

# Islamic State, the Arab Spring, and the Disenchantment with Political Islam

Written by Maximilian Lakitsch

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/09/12/islamic-state-the-arab-spring-and-the-disenchantment-with-political-islam/>

MAXIMILIAN LAKITSCH, SEP 12 2014

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood being supported by a large part of the population despite the strong government repression it exercises, Islamist Militia haunting a barely existing central government in Libya, and various Jihadi groups playing a crucial role in the Syrian civil war *all* seem to be closely related to Political Islam. Above all, it is the sudden and strong presence of *Islamic State* (IS) in Iraq and Syria which adds most to the impression about a new era of dominance of Political Islam. However, developments like the success of the social protests in Northern Africa in ousting their autocratic governments, as well as the image of Islamist militia in Libya, Syria, and Iraq as being a sectarian and self-serving actor, may have brought about disenchantment with Political Islam as a means for social and political justice. That being the case, Political Islam may face a significant decline in influencing national, regional, and global events in the near future.

### The Traditional Foundations of Political Islam

Islam already has a lot of political implications in its foundations. However, what is commonly understood as Political Islam and its synonym "Islamism" is a specific modern interpretation of Islam. It has its roots in social conflicts: the establishment of autocratic monarchies in the newly independent Arab countries in the 1950s and 1960s gave rise to social justice demands which these regimes did not meet (Hourani 2005: 373-458). Basically, the population had two available means of expressing their discontent.

The first one is the ideology of modern Political Islam. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars like Jamal al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Abul Ala Maududi, and Sayyid Qutb described a fundamental re-interpretation of Islam as a genuine base of empowered Arab societies in the face of Western imperialism – Islam is the solution to political and social problems (al-Din al-Afghani 2003; Abduh 1966; al-Maududi 1955; Qutb 2007).

The second one is the ideology of Arab Socialism. Intellectuals like Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar developed an Arab adaption of traditional socialist ideas as a genuine foundation of Arab societies in order to face political and social demands for power and justice against imperialism and capitalism. One of the most influential organisations was the Baath party. One of Arab Socialism's most influential proponents was Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (al-Husri 1976; Dawisa 2005).

And it was Arab Socialism which became dominant all over North Africa and the Middle East. As an egalitarian ideology, it was attractive not only for the masses, but also for young and ambitious men from poorer families, who often sought to climb the social ladder through an army career as an officer. As a consequence, various military coups d'états against the monarchies were led by young officers who claimed to represent the cause of Arab Socialism. That was the case in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. In Algeria, Arab Socialism came into power with the achievement of independence under the lead of the socialist *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN). And for Palestinians, Fatah's socialist ideology was undisputed (Hourani 2005: 401-415; Fisk 2006: 181-183).

However, throughout the years, these socialist leaders and parties were not only unable to meet their populations'

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demands, but they also grew more and more autocratic. As their legitimacy decreased, the regimes more and more depended on a vast network of intelligence agencies, which had to deeply penetrate society – Socialist Arab states became so called *mukhabarat* (Arabic for “intelligence”) states. And since the societies were closely monitored and public opinions about social and political issues were forbidden, the only remaining and available means of expressing discontent, apart from discredited Arab Socialism, was Political Islam – Political Islam became the monopoly of expressing social and political discontent. From then on, the hope of fulfilling political and social justice demands was predominantly linked to Political Islam: the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Syria, and Jordan; Hamas in Palestine; *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) in Algeria; but also *al-Qaeda*, as the armed pan-Arab actor pursuing the cause of Political Islam through Jihad. From 1970 onwards, those parties and groups were increasingly supported and their capabilities in influencing the political and social agendas nationally, regionally, and globally grew. Thus, Political Islam inherited the monopoly for expressing (Kepel 2002: 43-105).

In the last few years, the influence of Political Islam in global politics was perceived to have grown due to the aftermath of the *Arab Spring*, as well as due to the military strength of *Islamic State* in Iraq and Syria. However, at the same time, these developments may also indicate certain reconfigurations of Political Islam, which have actually eroded its traditional foundations and may therefore lead to its decline.

