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The Case of Iraq

The Critics

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Editorial

With the benefit of hindsight, the events of the past year seem entirely predictable. In the aftermath of the uprisings across the Arab World, those who stood to gain the most from challenging the entrenched establishments of stalwart regimes were those who had been most assiduously persecuted. And so it has come to pass that adherents to the tenets of political Islam—so diligently disenfranchised in the preceding 30 years—have found themselves the beneficiaries of unprecedented electoral success, particularly in North Africa.

Accordingly, in this issue of *The Majalla* we address the issue of Islamism, the challenges it faces and the fears its success may engender. Professor Fawaz Gerges assesses the diversity in political Islam and highlights the problematic ideological gulf between mainstream Islamists and the secular left.

Mehdi Khalaji looks at the Iranian example and makes the case that, despite their best efforts, Islamist governments will be unable to stem the tide of Western modernity into the Middle East.

Widely hailed as a model for Islamic-styled governance, the Turkish success story owes much to the movement of the Fethullah Gulen movement. Nicholas Birch takes the opportunity to re-examine the movement from a more critical perspective.

Though great claims have been made on the part of Tunisia's Ennadha party—some have said that they will revive the nation's ailing economy—Paula Mejia investigates what exactly is being done to boost growth in the epicenter of the Arab Spring.

Elsewhere, Amy Myers Jaffe reveals why an argument over the distribution of natural resources might tear Iraq asunder. Plus, the outgoing leader of the Syrian National Council, Burhan Ghalioun, shares his thoughts on the divided Syrian opposition movement.

All these articles—and more—are available on our website at www.majalla.com/eng. We invite you to visit us online and connect with us on Facebook and Twitter.



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The Many Voices of Political Islam

How do the renascent Islamist parties of North Africa approach toleration, dissent, morality and women?

Professor Fawaz Gerges examines the challenges that face newly empowered Islamist parties in North Africa, especially how they might cope with the ideological chasm between mainstream political Islam, Salafism, and liberal groups.

Fawaz Gerges

A big divide has emerged between liberal-minded groups and religious-based activists after Islamist parties gained parliamentary majorities in the polls in Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco, a divide that risks undermining the transition from authoritarianism to pluralism. Wary of the Islamists' surge, liberals, leftists, and women's rights groups argue that while Islamist leaders sound moderate, they harbor a conservative religious agenda—an agenda that might roll back human rights and individual freedoms. Particularly alarming to critics is the Islamists' desire to impose their own rigid interpretation of morality in the public sphere.

Since gaining majorities in these countries' parliaments, mainstream Islamist groups have been forced to outline their stances on a wide range of issues, especially with regards to Islamic law, personal freedoms, women and minority rights, and tourism. Liberal-minded activists assert that the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Ennahda Party, Morocco's Justice and Development Party, and the Salafists exhibit illiberal tendencies and are intolerant of the rights of minorities, particularly women.

Toleration and Pluralism?

Political Islam's worldview and evolution differ from one group and one Arab country to another. Most mainstream Islamists of the Tunisian Ennahda party and the Egyptian MB variety accept the concept of citizenship and the will of the people, as opposed to the sovereignty of God, as the foundation of legitimate authority.

Most Islamists do not talk about establishing Islamic-based governments—as stipulated by their original manifestos—and instead they call for al-dawla al-madaniya, or a civil state. Even the old guard among the Brotherhood no longer advocate building an Islamic state. They substitute “civil” for “Islamic” in an effort to avoid using the term “secular.”

“The concept of secularism has negative connotations among Arabs in general, not just Islamists”

The concept of secularism has negative connotations among Arabs in general, not just Islamists, because of its historical association with colonialism and Westernization. Similarly, the theocratic model in Iran has failed to fulfill the aspirations of many Islamists, thus reinforcing the shift in discourse from “Islamic” to “civil”, though they are yet to flesh out what they mean by a “civil” state. The pledge by a leading figure in the MB, Khairat Al-Shater, to introduce sharia law if elected as president of Egypt (before he had been disqualified from the presidential race) raises serious concerns about his commitment to civil institutions and individual liberties.

Nevertheless, after their impressive performance in Egypt's parliamentary elections, leaders of the Brotherhood's newly-formed Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) publicly stressed their commitment to pluralism and the protection of individual rights. They made it exceptionally clear that they are willing to accommodate different and diverse people into the process of drafting a constitution.

Two senior MB members, Mohammad Morsi and Essam El-Arian, pledged to form a national unity government with



other parties. Addressing assertions often made by their secular opponents, FJP leaders insist they “would hand over power if we lose” because the public mood will no longer tolerate dictatorship. El-Arian pledged that the FJP will not change the Egyptian constitution to make all legislation comply with Shari’a law.

In contrast to the Brotherhood, Ennahda in Tunisia is more consistent and unequivocal about respect for individual freedoms and its willingness to relinquish power if defeated at the ballot box. The party announced that Shari’a should not be the source for all laws, and that the new constitution should simply acknowledge that Islam is the state religion, just as the old constitution did.

After it gained a majority in the Tunisian parliament at the end of 2011, Ennahda established a broad-based unity coalition to oversee transition to pluralism. In contrast to the Brotherhood which has fielded its own candidate for president, Ennahda supported Moncef Marzouki—a liberal human rights activist—as president as part of the power-sharing deal. Said Fer-

of the political process which will protect them against the whims of autocratic military rulers. As Ennahda’s leader Rachid Ghannouchi put it in an interview in 2011: “Rulers benefit from violence more than their opponents do.”

Various Islamist leaders stress their commitment to building institutions and safeguarding individual freedoms and minorities, and the rule of law. Ennahda has made it clear that it will protect Tunisia’s small Jewish minority, which faces considerable pressure from small conservative elements in society. Ennahda has rejected calls from extremists (and from Israel) that Tunisian Jews should leave the country.

In Egypt, the debate on minority rights is still unfolding and revealing a less progressive stance by the Brotherhood. The party announced that while it would not oppose Christians or women standing for president, it would support a Muslim male for the position. Far from deterred by such illiberal statements, female candidates have thrown their hats in the presidential ring, such as famous Egyptian news-anchor Bothaina Kamel.

among pragmatists and younger, progressive Islamists, and there are important variations and differences among Islamists across national borders.

In Tunisia, Ennahda officials have repeatedly pledged to promote equal opportunities in employment and education for women, as well as freedom to choose or reject traditional Islamic dress. Long before the Arab awakenings, Rachid Ghannouchi, Ennahda’s leader, supported affirmative action to increase women’s participation in parliament, breaking with the policies of the MB in Egypt.

However, Tunisia’s female activists have accused Ennahda of misleading the public and making false promises. This tension became clear after a female member of Ennahda, Souad Abdul Rahim, challenged a law that protected women who have children outside marriage and called for its abrogation. While raising concerns that Ennahda may curtail women’s rights, another member of Ennahda, Ali Al-Areed, noted that “The Party will not change laws related to inheritance and polygamy because these laws are tailored for the Tunisian society.” These statements have not allayed the fears of women and liberals. Consequently, a number of female activists have formed the October 24 Front, to defend women’s rights and freedoms through monitoring the performance of Ennahda and other parties and scrutinizing the drafting of the new constitution.

The debate on women’s rights in Tunisia has recently become more audible after a dispute over whether women should be allowed to wear the niqab (full face-covering veil) in universities. After being suppressed and silenced during the Ben Ali regime, Salafists have emerged into public spaces, favoring long beards and veils and demanding the application of Shari’a law. Fearing the loss of individual liberties, secularists challenged Salafists on the streets and in universities. In late March and early April 2012, the war of words between the supporters of the two camps turned into violent clashes. Pressed in the middle of this fierce struggle, Ennahda has been paralyzed, unable or unwilling to act decisively and resolve the crisis.

In Egypt, the Salafists, who won 20 percent of seats in the new parliament, oppose women playing leadership roles in

As Iman Bibars, the head of the Association for Development and Enhancement of Women in Egypt, noted: “The revolution gave us a voice and we cannot hide that ... But I think the product after the revolution is against women ... I was shocked the fundamentalists took over and I did not foresee a male gender constitution”

jani, a rising figure within Ennahda, noted that history will judge his generation of Islamists not on its ability to gain power but rather on what it do with that power:

“In this golden opportunity, I am not interested in control. I am interested in delivering the best charismatic system, a charismatic, democratic system. This is my dream,” concluded Ferjani.

Although there is heated bickering among Islamists and their liberal and leftist rivals over the formation of new constitutions, the constitutions will reflect a spirit of pluralism and toleration. Islamists have a vested interest in the institutionalization

Minorities and Morality in the Public Sphere

For many women, the main issue lies in the degree of equality they will enjoy in society in the post-authoritarian political system. On the whole, Islamists, particularly the Salafists and the MB, remain prisoners to regressive dogma concerning women. Conservative Islamists deploy scriptural interpretations selectively and haphazardly and claim that women and religious minorities cannot be fully equal before the law—and so cannot hold the office of president or even magistrate. This anti-democratic position is contested

the work place or in the political space. Moreover, they favor regulating women's dress and imposing Islamic standards of modesty in the public sphere.

While the so-called blue bra girl incident—in which a young protester was stripped and beaten by police—and the cases of enforced virginity tests by a military doctor suggest that certain taboos have atomized—and that women have become more outspoken since the revolution—female representation in the political arena has dwindled. The constitutional committee in Egypt (subsequently disbanded by the court) included no women. In the March 2012 parliamentary elections wom-

en won fewer than 10 of the 508 seats. As Iman Bibars, the head of the Association for Development and Enhancement of Women in Egypt, noted: “The revolution gave us a voice and we cannot hide that ... But I think the product after the revolution is against women ... I was shocked the fundamentalists took over and I did not foresee a male gender constitution.”

