

## **CONFLICTS FORUM POLICY PAPER**

### **Islamic Visions of the Outcome of the Recent Arab Revolutions**

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The peoples and countries of the Arab and Islamic worlds have embraced movements and currents of numerous different ideologies and tendencies – nationalist and Pan-Arabist, secular and religious, violent and peaceful, Salafi and modernist, traditional and revivalist, shunning politics or inherently political - all this notwithstanding the fact that since Camp David, the Arab world has undergone a period of declining revolutionary spirit. The Pan-Arabist movements lost all real support after the invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies in Iraq and the fall of the country. Meanwhile, the Islamic presence has been growing steadily ever since the Islamic Revolution in Iran, aggravating the revolutionary elements of the Salafi and Brotherhood movements which have moved on from prothletising to armed action (although they have not given up prothletising and preaching completely).

The critical turning point came after September 11<sup>th</sup>, brought about by America and the international and regional alliance. Under the banner of cross-border globalisation, it launched the most violent and most comprehensive war on all forms of Islam with any involvement in politics, and even forms of ideological Islam confronting the West through critical sentiment. This has placed the affairs of Islamists within the following groupings:

1. Groupings of Islamists who uphold Sufi values in their teachings and who have not entered the political arena in their countries, though they have supported jihadist Islamist movements. This includes the Justice and Charity Movement in Morocco, which has extended beyond Morocco itself and which is primarily a youth movement.
2. Groupings of Islamists with Sufi tendencies who aim to tackle the problems of modernity through political engagement, and who mix Islam and pragmatic relations with the West, such as the Justice and Development movement. They are keen to offer a model form of Islamism for nationalist Islamist movements.
3. Groupings of Islamists with revolutionary tendencies who have set themselves in opposition to the global arrogance of the West and who resist the Israeli presence. They aim to offer a theoretical and practical basis for state rule, or to effectively participate in the national political scene. Examples include Iran and the Islamist resistance in Lebanon and Palestine.
4. Groupings of Islamists which incline towards conciliation or accommodation with the regimes, who work to offer theoretical approaches to civil society. This includes the Moroccan Justice and Development movement and some Brotherhood associations.
5. Groupings which continue to resist the regional and international environment through security deterrents and armed combat. It is these groups which are

instigating the current popular agitation in Arab and Islamic countries, which has been strikingly absent to date.

If we wish to consider the subject which is the source of this study and which is connected to Islamist theories on the eve of powerful popular uprisings or awakenings, and the effects of these on the future of our view of Islam, this requires both methodology on the one hand and on the other hand the resolution that these awakenings, even if they are not Islamically motivated, are also not nationalist and are not attributable to ideological causes. What is striking is that they transcend analysis based on humanitarian or nationalist causes or factors of living standards. Some of them are attributable to crises relating to the position of states or rulers, others to the nature of occupation and subjugation, others to the cultural, religious and moral backgrounds of the people. Given this multiplication of factors, and in light of the decline of many ideologies and doctrines, including Islamism, it is hard to determine the nature of the popular dynamic which has caused this type of transformation, which is open to many possibilities and for which it is too early to predict results. It confronts everyone with the responsibility for offering a vision and a project which will accord with the situation and ambitions of this dynamic. However, one thing is certain: the environment in which these movements are being incubated is essentially Islamic. Any setbacks they suffer at the hands of the existing regimes, whether increases in oppression, corruption or subjugation, will pave the way for the advance of Islamist theories.

Nevertheless, this advance faces real challenges and risks, including:

1. The predominance of structural discourse in most Islamist groups and movements, and the loss of programmes and the ability to legitimise and carry out developmental planning. These movements may possess the capacity for instigation and rebellion, but they are not yet trained for peaceful construction to meet the needs of the situation and the time in such a manner as to display their true identity and unique nature.
2. Fear of the sense amongst Islamists, or some of them at least, that they have reached the final stage and that they must enter the fray with a combative mentality ready to share in the spoils, even if this means relighting the fuses of sectarian, nationalist and religious, not to mention political, conflicts.
3. Falling into the trap of yielding to the effect of the West, which supports regimes here and there, all the while searching for parties which it can be sure will stick to the path it has laid out for them but without being concerned for the ideological or religious allegiances of these parties. There is also an equal amount of fear of yielding to the forceful pressure exerted by bullying remnants of the old regimes, which have enough financial resources and cunning to be able to change their colours and adapt to the new situation.
4. The growing failure of the positive Islamist forces to wield a constructive influence, and their presence in the arena in a way which does not accord with the educational mindset which they have always spread amongst Muslims, based on the idea that Islam provides a serious project for life. Islamic values involve considerable powers of compassion and severity at one and the same time: *“Muhammad is the Messenger*

*of God. Those who follow him are harsh towards the disbelievers and compassionate towards each other*".<sup>1</sup> This failure will clear the way for the forces of Islamic extremism and fanaticism to expand once again and gain significant ground. Here we should note that the loss of ability of these positive forces has nothing to do with righteousness and the logic of the situation. For history has shown that these forces may retreat from time to time but that they always retain their ability to reprise their role and regain their strength. My initial view is that whenever these forces encounter circumstances conducive to internal dissent, they will immediately focus all of their energies inwardly, at the expense of their confrontation with the external enemy.