## Re-Thinking the Arab State

On December 17, 2010, thousands of Tunisians spontaneously took to the streets to protest against their government following the self-immolation of young Mohamed Bouazizi. The successful ouster of autocratic president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali by the mass protests led people in Egypt to protest against Hosni Mubarak. Both of those manifestations of public indignation overthrew a dictator. Both of those protest movements effectively dealt with their source of indignation – they were successful. Following these events, a collective feeling of relief swept through North Africa and the Middle East that individuals can raise their demands peacefully beyond any party or ideology and can thereby succeed against an almighty state. In other words, the successful protests in Egypt and Tunisia provided people in North Africa and the Middle East with a new means of expressing their discontent in the face of the state: civic public protest. Thus, the political paradigm shifted to a modern one; it is not the citizen who serves the state, but the citizen is the actual *raison d'être* of the state.

However, as mass demonstrations in Libya and Syria led to civil wars, the original momentum of political hope which had been labelled *Arab Spring* was already being suspected as a delusion. Although the political developments in Tunisia in 2014 turned out to be favorable for most of the population, they were overshadowed by a threefold political disillusion: 1) Mass protests in Libya and Yemen [1] were perceived as manifestations of an emerging civil society, whereas they should have better been treated as particular sectarian or regional interests. Thus, the protests in Yemen succeeded in nothing but changing their leaders' names; protests in Libya led to the disintegration of Libya and the emergence of dozens of – predominantly Islamist – militia. 2) Protests in Syria led to a full-blown war. As the war continues, the situation becomes more and more unmanageable and the original social conflict transformed into a battleground for various armed factions, which are dominantly foreign as well as Islamist and have other goals than a better future for Syria. 3) The ouster of newly elected president Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood due to autocratic tendencies [2] and his replacement by the military's supreme leader Abdel Fatah as-Sisi gave the impression that what was emphatically *Arab Spring* was just an unsuccessful experiment of liberty which was doomed to fail anyway.

Consequently, it might seem that we are witnessing the legacy of an “Arab Winter” (Spencer 2012; Spencer 2014) or an “Islamist spring” (Dergham 2012), rather than being able to draw any positive conclusions about the region's political future. Nevertheless, it is the protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt which have already reconfigured the political foundations in a way that does not favor Political Islam underneath the surface: they have provided the MENA region with a new paradigm for raising political and social demands through simple civic means beyond any ethnic or religious affiliation, apart from Arab Socialism and Political Islam. Those protests provided the people with a whole new ideological space which not only transcended political, religious, and ethnic affiliations, but also opened a whole new set of ideas waiting to aggravate and be expressed. Thus, one important legacy of the Arab Spring is a first glimpse of something like an Arab civil society.

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The Arab Spring even reached war-torn Algeria: having gone through an enormously long and brutal war of liberation, as well as a very bloody civil war in the 1990s, the country seemed to be fed up with revolutions (Fisk 2006: 631-719). At the same time, Algeria seemed to be more than ripe for a revolution after the decades-long autocratic reign of the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN). Whereas the country's elite profited from the enormous amount of natural resources, it did not respond to the demands of its enormously poor population. Consequently, after witnessing its neighbors succeed in getting rid of their dictators, some mass demonstrations took place from 2010 to 2012, which were brutally clashed by the regime ('Algeria' 2012). Nevertheless, when the old and critically ill president Abdel Aziz Bouteflika was declared newly elected president for a fourth term in 2014, there were again cautious expressions of public indignation. And unlike in the 1980s and 1990s, it is not Political Islam which seems to benefit from this political indignation: protest movements like *Barakat* (Algerian Arabic for "enough") are being founded and eventually indicate an emerging civil society (Mouloudj 2014).