The predicament of women is no different in other countries where Islamists have made similar gains. In Jordan, the appointment of a new prime minister and a committee to review election laws and make amendments to the constitution did not fulfill a promise to include the word

“gender” in Article 6 of the constitution. That article would have guaranteed the equality of all Jordanians before the law. In Kuwait, the victory of the Islamist-based opposition in parliamentary elections led to an all-male chamber. The four women who won seats in 2009 lost them all in the 2012 elections.

In addition to women's rights, morality issues are heatedly debated in Arab countries that have experienced significant change during the Arab revolutions. In Egypt, in particular, where tourism plays an important role in the country's economy (generating more than 12 percent of hard foreign currency), alcohol consump-

A Salafist supporter in Tunisia



Photo © Getty Images

tion, the tolerance of bikinis and mixed bathing at beaches are being reassessed. As with women's rights, mainstream Islamists have sent mixed signals to the public about their views on morality issues.

In contrast, Mohammad Morsi, the leader of the FJP, told the public that his party did not plan to ban alcohol in hotels and at tourist resorts or prevent Egyptians from drinking liquor in their homes. However, other members of the Brotherhood have expressed opposing views.

What to make of the contradictory statements by Islamists on women's rights and enforcing a particular morality in the public sphere? On the one hand, the Salafists, along with conservatives among mainstream Islamists, seek to impose a regressive interpretation of morality on society at large. On the other hand, pragmatists among Islamists are caught in the middle of a fierce debate and are undergoing a huge learning process, as they attempt to reach consensus on controversial questions that touch on their very identity.

For example, Ennahda struggles to walk a fine line between the Salafists and the secularists and to avoid alienating and estranging either camp. In contrast, the MB and the Salafists in Egypt have voiced conflicting messages about their views on morality issues in the public sphere.

Nevertheless, a clear divide has emerged between mainstream Islamists and the Salafists, a divide that will deepen and widen as Islamists come to terms with the responsibilities of governance and are forced to clarify their positions. Of all religious-based groups, Ennahda has exhibited the most progressive stance on women's rights and the role of morality in the public sphere, even though it has refrained from publicly confronting the Salafists. Its leaders prefer to unite all Tunisians and set an example for neighboring Arab states. A woman—Siham Ben Sedrine—is leading the panel to define rights and liberties in the nation.

The Brotherhood has been slower than its Tunisian counterpart in fully embracing the equality of all citizens before the law regardless of sex, religion, and ethnicity. This nuance may be explained by the different historical experiences of Egyptian and Tunisian Islamists, as well as the influence that the old guard like Al-Badi and

Political Parties

Ennahda, Tunisia

Seats in parliament: 89 (out of 217).

Founded: 1981, legalized 2011

Leaders: Secretary-General Hamadi Jebali (now Prime Minister of Tunisia), Rashid Ghannouchi

Notes: Entered coalition with two other parties to form a government after 2011 elections. It is the biggest single party in parliament.

Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), Egypt

Seats in parliament: Lower house 217 (out of 498); Upper house 105 (out of 180)

Founded: Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, 2011.

Leaders: Chairman Mohamed Morsi, vice-chairman Essam El-Ariam

Notes: Party leader, Mohamed Morsi, is a candidate in Egypt's presidential elections this May. The party also had 38 seats (out of 100) on the commission charged with writing Egypt's new constitution, before it was suspended by court order. It is the largest political party in parliament, and it is a member of the Democratic Alliance, the largest political bloc in Egypt's parliament.

Justice and Development Party, Morocco

Seats in parliament: 107 (out of 395)

Founded: 1967 (original), 1998 (present form)

Leaders: Abdelilah Benkirane (now Prime Minister of Morocco), Saadeddine Othmani (now Foreign Minister)

Notes: Part won a plurality in the elections of 2011, and formed a governing coalition with two others. Like Ennahda and the FJP, it is the biggest single party in the government but does not have a majority by itself.

“In Egypt, in particular, where tourism plays an important role in the country's economy (generating more than 12 percent of hard foreign currency), alcohol consumption, the tolerance of bikinis and mixed bathing at beaches are being reassessed”

even Shater—who was previously seen as a reformist—still works within the 86-year-old Brotherhood. Many young Muslim Brothers complain that the group's old guard does not practice democracy internally even as it promises to lead the country toward pluralism.

As can be seen, mainstream Islamists are finding their voice and their way awkwardly. They are learning by trial and error. In particular, the Brotherhood has already alienated most of the political groups from the left to the right. Lacking imagination, time and again, the old guard has proved to be its own worst enemy, forcing decisions on rank-and-file

and demanding absolute loyalty. Conservatives are testing the limits of their newfound power, falling into the trap of blind political ambition. Overreach might cost the Brotherhood critical public support and deepen the divide within the organization, as well as between the Muslim Brothers and secular-minded groups. ■

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The many problems of Fethullah Gulen

Turkey is no stranger to conspiracy and the rise of the Fethullah Gulen Movement has recently prompted a few eyebrows to be raised. Previously admired inside and outside Turkey for its liberal reputation, the Movement is battling skepticism and suspicions that all is not as it seems.

Nicholas Birch

Either appear as you are," the thirteenth century Sufi mystic Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi once famously said, "or be as you appear."

One wonders what Rumi would have made of modern Turkey's most powerful religious group, the neo-Sufi Fethullah Gulen Movement, set up in the early 1970s by a former state-employed imam, in control today of a media empire and a network of schools and businesses that stretches across the world.

Outside Turkey, among the few who know of it, the Movement has long had a positive reputation.

Playing on simplistic western ideas of Sufism as 'tolerant' Islam, its leaders have proved adept at marketing it as a moderate alternative to Al-Qaeda and its offshoots. A day after the Twin Tower attacks, Gulen placed a full page advert in the New York Times saying that "a terrorist cannot be a Muslim, nor can a true Muslim be a terrorist.

The advert was very much on message. Based in the USA since 1999, Gulen has been unswervingly critical of efforts to turn Islam into what he calls "a means to control people." In reality, he says, it is a "religion of belief, prayer and good morals" which is perfectly in line with Western democratic norms.

Gulen was an early exponent of inter-faith dialogue, meeting Pope John Paul II in 1998. He has met Jewish community leaders on numerous occasions since. Across Europe and the US foundations set up by his followers organize conferences on 'moderate Islam' and the importance of civilizational dialogue.

Schools funded and staffed by his sympathizers offer English-language education—modeled on Turkey's state curriculum—to the children of elites from Mongolia to South America.

Every year, in the second half of May, hundreds of children from the schools come to Turkey to participate in what the Movement calls the Turkish Olympiads, competing to sing the best Turkish song, to recite the best Turkish poem, to dance the best Turkish folk dance. The finals are broadcast on prime-time TV and reported assiduously by newspapers of all ideological stripes.

"Turkey's media have stopped applauding the Movement and timidly begun to question its motives"

"This organization will transform Turkey from a regional power to a world power", Ali Agaoglu, the CEO of one of Turkey's biggest construction companies, enthused after last year's finals.

Even Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, known to be no great fan of the Movement, if only because its power risks encroaching on his, was unstinting in his praise. "When I go abroad, I see our flag flying not just in our embassies," he told the gala audience last year. "I see it in the schools too, and that makes me proud."

Yet, despite the public displays of enthusiasm that greet the Olympiads every year, attitudes towards the Gulen Movement inside Turkey have long been mixed.

In part, the suspicion can be put down to the Republic's deep suspicion of what it calls *irtica* (reaction), a convenient shorthand for any expression of Islam that is not in line with interpretations backed by the state.

In 2000, three years into an army-backed campaign to crush political Islam, a prosecutor charged Gulen with attempting to undermine Turkish secularism. Gulen has always denied the charges, and in 2006 a court dismissed the case.

Since then, the power of the Movement has grown exponentially. Sales of its flagship newspaper, Zaman, have grown in five years from around 300,000 to just un-



der a million. When a non-Turk boards a Turkish Airlines flight today, it is Zaman's English-language version they are offered to read, not the more secular Turkish Daily News, as was once the case.

Analysts put its rapid rise down to its success at capturing the newly-confident zeitgeist of Anatolia's new entrepreneurs.

In Gaziantep, Konya, Kayseri and Denizli, socially conservative Anatolian cities that have risen from small trading towns to major industrial exporters in the last twenty years, pro-Gulen business associations regroup the strongest businesses.

Everywhere you go in these cities, you meet businessmen who echo the sentiments Gulen has expressed in his sermons for years: pride in Turkey, the descendant of the great Ottoman Empire, the conviction that after years of weakness and shame the country is on the way up again, the conviction that strength lies in strong faith, an emphasis on moral conservatism rather than radical Islam.

But the Movement's growth has increased suspicions, and skepticism about its intentions is no longer limited to secularist die-hards.

“In Gaziantep, Konya, Kayseri and Denizli, socially conservative Anatolian cities that have risen from small trading towns to major industrial exporters in the last twenty years, pro-Gulen business associations regroup the strongest businesses”

At the heart of suspicions lies the sprawling investigation into a group that Turks know as Ergenekon, the name of a Romulus and Remus-style myth of Turkish origins.

The investigation began in 2007, when police found a stash of explosives at a retired military petty-officer's house in Istanbul. Within months, scores of people had been arrested on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the self-styled 'Muslim democrat' government in power since 2002: mafiosi, hired killers the state had used to gun down Kurdish dissidents in the 1990s, ultra-nationalist lawyers and—shockingly—several four-star generals.