I would like to end by saying that in the future we may witness serious dialogue between two trends seeking to explain the role of politics in Islam.

**The first trend** opines that Islam must be implemented either so that it is comprehensive, as it was during the age of the first Islamic rulers, or so that the way is open for an Islam which Muslims can embrace whilst living within a civil state that meets the needs of the modern age and whose interests occasionally intersect with ruling global or regional forces. In my opinion, there is no potential for this so-called 'secular Islam'. The discourse of modernist Islam is influenced by secularism, and has now gone so far as to adopt a project of preserving the sanctities of Muslims in the shadow of a strong state which stretches itself between pleasing others (i.e. the West), implementing civil laws and policies, and concerning itself with issues regarding the life of the Islamic nation. This type of conflict typically results in the nation state taking precedence over the Islamic nation.

We are entitled to ask to what extent movements in Arab countries can influence this mindset. What will determine the particular meaning of the state, the meaning which is closest to the civilisation of the state, is that it is an Islamic state on the one hand, and on the other that it prioritises internal affairs over any other priorities, such as its stance on the occupation or the conflict with Israel, or its position towards Western global aggression. However, when we talk here of "prioritising", we do not mean there is no combative interest amongst these people and groups, only that we are discussing priorities.

**The second trend** is represented by the Iranian Islamist experience, which proved the necessity of adopting Islamic sources as the launch pad and programme for *ijtihad* and actual practice. *Ijtihad* necessitates the observance of the flow of time, the characteristics of place and the effects of local tradition and custom. This trend differs from the first trend in calling for renewal through *ijtihad* and rejecting modernism. Accordingly, it believes that the civilisation of the state will arise from the characteristic nature of Islam, and Islam alone. This trend is thus concerned with two ideas:

- a. Being an operational support for all combative movements in the region, assisting the states and peoples of the Islamic nation demanding freedom and rights, and in this manner offering a strong example to be imitated and adopted by Islamist movements with similar demands. In this way it aims to transcend the boundaries of sect, as it

holds that the adherents of this trend are themselves a minority and that unity over crucial issues requires the transcending of the sectarian and doctrinal framework.

- b. Promoting the ability of the Islamist theory to offer a civilizational example which resists America. Here, the idea of the Islamic nation parallel to the “able state” becomes prominent, based on the governance of a learned, just ruler, the foundation for this governance being the people. This is the notion embodied in the principle of “*wilayat al-faqih*” or “the guardianship of the jurists”. Before moving on, I wish to briefly point out that this trend faces real subjective and objective difficulties. The feeling the adherents of this group have of being a minority has created amongst them a sense of distinguishment blighted by fears of modernity evident in their convictions and from the viewpoint of their obligations and ideas which fear any negative effects on the group or other groups. It is this which sometimes causes adverse reactions; the lack of clarity in the initial proposal may stir up storms of anxiety and problematic questions. I should also add that this trend insists on using terminology in an acutely sectarian way, even though it knows that in some cultural or sectarian climates this terminology may be understood incorrectly. An example of this is “*wilayat al-faqih*”, a term which is correctly understood in the Iranian environment, although it may suggest to others guardianship in the form of a sultanate, or the era of power of the religious establishment during the Middle Ages. In fact, this term carries the meaning of “the learned, just ruler”, demand for which is currently sweeping the Arab and Muslim streets. The adherents of this trend have, so far at least, not sought to change the nomenclature of this concept.

I believe that what this trend lacks is a sense of centrality which is able to present itself so as to accord with current concepts and moods, without timely fears of hasty reactions. It must distinguish between methods for political action and the methodology of the ideological work which establishes the political edifice. It must also show more concern for ideological and juristic operational planning alongside the other trends, and for the values of the project they have adopted and in which they trust. I am not considering matters here from a theoretical standpoint far removed from the practical angle, since this trend is fundamentally concerned with the operational aspect. The fault we find with it is a lack of cultural and informational clarity in expressing, presenting and rationalising its theoretical dimensions which are linked to the operational field.

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<sup>1</sup> The Victory, verse 29