## Islamic State and Political Islam's Self-Interest

Mass protests in Benghazi and the following French-led ouster of Muammar Gaddafi led to the social and political disintegration of Libya. This vacuum became a new hotspot of global Jihad [3]. In Syria, Al-Nusra Front and ISIS became the two main Islamist militia groups fighting Bashar al-Assad's regime. ISIS occupied large parts of Eastern Syria in 2013, in addition to its already captured territory in Western Iraq. Thus, ISIS's occupied areas already looked like a whole new state territory between Syria and Iraq in size. Finally, in June 2014, ISIS launched a full-scale offensive in Iraq, which led to a sudden and successful seize of very large areas of Iraq – ISIS dropped two letters from its acronym and became *Islamic State* (IS). The fall of Baghdad was believed to be only a matter of time.

Although it might look like Political Islam has entered a higher stage of existence by becoming an unstoppable military and political force, this very transformation has actually again eroded Political Islam's foundations leading to its loss of influence and power. Three developments are fueling this reconfiguration: 1) IS is exercising power in its territories in a very cruel way by killing thousands of people, often randomly – it has nearly no legitimacy in its conquered territories (Weber 1978: 212-215). 2) In Syria, IS at first sided with the *Al-Nusra Front* and the secular *Free Syrian Army* (FSA) against the regime. However, power struggles between *Al-Nusra* and IS led to fighting, which caused more than 4,000 deaths so far. That opened a new frontline: FSA and *Al-Nusra* against IS. Consequently, IS is more and more perceived as an ordinary militia group following its own power ambitions, rather than representing the Islamic answer to the peoples' social and political demands. 3) IS is fundamentally sectarian. It tends to consider everything but Sunni Islam as infidelity. Already Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who is a crucial predecessor of its current leader, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, and had initiated Jihad in Iraq in 2003, declared war on Shia Muslims in 2005 ('Al-Zarqawi declares war on Iraqi Shia' 2005). Although there might be more or less suspicion between Sunni and Shia believers throughout the MENA region, declaring Sunni or Shia a target in Jihad is barely supported in those countries.

Nuri al-Maliki's sectarian politics in Iraq and the discrimination of the Sunni population were the major shift which allowed the Sunni militia IS to conquer vast parts of Iraq. As a matter of fact, local support in Iraq is or was because of sectarian politics. The peaceful power shift to Haider al-Abadi, who promised inclusive politics, is already backed by Sunni leaders and clerics. So IS is very likely to lose its local support again. IS will again be what it was from the beginning: an actor whose strength does not relate to legitimacy, but to brute force. So once the influence of IS in Iraq decreases due to a shift to non-sectarian policy, it will become more and more apparent that IS is less an actor seeking justice for the people it claims to fight for, but rather an actor pursuing its own interests.

Osama bin Laden used to justify Jihad in terms of political or religious legitimacy: the Jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s aimed at defending fellow Muslims against the unprovoked Soviet invasion; the attack on the US embassy in Mogadishu, as well as on the US military camp in Saudi Arabia, aimed at expelling US troops from the Arabian Peninsula (Kepel 2002: 313-323). It is basically two fatwas which are crucial for today's global Jihad: Bin Laden's "Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites" of 1996, and "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders" in 1998 by Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and others. In those documents, among the presence of US troops in the land of Mecca and Medina, Bin Laden names violence against Muslims in Palestine, Bosnia, Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Assam, Philippine, Fattani, Ugadin, Somalia, Eritrea, or Chechnya as reasons why it is a

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duty to fight the Americans and its allies. Furthermore, American imperialism is blamed for poverty and social injustice in Muslim countries (Bin Laden 1996; World Islamic Front 1998). The 9/11 terror attacks, the reemerged Jihad hotspot in Afghanistan, as well as the one in Iraq, were justified along similar lines and thereby found sympathy not only among many Muslims, but even among parts of the anti-imperialist left (Taaffe).

IS, however, inherited Zawahiri's very broad and loose concept of *takfir*, which is an Islamic concept of declaring someone's belief heretic and therefore paving the way to declaring someone or a group an enemy in Jihad. As a consequence, this highly arbitrary paradigm of choosing the target opened up the concept of Jihad to a broad variety of goals. Following an order of Zawahiri, Zarqawi changed the name of his *al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia* to *Islamic State of Iraq* and declared the creation of an Islamic caliphate the first goal of Jihad in Iraq (Roberts 2014). Thus, pursuing this profane goal of conquering land for the extension of *Islamic State's* territory and declaring any opponent in that an enemy in Jihad lacks the broad base of legitimacy Bin Laden's global Jihad sought to establish from the 1990s to at least 2005.