Secular politicians reacted from the start with horror. But for many Turks,

liberal or conservative, the investigations were welcome. Evidence of plotting was clear. There was a history too: the army had intervened in politics four times since 1960. Finally, the unelected 'guardians' of the Turkish Republic were being brought to account. It was a victory for democracy.

Then things began to go wrong. It wasn't just the abysmal quality of the three Ergenekon indictments, or their length (5000 pages). Nor was it the fact some suspects have been held in custody for over two years either: Turks are used to that. It was the way investigations seemed to turn into a witch-hunt of critics of the government and the Movement.

In 2009, there was a police raid on the house of a terminally-ill 73-year old woman well-known for her advocacy of girls' education. In 2010, a senior police officer who had spent his life fighting left-wing terror was arrested on charges of membership of an extreme left-wing terror group. In 2011, two journalists who had done more than any to shed light on Ergenekon were arrested on suspicion of being members.

Many blamed the Movement for the arrests. Long accused of being a missionary by conservatives (her mother was Swiss), the woman had set up schools that were a competitor of Movement schools. The police officer had just published a book alleging that Movement supporters controlled senior positions in the police. The journalists had both written books critical of the Movement. "Anybody who touches [the Movement] burns," one of them shouted as police led him away.

Sympathizers of Fethullah Gulen point out that Turkey is full of critics of the Movement who have not been arrested.

But the reactions of the Movement's media to the arrests did nothing for its reputa-





Fethullah Gulen and his movement control a worldwide media network

Photo © Getty Images

tion. A news presenter on Samanyolu television, the Movement's TV flagship, smiled as he announced the woman's death from cancer shortly after the raid. When the police officer was arrested, Zaman columnists made much of allegations that he was having an affair with a schoolteacher.

"If he had not had an affair, would [he] be in prison today," asked Huseyin Gulerce, a leading columnist for Zaman. "God protect us all from our moral frailties. For it is these that the Deep State uses." (The Deep State is the shadowy nexus of civilians and military men Turks believe have controlled Turkey from behind the scenes for decades.)

Gulerce then went on to quote the alleged founder of a military police unit blamed for scores of murders during the 1990s. "Before we recruit people for JITEM, we dirty them thoroughly: they are no good to us if they are clean." The implication was clear: the police officer was a member of JITEM, a group he was among the first officials publicly to give evidence against in the 1990s.

"Politically too, old allies appear to be drifting apart: the government recently rushed to pass laws protecting Turkey's intelligence chief after the same prosecutors who have spearheaded Ergenekon investigations tried to take him in for questioning"

As international concern grew over the fate of the arrested journalists, meanwhile, it was the pro-Gulen media which led lobbying to keep the vaguely-worded anti-terror laws and 'Special Authority Courts' which enabled judges to keep the men in custody for over a year without even informing them of the case against them.

Get rid of the courts, Zaman chief editor Ekrem Dumanli wrote, and "all the trials against deep structures will fail. That is what Ergenekon supporters have been demanding for a long time."

It is a rhetorical trope that has become wearisomely familiar in recent years. In the past, the secular regime smeared its opponents as iriticaci (reactionaries). Today, Ergenekon has replaced iritica. Only the media's fondness for unattributed sources and ad hominem attacks remains unchanged.

The irony, analysts say, is that Zaman was among the most outspoken supporters, back in 2004, of the government's European Union-backed plans to dispense with the State Security Courts which had been used for decades to lock up opponents of the regime.

Why oppose one court and defend another which is almost a carbon-copy of the first? That, critics of the Gulen Movement say, is the nub of the issue.

"What we have seen over the past six or seven years is a veiled war for control between two judicial cliques," secularists backed by the military and Gulen sympathizers, says Orhan Gazi Ertekin, a judge and political analyst.

The State Security Courts were controlled by military judges, and secularists controlled other courts. Today, secularists are still strong in higher courts, the Court of Appeals and the Constitutional Court. The new Special Authority Courts, responsible for running the investigations into allegations of coup plots and terrorism, are controlled by Gulen sympathisers.

"The Movement has won the power struggle," Ertekin says. "They are the new Kemalists. The mind-set is the same. Expecting them to be any more 'Islamic' than the secularists is as meaningless as expecting them to be any more democratic."

Ertekin sees the signs of a growing rift within the judiciary between Gulen supporters and Islamists, allied until recently by a shared desire to combat authoritarian secular ideas. Politically too, old allies appear to be drifting apart: the government recently rushed to pass laws protecting Turkey's intelligence chief after the same prosecutors who have spearheaded Ergenekon investigations tried to take him in for questioning.

"The alliance between the Justice and Development Party government and the Gulen Movement is finished", says Ali

Bayramoglu, a columnist for the pro-government and Gulen-neutral daily Yeni Safak.

Smelling blood, Turkey's media have stopped applauding the Movement and timidly begun to question its motives. The international media too, which played such an important role in burnishing the Movement's image as a standard-bearer for 'liberal Islam', have begun to rethink.

The *New York Times*, until recently a fairly unreflective cheerleader of Fethullah Gulen and his educational activities, has recently published two articles criticizing the Movement.

The second in particular, published in April, stung the Movement to respond. Gulen's lawyer Orhan Erdemli accused "some marginal circles" of generating what Today's Zaman called "imaginary scenarios to besmirch Gulen's reputation."

"[T]hey set about campaigns of lynching through the media in order to destroy this great interest, love, and high respect for Gulen held by the public opinion", Today's Zaman reported Erdemli as saying.

Fighting words. But Rusen Cakir, a liberal columnist who has watched the Movement for decades, nonetheless senses that many in the Movement are increasingly anxious at the turn events are taking.

"The Movement wants to leave behind the 'extraordinary' events of recent years and return to civil society activities," he says.

Political scientist Dogu Ergil agrees. "The Gulen Movement is Turkey's biggest export", he says. "And when you internationalize yourself, you have to... balance things."

As it works to re-brand itself, the Movement would do well to consider Rumi's words: "Either appear as you are, or be as you appear." ■

Nicholas Birch lived in Istanbul, Turkey, from 2002 to 2009, working as a freelancer. His work from Turkey, Iraq, Iran and the Caucasus appeared in a number of publications including the Washington Post, Time Magazine, The Guardian and the Times Literary Supplement. Birch was a stringer for the Wall Street Journal and The London Times until the end of 2009. Birch is in the early stages of writing his first book, a travel book investigating Turkey's troubled relationship with its past.

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The Clerics vs. Modernity

Failure of the Islamic Republic's Soft Power

The Islamic Republic of Iran's greatest fear is neither a military attack on its shadowy nuclear program nor a forced suspension of Uranium enrichment, but a cultural invasion in the form of Western modernity. As much as Tehran's regime takes culture seriously, it misunderstands its nature, mechanisms and dynamism. Therefore the government's dissatisfaction with the cultural situation within Iran never ends. The political revolution in 1979 reached its goal by overthrowing the monarchy, but the process of Cultural Revolution never stops and the re-Islamization of Iranian society and culture has been an ongoing project. Every year there are new programs and plans for changing the culture and Islamizing it. The regime attempts the impossible and believes in the triumph of hope over experience.

Mehdi Khalaji

An Iranian worker puts the final touches to a mural of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, adjoining a cinema



Militarizing the Cultural Arena

In a speech in 2003 Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated that

“More than Iran’s enemies need artillery, guns and so forth, they need to spread cultural values that lead to moral corruption. They have said this many times. I recently read in the news that a senior official in an important American political center, said: ‘Instead of bombs, send them miniskirts.’ He is right. If they arouse sexual desires in any given country, if they spread unrestrained mixing of men and women, and if they lead youth to behavior to which they are naturally inclined by instincts, there will no longer be any need for artillery and guns against that nation.”

It is striking here how the government uses military literature, vocabulary and metaphor to speak about culture. Since Khamenei is the commander in chief of the Armed Forces he also regards himself as the commander in chief of Islamic culture. He is the one who defines it and he is the authority who implements it.

What Khamenei considers a cultural invasion should be seen as the broadest war in the history of mankind. In his eyes the enemy’s armies are innumerable and include all members of Western society who adhere to modern liberal values and cultural institutions—from art to tourism. Not only this, but the West has globalized its ideals in order to poison all foreign cultures—not only Muslim hearts and minds but also non-Muslim cultures like Japan. According to Khamenei the Muslim world is under particularly heavy attack. Western cultural colonizers are trying to destroy the cultural “authenticity” of Muslims and deprive it of its “originality” and there are colonized minds within Muslim community who are knowingly or unknowingly the West’s agents—who corrupt cultural territory and contaminate it with western cultural microbes. These agents—such as intellectuals, scholars, artists and writers—reproduce the same values that the colonizers want to spread all over the world. Therefore aesthetics are as dangerous as conventional politics: We may not easily be able to perceive its danger but we should be certain that it was not created by the West in vain.

As Islamist ideology believes Islamic government should manage all cultural affairs

of the country, the rulers of Iran therefore believe that Western culture is under the tight control of the political powers—imperialists and Zionists. For them the capitalist world is not designed to function within a decentralized network but as a well-guided structure that exploits every citizen and dominates undeveloped nations.

In other words, everything is political and every member of the society ought to prove whether she/he is with ‘us’ or with ‘them’. The process of proving that one is with the ruling ideology is not easy. Totalitarian ideology is temperamental and moods can change swiftly, because in the end it is not principles which define the ideology but the whims of the ruler. Absolute loyalty to the ruling ideology can also be risky. The cult of personality of the leader trumps the ideology in such a way that he becomes the main criterion for measuring the fidelity to the ideology.

