only look wistfully at a country where Islamists took and have held power. The reputation of the Saudis, who helped undermine Egypt’s Islamists, has never been lower among Muslims and non-Muslims. The new alignment in the Muslim world is not so much Sunni-Shia as traitor-Islamist.

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The only (Sunni) political analyst to recognize this post-1979 logic was Kalim Siddiqui, who hailed the Iranian revolution in 1979, and in *Stages of Islamic Revolution* (1996) predicted the convergence of Sunni and Shia in a revolutionary movement to overthrow neocolonial regimes across the Muslim world. His work is seminal in pointing to the

sira

(life of the Prophet) and the

sunna

literature as a “storehouse” of data which must be used as a basis for strategy to defeat imperialism, i.e.,

tajdid

(re-reading)

and

ijtihad

(independent reasoning). This means in the first place eliminating the Sunni-Shia sectarianism—stoked by imperialism—to create a “global Islamic movement”.

Siddiqui argues that Islamic civilization was flawed beginning with the Sunni Umayyad/ Abbasid dynastic rule, as opposed to the rule of a *khalifa* (steward) through consensus of the *umma* (community of Muslims). The Shia also rejected

khilafa

(stewardship), believing that genuine Islamic rule would come about only with the return of the Hidden Imam. Siddiqui complained that Islamic civilization degenerated over the centuries among both Sunni and Shia, the former condoning dynastic rule, the latter, retreating into a quietism until the return of the 12th Imam. He hailed Ayatollah Khomeini’s

velayat e-faqih

political theory (guardianship by jurists) in the absence of the Imam Mahdi, as the culmination of a renewal within Shia scholarship (the Usuli movement). This corrected the quietist Shia political tradition, confirming the possibility of genuine Islamic rule through the establishment of an Islamic state, implying political rule by

mujtahideen

(Islamic jurists).

There is no ‘Shia’ or ‘Sunni’ state; the two facets of Islam would overcome their differences by establishing Islamic states guided by Islamic scholar-activists versed in sharia, headed by a *khalifa*

(steward) or

na’ib

(deputy) of the Prophet. It was the task of both Sunni and Shia scholars and activists to reject the neocolonial and monarchical political systems by overthrowing them. He argued that after 1979, a “global Islamic movement” was already in place and would bring about further

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revolutions, which would triumph through armed struggle.

Siddiqui's works hark back to Sayyid Qutb in their militancy. "All modern Muslim societies are living examples of societies that have undergone mindless, uncontrolled, unguided and imposed change ... developed in the West in the name of progress." He sees the uprisings from 1979 on in Iran, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia and Kashmir as part of an anti-imperialist continuum, which will result in the overthrow of existing neocolonial governments. In line with Qutb, Siddiqui criticizes the Muslim Brotherhood and Maududi's *Jamaat i-Islami* (Islamic Society) for being captive to nationalism, and as superficial attempts to oppose the secular order. The MB's position is to aim for power through the neocolonial electoral system dominated by party politics, vs a mass uprising a la Iran
1979 that will sweep away the whole western set-up in one fell swoop.

However, as argued here, the Egyptian MB's strategy—building grassroots mass structures in parallel to the 'soft state' and pursuing legitimacy through elections—is a valid response given the narrow room for maneuver in today's geopolitical world, though recent events in Egypt and across the *umma* give pause to reconsider. The alternative—Qutbian revolt—is the subject of part II.

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