Nevertheless, the Jihad hotspots in Syria and Iraq will continue to attract delusional people from all over the world who are seeking their existential fulfillment in Jihadi adventure. However, without local and international sources of legitimacy, like the first global Jihad hotspot in Afghanistan or the anti-imperialist and pan-Arabic arguments, Syria and Iraq have no potential of becoming sustainable battlegrounds of Jihad. Besides the fact that IS in Syria and in Iraq not only discredited itself as a legitimate actor for the people of Syria and Iraq, it discredits the ideology of Political Islam as a whole: IS's ambitions of power and self-interest strongly add to the disenchantment with Political Islam as an Islamic means to pursue social and political justice.

## A Transformed Role of Political Islam

To sum up, several developments from late 2010 onwards in the MENA region have led to profound reconfigurations of Political Islam. On the one hand, it was the discovery of the effectiveness of social protests in Egypt and Tunisia which shattered the monopoly of Political Islam. On the other hand, IS's display of self-interest and brute force discredited it as a trustworthy representative of Muslim people's social and political demands. All that led to the erosion of the traditional foundations of Political Islam and discredited it as a long-time exclusive and trustworthy means of pursuing political and social justice.

In the short term, Political Islam will still be perceived as being on the rise. But its national and regional foundations have already been eroded. That is why, in the long term, its parties like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Tunisia's *Ennahda* will likely become just one political party among others, rather than the hegemonic threat of everyday politics.

The current Jihad hotspots have been fundamentally fuelled by the golden years of Political Islam from the 1970 until the 2000s in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Palestine, or Syria. However, following the erosion of its national power base, Political Islam will also not be able to be as influential in regional and global affairs as it used to be. Whereas there is still enough money and weapons to maintain its influence by force and foreign support in fighters and weapons, its role in regional and global affairs will diminish with its original source of power long gone.

## Notes

[1] Unlike the more or less manifest Islamist and secular factions within the protesting mass in Tunisia and Egypt, it was also various tribal and sectarian factions who opposed former president Saleh in Yemen, either demanding the secession of its Shiite Northwest like the *Huthis*, or the secession of South Yemen like the Southern Movement ('Who's who in Yemen's opposition?' 2011). In Libya, it was to a large extent a coalition of Eastern Libyan tribes which demanded the ouster of Gadhafi. Thus, whereas the protests in Tunisia and Egypt were predominantly aimed at changing the political nature of its government, various factions within the oppositions in Libya and Yemen had sectarian and regional interests (Fattah 2011).

[2] The fact that the military's supreme leader ran for office and was elected by 96.6 percent of the votes already

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raised first suspicions that the president-elect Sisi will not support the political liberalization of Egypt. Further indications, like the detainment of three Al-Jazeera journalists ('Journalism under fire' 2014), as well as new regulations for civil society organizations (Majeed 2014), also nourish doubts about autocratic tendencies of Egypt's government.

[3] The Taliban war against the Soviet Union is considered the first hotspot of global Jihad: Muslims from all around the world were offered the possibility to practice their faith through Jihad. That was, at the same time, the creation of what later became *al-Qaeda*, literally meaning "base", as in base of Jihad. Many of those Muslims who were trained in the armed Jihad in Afghanistan then deployed to Bosnia to fight the Serbs (Kepel 2002: 217-253, 299-322). And it already was Osama bin Laden and his companion Ayman Az-Zawahiri who orchestrated these activities. Following the US invasion in Afghanistan and the al-Qaeda-led reactivation of this Jihad hotspot, the creation of such hotspots was declared an objective in al-Qaeda strategy papers. The war in Iraq following the US occupation was already intentionally initiated by al-Qaeda affiliate al-Zarqawi (Fisk 2006: 1097-1286). Thus, the situations of political vacuum and turmoil in Libya and Syria were highly welcomed opportunities for al-Qaeda and its global Jihadis (Mortada 2012).

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