“The objective of a totalitarian system is to destroy all forms of communal life that are not imposed by the state and closely controlled by it, so that individuals are isolated from one another and become mere instruments in the hands of the state” wrote Leszek Kolakowski in describing why Joseph Stalin killed many more people who were sincerely loyal to the communist ideology than people who were opposed to it.

“Those who took the faith seriously wanted to interpret it for themselves and to consider whether this or that political step was in accordance with Stalin’s version of Marxism-Leninism. But this made them potential critics and rebels against the government, even if they swore fealty to Stalin; for they might always invoke yesterday’s Stalin against today’s and quote the leader’s words against himself” Kolakowski continues.

In Iranian contexts this picture seems very familiar: Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karubi—the leaders of green opposition who have been under house arrest for more than 450 days at this point—never rebelled against Islamic ideology but instead criticized Khamenei. Both were former officials and sincere believers in the Islamic Republic but came to the conclusion that Khamenei had deviated from the initial path of the revolution. This is also true about intellectuals

who were considered to be committed to Islamist ideology three decades ago, but now are seen by the government as Western agents who seek to penetrate Muslim society and corrupt it from within. The film maker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the late poet Qaisar Aminpoor and the intellectual Abdul Karim Soroush are among the best examples whose starting-point was within Islamic ideology but the government’s record disappointed them and made them its critics. In fact the true believers who abstain from becoming morally and economically tied to the regime are susceptible to become revisionists and reformists.

“The Islamic Republic has tried to transform Islamic tradition into a shield against modern culture”

Re-Islamizing Islam

For Islamists, the golden age is not the period immediately before Western colonialism or the emergence of modernity in Europe. They idealize the time of Prophet Mohammed and his four succeeding Caliphs (in the case of Sunnis) and (in the case of Shi’ites) his fourth succeeding Caliph. They look at the history of Islam as a history of misunderstanding Islam. Islam deviated from its divine path a short while after its very inception. They reject not only the objective and concrete history of Islam but also its subjective history; Islamic theology and exegeses. They want to provide a ‘new’ interpretation of Islam which is supposed not to perfectly correspond to the period of prophet. Since interpreting is not possible without referring to a tradition, they take a very eclectic approach to Islamic traditions, books, authors, and customs. They arbitrarily choose what they need for their political agenda and leave what does not serve their ends—occasionally forcing people to forget it ever existed. Consequently they use force not only to fight with Western cultural influence but also to impose their own image of the past in the minds of Muslims—manipulating Muslims’ histori-

cal memory and identity. This is why they try to re-Islamize Muslim society; a process that never ends.

Islamists fight not only with the present and the future but also with the past. They fight time itself and want to replace it with mythological eternity. Islamists' historical pessimism does not have any cure. It just makes them exert more violence until their capacity of using force gets exhausted; something that is happening now in Iran after the brutal implementation of Islamic ideology for more than three decades. Interestingly their approach to modernity is also eclectic. They do not deny all of it. They choose technology and science and reject certain cultures and worldviews. The marriage of modern technology and ideological interpretation of Islam can generate the darkest forces in our time.

Cultural Ground Zero

The Islamic Republic has tried to transform Islamic tradition into a shield against modern culture. But the clerical establishment—the main factory for producing tradition and guarding it—was not equipped to do the job. Indeed, clerics themselves have not been effective guardians of tradition. The clerical mind has been closed for several centuries. Clerical discourse is a repetition of what has been said by Muslim scholars many centuries ago. After the revolution the clerical establishment's bureaucracy was not compatible with the requirements and expectations of the newly formed Islamic government, it was modernized structurally and bureaucratically but failed to modernize the foundations of its thought and to remedy the sclerosis of tradition. The government allocated billions of dollars to the clerical establishment and other religious institutions, so that they could take the place of modern cultural institutions.

Significantly, the intelligence ministry and the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) maintain de facto control over cultural production but the result is not satisfying for the regime. Islamist ideology, as in other totalitarian ideologies, ignores the spontaneous nature of culture. None of the religious cultures of the past could have been created as a result of social and cultural engineering by the ruling power. Culture evolves naturally, un-

consciously and freely. Consequently, as the government has sought to intervene in culture in order to steer it in a specific direction, it has destroyed it. By censoring cultural production, bankrupting private publishers and cultural entrepreneurs, arresting writers and artists, laying off scholars from universities, eliminating humanity majors from academia and changing textbooks to religious books, the government has so far failed to produce its own brand of acceptable culture.

Islamist ideology defines itself as more 'against' modernity than 'for' building an authentic and functional society. Islamist ideology is now more than a century old, but still there is no clear vision of what a Utopian Islamist society would look like. Since its nature is more based on negation its power lies more in destruction. What is ironic in Islamist ideology is that it gives a pivotal role to culture and soft power, but in countering Western soft power it relies on aggressive hard power. Without a potential recourse to violence local society tends to become influenced by modern global culture rather than isolate itself from it.

Also Islamist ideology wants to replace culture with Shari'a or Islamic law. Therefore in its view, religious jurists become custodians of culture and they have the responsibility of imposing a juridical model on the society. An ideology that looks at individuals only from a juridical perspective would find all of them sinful.

Culture Saves the Nation

Islamists in Iran were lucky to take power in 1979 but not lucky enough in ruling a society already deeply modernized. Had Iran not been modernized for several decades before the Islamic Revolution, imposing an "Islamic model of society" would have been much easier. Women, young people and the urban middle class in Iran subsequently saved the country from going in a similar direction to Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban. Despite all the daily systematic pressure on people in Iran, more than 40 percent of people watch prohibited satellite television and more than 20 million use the internet. Underground culture in Iran is not underground anymore; it is visible and widespread. The new generation stands against the government's imposed

cultural model. Even the religious strata of the society distinguish between state Islam and civil Islam and frequently prefer the latter. Clerics who do not have affiliation with the government feel closer to people than those who are in power. Both the Islamic state and state Islam are losing their credit, even in the house of IRGC and the clergy.

The Islamic Republic did not take into consideration that the Islamization of a society has its limits. It has overstretched its political authority. Women and youth want to look to the future but the government wants to imprison them in a mythological past. Under the Islamic Republic the number of schools for foreign languages in Iran has enormously increased, because families are keen to provide their children with secular education. Despite censorship people are more eager to read Western books or watch Western movies or listen to Western music. If the Pahlavi monarchy was trying to modernize the society from above, the Islamic republic has unwittingly but successfully modernized the society from within. If modernity was a luxury for the upper and upper-middle class in the north of Tehran under the Shah, now every remote village can access the internet and satellite television and dream of a better life and a noble cultural interaction with global culture.

If the newly elected Egyptian and Tunisian Islamist governments declare that they do not want to imitate an Iranian model, it means that the Islamic Republic of Iran is an example for no one in Muslim world. Iran needs to rely on its money and military strength to mobilize Muslims to its cause. While the Islamic Republic's soft power fails, the Iranian people's urge to integrate into world culture and economy is unprecedented. This leaves the door of hope for political change in Iran wide open. ■

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shi'ite groups in the Middle East. Mr. Khalaji has also served on the editorial boards of two prominent Iranian periodicals, and produced for the BBC as well as the US government's Persian news service. He currently writes a bilingual English and Persian blog, MehdiKhalaji.com.



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A Divided Opposition

Burhan Ghalioun: “We have nothing but optimism; no way but victory and defeating the regime.”

Shortly before his resignation, the outgoing head of the Syrian National Council spoke to *The Majalla* about the divisions in the organization and its attitude to Kofi Annan’s peace plan.

Roshan Kasem

Burhan Ghalioun has proven to be a controversial leader of the Syrian National Council (SNC). Based in neighboring Turkey, he originally agreed to step down earlier this month in a bid to forestall the movement from being divided further; after activists in Syria criticized him for monopolizing power. Now, given the news of his resignation this week, *The Majalla* brings you an interview with the long-time dissident, who claims to be confident that splits in Syria’s opposition will be solved, and rules out negotiations with Assad’s government.

“There could be a crisis within the committee, but the process of restructuring has not failed, because we have not reached the consultative meeting to launch it”

If you are willing to hand over power to another person or party, why do you face so much criticism?

It is because the Syrian people and the revolutionaries feel strongly that any such extension is a thing of the past. In fact, the problem is that the term is not enough for action; it should be longer until a plan is implemented. Three or five months are not enough. Any serious project can’t be achieved in such short time. We have an ongoing revolution. However, if this is the demand of the youth who are sacrificing on the ground, I will do it.



What should the opposition focus on in the current stage?

Our strategy is to support the revolution inside Syria by all means, to ensure its continuation and victory. This will not change just by changing the chairman of the National Council. If you asked me what my main focus in the coming period will be, the answer is to restructure the Council as soon as possible, and maybe handing over its presidency to another party.

But challenges facing the process of restructuring seem to be huge, especially after the committee appointed to prepare the process announced its failure?

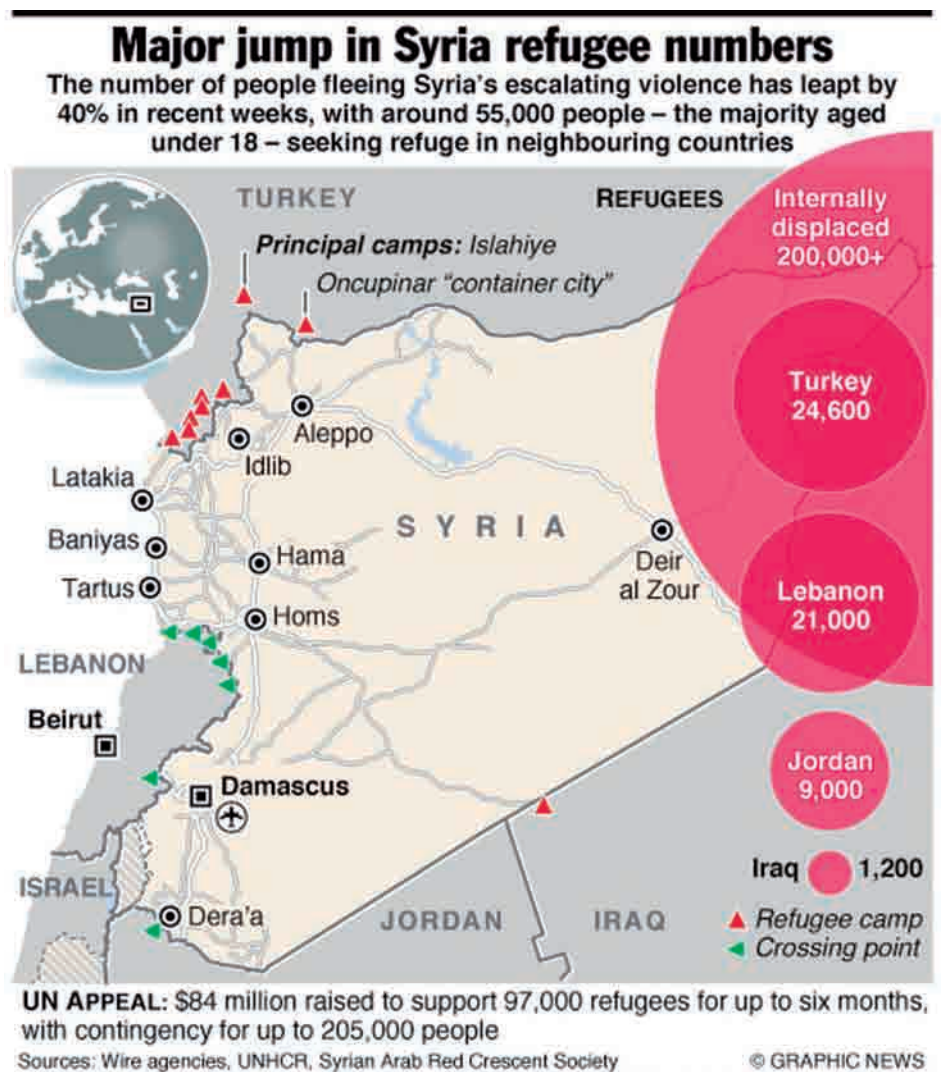
No, the accurate information is that in [the meeting of the opposition before the second conference held by Friends of Syria], a preparatory committee was formed to prepare for a consultative meeting to discuss restructuring the National Council. This committee comprises five members of the Council and five from outside, and it is still working. However, the outside members have issued a statement, which I think is incorrect and unnecessary. I contacted an assistant of an Arab League envoy who participated in the meeting, and he told me that issuing the statement was wrong and he would contact the members who issued it.

So the preparations have not failed?

No, work is still underway. So far, the consultative meeting has not been held. It will be attended by representatives of all parties, from inside and outside the Council; all new political and civil powers which want to join the council or are supposed to join it. There could be a crisis within the committee, but the process of restructuring has not failed, because we have not reached the consultative meeting to launch it.

Was the consultative meeting the reason behind your refusal to hold the opposition conference in the Arab League? Did you oppose holding such a conference?

We agreed with the Arab League Secretary General Nabil Al-Araby when we met him in Beijing, even before issuing invitations to the conference, to separate the conference from the meeting on re-



“We told the Secretary General that the AL conference does not have to discuss establishing a new opposition structure, but reach an agreement on a document that can be accepted by the National Council, or any other party – a document stating the main principles agreed on by all parties”

structuring, which we named the consultative meeting. We explained our view to the Secretary General, that the National Council will be the one to issue invitations to the consultative meeting and will invite the Arab League as an observer. There should have been a distinction between the consultative meeting and the opposition conference the League was invited to, as it aims at issuing a document that

represents a unified stance by the Syrian opposition, and a unified view of Syria's future. We told the Secretary General that the AL conference does not have to discuss establishing a new opposition structure, but reach an agreement on a document that can be accepted by the National Council, or any other party – a document stating the main principles agreed on by all parties.

So, what was the reason for you refusing to attend the conference?

We refused to go because we didn't want to attend an Arab League conference to dispute among ourselves and disclose our differences. The original aim of the conference was to announce an agreement, and we said that the best thing is to have a document to agree on. Even the Secretary General suggested that this document would be Syria's future national pledge, issued by the National Council itself. However, we found that the invitation included a different conference plan; it was basically an opposition conference and a consultative meeting to restructure the national council. We have attributed this to a misunderstanding inside the League in determining the aim of the conference and its main mission.

Some within the opposition parties referred to efforts by the Arab League and Kofi Annan, who considers himself an intermediary between the Syrian regime and the opposition, which makes it logical to be invited to a dialogue with the regime. So what is the possibility of your entering a dialogue with the regime?

This is true, and it was one of the reasons behind our refusal to attend the conference. The statements of the Secretary General surprised us; it indicated that the conference would authorize a delegate to negotiate with the regime's representative. In fact, during the past period we [the National Council] have always reiterated that we don't consider Annan an intermediary between us as the opposition in general and the regime, and that we will never accept him to be. This was not the aim of his plan; Annan's role is to transform the country from a dictatorship into a democracy that represents the people's will; but not mediation between the opposition and the regime. We will not accept such dialogue or mediation, but we will negotiate on handing over power to a democratic regime. Thus, the Arab League has a confused view of Annan's mission. He is not assigned to gather both parties in a dialogue, as no Syrian will now accept to negotiate with killers, how can we accept reforms or compromises? According to

“The statements of the Secretary General surprised us; it indicated that the conference would authorize a delegate to negotiate with the regime’s representative. In fact, during the past period we [the National Council] have always reiterated that we don’t consider Annan an intermediary between us as the opposition in general and the regime, and that we will never accept him to be”

our view, Annan's mission is to transform the country into a democratic regime and put an end to dictatorship. If this is not the case, we have nothing to do with it.

It seems that Annan is proceeding with his plan, despite statements by many Western and Arab countries, and even the Syrian opposition, that the plan has failed. What is your plan?

Since the first day of the plan, we said that it was going to fail. We didn't expect that it would ever succeed. We said that we welcomed it, because we wanted the world to see the nature of this regime which refuses any political solution and is still resorting to the use of force. We said, in the meantime, that we were not under any illusions, but you would see that the regime will not implement or be committed to any of its provisions.

So what are your alternatives?

Our alternative is the revolution itself. We have never bet on Annan's plan, the UN or its resolutions. The Syrian people are betting on its youth, their struggle and sacrifices. Thus, our strategy is the lasting alternative which is to strengthen and support the uprising in order to endure, and to defeat the regime. This can be done by gathering international efforts through restructuring the National Council, in order to be more efficient in putting our house in order. The Council also has to unify and organize the brigades of the Syrian Free Army under political supervision, and provide it with advanced weapons to be able to resist the regime's brutalities.

This is our strategy, and not reliance on mediation or negotiation with the regime.

In regards to the Free Army and the increasing tendency of the international community towards imposing a safe zone which requires a unified and coherent Free Army (at least to protect civilians), do not you think that the Free Army has been exhausted by lack of weapon supplies and reports about Al-Qaeda in Syria?

We are still counting on the Free Army, which is stronger than a few months ago. It is not true that it is regressing. The numbers of defectors, volunteers, soldiers, and rebels are increasing. Also, its organization and armament have been improved, and it has become a significant force.

Given the circumstances, are you optimistic about the National Council restructuring itself and gathering international support?

We are nothing but optimistic; we have no future but victory and defeating the regime. Even if we do something wrong, we have to correct it; if we divide we have to address our divisions. We should not forget that we are vulnerable to penetration by the regime which has spent more than four decades preparing its security and intelligence agencies for the day of the uprising. Therefore, we have to be careful when people speak about divisions. Some people say that 75 percent of these divisions are attributed to regime penetration. We have also to be careful and believe that our cause is fair. We should lick our wounds and proceed. There is no other solution. ■

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Navigating the Winds of Change

Meshaal the survivor

Khaled Meshaal has proved to be a skilled politician within an unpredictable environment. Despite the mortal dangers he has encountered, the leader of Hamas may have evolved from a populist to a statesman.



Khaled Meshaal (L) in discussion with Mahmoud Abbas and Azzam Al-Ahmed of Fatah

Photo © Getty Images

Khaled Meshaal, the leader of Hamas based in exile, is, if nothing else, a political survivor. As the head of a religious militant group that prioritizes party discipline and organizational cohesiveness, Meshaal has operated for most of his career within the confines of a fairly rigid box. When Hamas introduced suicide bombing into the arsenal of politically motivated violence in an effort to undermine the advancement of the peace process, Meshaal became a fierce public defender of the tactic.

Yet at other times he has proven himself a shrewd-tactician and, for some, an opportunistic voice within an otherwise ideological movement, avoiding the religious sermonizing typical of others and advancing, however limitedly, elements of change. Deftly straddling popular opinion throughout his career, it is little wonder that Meshaal was in charge of Hamas's political bureau and a central figure within the movement before reaching the age of forty. Today, however, Khaled Meshaal is facing a new challenge as the turmoil in Syria has unseated him from his regional base and changing internal power dynamics within Hamas has him once again jockeying for position.

Early life and career

Born in the West Bank village of Silwad in 1956, Khaled Meshaal is the eldest of eleven children. In 1967, after the West Bank was captured from Jordan in the Six-Day War, Meshaal's father moved his family to Amman and later Kuwait. At Kuwait University, Meshaal studied physics and was actively involved in student politics, co-founding the Bloc of Islamic Students on campus. For years afterwards he taught high-school physics until the First Gulf War forced thousands of Palestinians to leave Kuwait following Yasser Arafat's decision to side with Saddam Hussein during the conflict.

Relocating to Amman, Meshaal became active in the Muslim Brotherhood and the nascent Hamas movement, as well as being a vocal critic of Arafat and the Peace Process. By the mid-1990s Meshaal had become a prominent voice within Hamas and assumed leadership of the diaspora-based political bureau in 1996. As the Hamas leadership sought to undermine

the nascent Palestinian Authority and the Oslo Accords through the use of suicide bombings against the Israeli population, Meshaal became a staunch public advocate of the brutal tactic.

"Hamas's spokespeople keep emphasizing the 'collective leadership' nature of their movement over personalities, and in practice they have shown a significant amount of adherence to this principle," says Khaled Hroub, in his book, *Hamas: a beginner's guide*. "As yet, there have been no authoritarian personalities or ultra-charismatic leaders who have used their influence to impose any individual vision on the entire movement, such as was the case with the PLO, Fatah and Yasser Arafat, for example."

"After actively pushing reconciliation between political factions and creating inroads for Hamas within the PLO, some analysts perceived Meshaal had his eyes set on broadening his appeal to all Palestinians in order to take over the PLO leadership after Mahmoud Abbas, now 76 years old, stepped down from office"

On September 25, 1997, then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the assassination of Khaled Meshaal. In front of his office in Amman, the Hamas leader was attacked by two Mossad agents who injected a liquid poison known as levofentanyl into his ear. Ensuing outrage by King Hussein of Jordan—in which he threatened to abrogate the 1994 Peace Treaty between the two countries—and subsequent involvement of US President Bill Clinton, compelled Netanyahu to provide the antidote to the poison in time to save Meshaal's life. The two Israeli operatives were later apprehended and traded in a prisoner exchange deal that involved the release of Hamas's spiritual leader and mentor, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin.

The botched assassination attempt catapulted Khaled Meshaal into the limelight of Palestinian politics where he enjoyed increased popularity. Nonetheless, not long after King Abdullah II of Jordan inherited the throne from his father, the new

monarch banned Hamas in Jordan, after the unveiling of a plot aimed at undermining the security of Jordan and its commitment to the peace process, arresting and exiling its top officials, including Meshaal. The Hamas leader initially moved to Qatar but eventually made his way to Damascus by 2001.

For over a decade Meshaal enjoyed the patronage of the Syrian regime, a distinct advantage over Hamas figures in Gaza who were subject to harassment, arrest, and extra-judicial assassination by Israel. Meshaal moved freely and was received in friendly capitals around the world, building a network of support and financiers for Hamas. In March 2004, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas was killed in a

targeted assassination by Israel. Yassin, who was a near-blind quadriplegic, was being wheeled from early morning prayers at a Gaza mosque when an Israeli helicopter gunship fired missiles killing him, his body guards and several bystanders.

Following his death, leadership was briefly split between Abdel Aziz Rantissi in Gaza and Khaled Meshaal in Damascus. However, a month later in April 2004, Rantissi was assassinated in similar fashion when an Israeli helicopter targeted his vehicle. After the killing of Rantissi, Meshaal had become the undisputed leader of Hamas.

Hamas under his leadership

Under Meshaal's stewardship, Hamas continued to increase its presence in Palestinian politics as well as market the organization to the outside world. Meshaal was instrumental in trying to rebrand Hamas by hinting at the militant group's acceptance of a two-state formula and hudna, or truce with Isra-

el. However, while never accepting Israel or the principle of negotiation, these attempts to moderate Hamas' position using its hard-line language, have largely been rebuffed.

In 2006, Hamas decided to enter the political foray for the first time by contesting Palestinian Authority parliamentary elections, which it won, unseating the Fatah party that had dominated Palestinian politics for decades. After a violent split between Fatah and Hamas occurred in 2007 on the streets of Gaza, the latter assumed uncontested control over the coastal territory.

"After Hamas came to power in 2006, the inside leadership was strengthened even further," writes Khroub. "Well, while it is safe to say that the two-branched inside leadership (in the West Bank and Gaza Strip) controls the muscles of the movement, the outside leadership controls financial resources and external contacts."

While Hamas has had three distinct camps for most of its existence, the structure of the organization is also changing as the dichotomy in roles between Hamas in Gaza, the West Bank and Damascus continue to evolve. Traditionally, Gaza and the West Bank were the bases of the armed branch of Hamas, while Syria remained its political-diplomatic center outside the reach of Israel. In recent years, however, while the West Bank leadership has been suppressed, Gaza has developed strong political foundations of its own, basically operating a mini-state in the coastal territory. With the changes to the regime in Egypt, Hamas officials from Gaza have been given more freedom of movement, as well. Indeed, Ismail Haniyeh, the current President of the Hamas government has been visiting capitals from Tehran to Moscow, where he is received as a head of state.

The change is very similar to what happened between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, with the latter superseding the power of the former once it began to govern a population in the manner of a state. And in many ways Meshaal has come to resemble Yasser Arafat, the man he once criticized. Those who have met him personally say he embodies many of the same traits of giving everyone around him the feeling of being important, for which the deceased leader of the Palestinian national movement was famous. Others point to his need to change from a populist to a statesman capable of making unpopular decisions.

Shifting political winds

The Syrian uprising has made life tenuous for the Damascus-based Hamas leadership. According to Nabil Al-Araby, Meshaal tried to posit himself as a negotiator between Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian rebels, which Assad dismissed by refusing to even meet Meshaal in person. Meshaal was reluctant to side publicly with Syria's Bashar al-Assad against the wishes of the regime and its regional ally, Iran. It has been reported that nearly the entire leadership core of Hamas has left Damascus, settling in various Arab capitals including Amman, Cairo, Doha, Beirut and even Gaza.

In searching for a new base of operations, Meshaal's past positions within Hamas have come back to haunt him. The Damascus leadership headed by Meshaal has not been able to regroup and setup shop anywhere else, owing to the liability of sheltering Hamas. Like Arafat before him, Meshaal is quickly running out of room and may be trying to shed the clothes of Hamas as the armed group and don those of Hamas the legitimate government.

In doing so, ideological and political differences have been exposed inside Hamas between the circle of Meshaal and that of the Gaza based leadership. This power struggle was put on full display after Khaled

Meshaal signed a reconciliation agreement with Mahmoud Abbas in May 2011 in Cairo and then again in Doha in February of this year. Meshaal's decision to push for reconciliation with Fatah is extremely popular among Palestinians everywhere and perceived as forward looking, contrasting sharply with the narrow political goals of Hamas leaders in Gaza who are not eager to reconcile with Fatah or hold elections. Yet, despite Meshaal's signature the reconciliation process has made little headway on the ground. By determining the success of its implementation, Hamas leaders in Gaza have demonstrated their power to the world and to Khaled Meshaal. Meshaal later retreated from the confrontational stance by postponing implementation of the reconciliation.

At the beginning of 2012, Meshaal intimated that he would step down from the helm of Hamas' political bureau, causing wide speculation about internal Hamas politics and the future of its leader. After actively pushing reconciliation between political factions and creating inroads for Hamas within the PLO, some analysts perceived Meshaal had his eyes set on broadening his appeal to all Palestinians in order to take over the PLO leadership after Mahmoud Abbas, now 76 years old, stepped down from office.

Meshaal also stunned observers around the world and within his own party when he discussed the possibility of Hamas adopting a non-violent resistance platform. All these changes seem engineered to court a much wider audience than the Hamas base and continue to gain support among Palestinians in general at a time when his strength within Hamas is weakening. These developments are also in line with wider changes in the region and the rhetoric of other Islamist parties that are entering the mainstream for the first time.

With so many transformations occurring simultaneously, it is probably too early to surmise the fate of Khaled Meshaal in Palestinian politics. No one within the movement enjoys unparalleled popular support and Meshaal's chances of remaining at the helm are as good as any. Yet, with the results of internal Hamas elections from early April still a secret, we may find out sooner rather than later what the future has in store. ■



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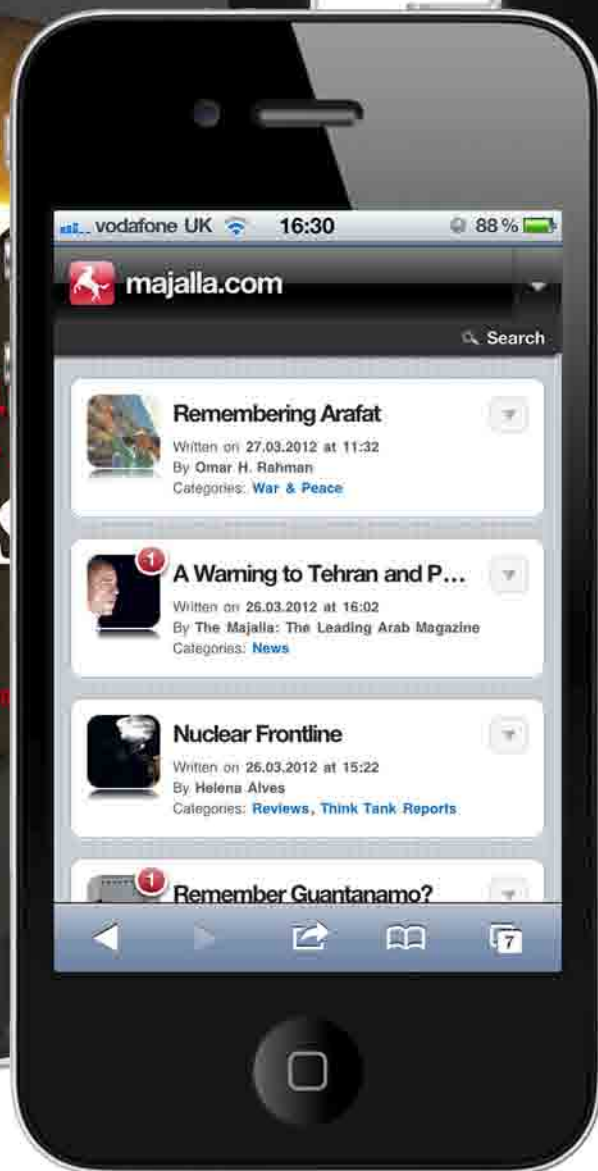


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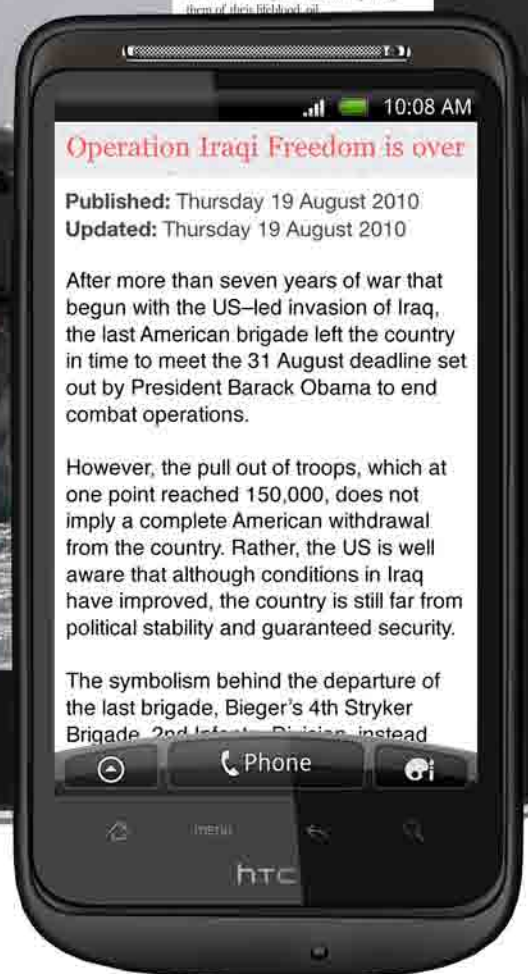
Building Hormuz Hostage

Iran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz by a mere bluff?

...between Iran and the United States has escalated in recent months, from the suspension of all operations to a full-scale military confrontation. The Strait of Hormuz is a critical oil supply route, and its closure would have a major impact on the global economy.

Bryan Gibson

Iran's threat to close the strategic Strait of Hormuz—the narrow waterway through which one-fifth of the world's daily oil supplies must pass—is a bluff, and the international community knows it. They know, just as the Iranian government knows, that if Iran were to close the strait it would deprive itself of the ability to export oil. Without the sale of oil, Iran cannot finance itself and its economy could collapse. In short, closing the Strait of Hormuz would hurt Iran far more than any sanctions the Obama administration could ever dream up, so why run the risk? The regime in Tehran is under considerable pressure and has few cards to play. With its back against the wall, the one card that the regime holds that truly terrifies the steady economies of the West is closing the strait and depriving them of their lifeblood oil.



The Blind Leading the Blind

Ennahda's economic policies in Tunisia

The state of Tunisia's economy remains weak. Rather than improving the living standards of Tunisians, the revolution has largely affected their purchasing power. Without the capacity to save, or the sufficient assets to meet their monthly expenses, Tunisians are becoming frustrated. Unfortunately, the Ennahda-led government has approached these obstacles with short-term solutions that do not address the source of Tunisia's economic problems.

Paula Mejia

A Tunisian vendor sells dried fruit before an election poster in Tunis



Photo © Getty Images

A year after the revolution in Tunisia took place, one thing has become clear, though many of the grievances that led Tunisians to protest had economic origins, the living standards of most Tunisians have not improved—rather the economic situation has become more precarious. Ennahda, the political party that won the majority of the votes in the constituent assembly, has been in power for a few months and Tunisians are becoming impatient with what they see as a lack of economic progress since the election.

Indeed, the state of the economy remains weak even though the tourism sector is slowly recovering and is expected to increase by 30 percent compared to last year, representing 6 million visitors. Nevertheless, according to the Central Bank, the country is running a trade deficit which is contributing to the decline of Tunisia's foreign currency reserves which are down to 9.947 million dinars. The Central Bank also announced that bank savings rates have dropped and the number of non-performing loans has increased. This has created a liquidity crisis which has limited the capital banks capability to contribute to financing the economy.

Under today's conditions, Tunisians do not have enough money to save nor do they have enough to meet their monthly expenses. Inflation has risen drastically and is currently at 5.4 percent. In addition, as the interest rate (3.78 percent) is lower than inflation, this has discouraged Tunisians from depositing money into banks—as their deposits would decrease by 1.6 percent if they did.

Inflation has also reduced the purchasing power of most Tunisians. At markets throughout the country, gasps are usually the reaction to the price of tomatoes. The impact of inflation has greatly affected the standard of living of many Tunisians who lived comfortably prior to the revolution.

The Central Bank meanwhile is caught in a catch-22 with regards to what it can do about inflation. Inflation is normally addressed by raising interest rates, yet in the case of Tunisia, raising interest rates would suffocate growth as it would discourage further borrowing and increase non-performing loans and defaults.

True, the government has other options. Inflation has been attributed, in part, to a lack of supplies resulting from the smuggling of food, agricultural products and

oil to neighboring countries, in particular to Libya. Exerting greater control over the black market trade of these products may be able to curb inflation further, though it is unclear whether the current government will be able to effectively decrease smuggling given that border control between Libya has been largely disrupted since the chaos in Libya began.

Under these strained conditions, Tunisia continues to face the structural problems of the economy that led to the revolution in the first place. High rates of unemployment, particularly amongst the educated youth, as well as regional disparities continue to plague the Tunisian economy.

Ennahda, though in power for only a few short months, is expected to be able to improve both the macroeconomic situation in the country and especially the living standards of Tunisia's citizens. With that in mind, the government has passed a number of measures that they believe will be crucial in addressing the socio-economic challenges of the country.

In essence, the thrust of the Ennahda-led government's policies is based on an economic reform program that will allow for a growth rate that can create enough job opportunities to reduce unemployment. According to a recent article by Al-Monitor, the government has considered 2012 the recovery phase of its economic program. In order to improve recovery the government has increased (and will continue to increase) expenditures so that regional disparities decrease. Unemployment, meanwhile, will be addressed largely through the creation of jobs in the public sector.

Ennahda's intention to increase spending as a means of stimulating the economy is problematic. The current spending rate has increased by close to 20 percent since the

creation of 25,000 new government jobs. These wages account for over 12 percent of the GDP, which can have a negative impact on the government's budget. Though it is important for the youth to have opportunities available to them, Ennahda is in essence repeating mistakes of the past. Government jobs do not have the added value that the creation of small businesses might have. Instead they perpetuate an expectation that the government should be the source of employment rather than the private sector. As a short-term measure this may be effective, but if Tunisia intends to keep its expenses under control (so that it may invest them in to the economy) continuously creating jobs in the public sector will only aggravate unemployment in the long run.

Similar concerns arise with regards to the food and fuel subsidies that the government has put into place. The government's direct support for basic materials including fuel and electricity, as well as some foodstuffs (such as bread, pasta and tomato paste) is inefficient. Subsidies account for almost 20 percent of government expenditures. However, these subsidies are not targeted which means that rather than helping the poor exclusively they also benefit the rich who do not need financial support. As a result, the government wastes a large part of its contribution. Though direct support helps maintain Tunisian's purchasing power, the way it is being executed now is wasteful and better targeted measures could result in greater benefits to the most-need.

Ennahda, which faces another election next year, is applying short-term solutions to long-term problems. Rather than addressing the source of Tunisia's economic problems, Ennahda's policies are superficial and will likely further the country's economic problems in the future. ■

“Exerting greater control over the black market trade of these products may be able to curb inflation further, though it is unclear whether the current government will be able to effectively decrease smuggling given that border control between Libya has been largely disrupted since the chaos in Libya began”

The Spoils of Oil

Oil's Divisive Influence: The Case of Iraq

The future economic security of Iraq rests upon the management of its natural resources, but an acrimonious dispute between the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan and the central government in Baghdad threatens to destabilize more than just Iraq's economy.

Amy Myers Jaffe & Keily Miller

It has long been speculated that oil can be a driver for civil conflict, and one needs to look no further for evidence than the sectarian power politics now playing out in Iraq. The oil-fuels-conflict hypothesis is well-documented in academic studies on war and conflict: In one such recent analysis, Michael Ross offers a comprehensive assessment of the causal links between civil conflict and oil in cases involving Middle East countries. Oil's divisive role, if not properly managed, can fuel insurgencies and aggressive sectarianism that can hold grave economic and geopolitical consequences. This sober reality needs to move higher on the radar of the region's leaders and the international institutions that interact with them.

Iraq's murky constitutional clauses concerning oil development remain a major challenge to the nation's unity. The Iraqi constitution claims to protect the country's oil as the endowment of the "Iraqi people," while at the same time leaving open the concept that responsibilities for oil field development may fall to the very politicians governing the ground under which the oil sits. In Iraq, this concept is a problematic one, as oil resources are geographically situated within domains of sectarian power—the Kurdish north, the Sunni-dominated Anbar region, and the southern Shi'ite regions around Basra—but not in and around the federal capital in central Iraq. Under Saddam Hussein's authoritarian rule, this geographic anomaly was managed through repression. It mattered little that sectarian communities sat on the country's oil and gas fields but received an 'unfair' share of the gains. The Tikriti clan held onto the spoils from oil by terrorizing its own people. Hopes that the prospects of a democratic Iraq would redress this history have been dim-

ming in recent months, as the government of Nouri Al-Maliki has failed both in sustaining a broad coalition government as well as in crafting a solution to the divisive influence of oil.

A festering dispute between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the central government in Baghdad over how to manage oil investment and oil export revenues now threatens the possible devo-

lution of the Iraqi state. In April, the KRG suspended 175,000 barrels per day (bpd) of oil exports controlled in its territories and hinted that a referendum on Kurdish independence might be forthcoming if Baghdad fails to comply with its revenue sharing vision. Under a compromise hammered out in early 2011, the Kurds were supposed to receive 17 percent of the income derived from oil produced in its



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territory, while Baghdad was to retain the remainder. But the KRG is developing its own oil via production-sharing contracts (PSCs) that provide 'profit' oil payments to international oil companies (IOCs) operating in the Kurdish north. Baghdad has stated openly that it objects to the contracting paradigm of paying profit oil to IOCs, and political negotiations for a definitive oil law are all but dead amid Iraq's devolving political situation.

The Iraqi population is growing increasingly dissatisfied with its government's incompetence in dispersing budget allocations and failure to provide electricity and vital public services. The KRG's intransigence on the oil issue, combined with its post-war oil and economic boom, has roused demands for regional financial (and oil and gas) autonomy in other provinces, including Anbar, Salahaddin, Diyala, and Ninewa.

An Iraqi petroleum worker walks past a gas burn off flame in the Anzalla oil fields in the Ninewa Province of Northern Iraq



The Maliki government has countered by announcing an oil exploration acreage tender for foreign investors this month in an effort to show that as the centralized authority, it can and will develop resources across the entire country. The tender is both an exercise to reassert control over wayward regions seeking authority in oil and gas contracting and to counter criticism that the distribution of investments has so far not been implemented fairly by the current government. The tender includes three exploration blocks in Anbar near the western border with Jordan, two in Ninewa in the northwest by Syria, one just east of Baghdad, and several in southeastern Iraq near Najaf and in Diyala. But the tender is considered too little too late and comes against not only the reality of the ongoing dispute with the KRG, which is pursuing its own independent export policies with Turkey, but also against the backdrop of ambitions for an independent oil and gas industry for the Anbar region, which has already signed an exploration deal with Korean firm Kogas and is likely to pursue an energy export corridor (backed by Saudi Arabia) with the 'new' Syria, should a Sunni government take hold there. There are even hints that leaders around the oil-rich Basra region would like to control their own oil fate.

“Iraq’s murky constitutional clauses concerning oil development remain a major challenge to the nation’s unity”

The upshot of the tendency toward autonomy goes beyond the problematic of political agreement inside Iraq. It has raised the specter that important regions will pursue their own foreign policy interests without consideration of the central government and/or a unified vision for international relations. The United States, while pretending to pay lip service to the center's one state oil investment policy, has actually encouraged autonomous oil development in Anbar and elsewhere, focusing on the 'income' potential but failing to understand the political dangers this poses to a unified Iraq. Unwittingly, the US has laid the groundwork for the political devolution in Iraq that it sought to avoid.

The Iraqi central government may be counting on using the increasing oil revenue from southern Iraq to feed a war chest to assert itself across the country. But even this is risky business. The flap over whether ExxonMobil could or couldn't take on a production sharing deal with the Kurds and still maintain its position as a key investor with the central government's program in the major southern oil fields prompted the US major to withdraw as project leader of the Common Seawater Supply Facility (CSSF) project, a massive seawater processing and injection scheme that will be critical to the major expansion of Iraq's largest oil fields. More recently, in light of continuing logistical problems with the CSSF, natural gas development, and other components needed to move the expansion program forward, the Iraqi central government has begun talks to downsize the unrealistic output targets for various oil field development programs, including Royal Dutch Shell's capacity building project at super-giant Majnoon field. Norway's Statoil has already withdrawn from its deal for West Qurna-2.

In sum, the promise of an oil renaissance in Iraq that would give it a head start at nation-building can fade quickly if its political leaders cannot figure out how to forge a national vision for a unified oil policy. And this sad truth should be a cautionary tale for the entire region.

In light of the Arab Awakening, the struggle for who controls the riches from oil and gas resources across the Middle East may yet turn out to be like hidden corpses uncovered when drought dries a river bed. Libya's civil war highlighted the long-standing acrimony spawned by Qadhafi's failure to share oil revenues with Libya's oil-rich eastern provinces. The Benghazians are bent to ensure they will now have their day in the sun; the same can be said for South Sudan. And with the Middle East citizenry ever more assertive of its rights and interests, the days in which sectarian minorities allow themselves to be deprived the spoils from oil under their feet may be numbered. ■



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Acknowledging the failures of “the so-called Arab Spring”

Abdullah Al-Otaibi

One year ago, the term “the so-called Arab Spring” was drawing condemnation, disapproval and even denunciation against all those who utilized it. Today, however, this term appears logical and realistic to many of those who once attacked or condemned others for using it. In fact, it has become increasingly apparent that this expression is worth recalling and deserves praise, even by those who once condemned this, as they previously held great expectations and hopes (each according to his own wishes) regarding the fate of the Arab Spring. It has therefore become clear today that this expression is

extremely useful, particularly during the truly exceptional and historical circumstances that we are witnessing.

A variety of common expressions and phrases have been established to express a qualitative transition from one state to another. In science, as is the case with economics, some remarkable discoveries or changes have been termed a “breakthrough”, whilst in politics this is often termed a “revolution”, whether the incident truly matches this expression or not.

Throughout the long course of history, there have been countless different types of revolutions. There have been as many forms or types of revolution as there have

been motivations for revolt; this is not to mention the results of revolutions, which do not take a single specific route. What happened in the past applies to what is happening today, and learning the lessons of history is the wisest thing that anybody can do, therefore the ability to predict what is going to happen with regards to any given event is one of the most important weapons in the arsenal of any researchers and intellectuals, regardless of their location or stature.

The French revolution’s eruption and results were influenced by the culture and awareness of the time, whilst the Russian revolution was influenced by the size and



Photo © Getty Images

organization of the Communist Party which strongly contributed to the revolution's initial eruption, as well as its results. Despite all this, the world has witnessed important revolutions throughout ancient and modern history that were not widely discussed. Examples of this in ancient Islamic history can be seen in terms of the Kharijite sect and the Zanj rebellions, whilst in modern history we have the Eastern European and Latin American revolutions.

There can be no doubt that the attempts to reach common denominators in terms of describing political and social revolutions is something that deserves our full attention and concern. Yet, some of those who focus on the common denominators are indifferent to the huge number of systematic mistakes they may commit, because they are focusing on their hopes that these revolutions may spread, rather than trying to understand or interpret the revolution itself. Therefore, some people may be pushed by their revolutionary zeal to take practical risks in this regard, however we must stress that when analysis is based on a scientific approach – rather than dreams – this produces the most respectable and commendable scientific results.

Hence, I believe that perceiving the differences between revolutions and attempting to understand each revolution in itself is something that is very precise in terms of reading, description and analyses. This would therefore result in more effective and respectable work for everybody involved in this, whether we are talking about historians, politicians or intellectuals. I say this because the latter route [of basing such analysis on dreams and wishful thinking] involves numerous political, economic and social changes as well as religious, ethnic and sectarian elements. This approach is much boarder than the scientific approach of viewing revolutions, which is far more realistic.

Despite all this, analysing revolutions also depends on the researchers' starting point, as many of these researchers are doing this in order to understand how these revolutions came about, namely what caused the revolution to occur in the first place and how will it end. Whilst others study revolutions in order to see what

things influence or affect the revolution's course, whereas others study this subject in order to understand how to benefit from revolutions, whether on a personal or organizational basis.

A quick reading of the two routes mentioned above, and an analysis of the so-called Arab Spring states and what has happened there, specifically Egypt, reveals that at the "revolutionary tipping point", egos are bolstered, groups are inflamed and the people join together to fulfil one common clear objective. However, once this is achieved, disagreements and differences emerge, and each party becomes absolutely certain of the reliability and merit of their own approach, and so each party believes that it solely deserves to reap the fruits and direct the course of the revolution.

Following this, what I termed in one of my previous articles "the addiction and autocracy of the revolution" emerges. This is because revolutionaries, having been completely absorbed in fulfilling their objective of toppling the regime, do not find any alternative but to continue with this uprising even after they have

national stability and livelihoods. As a result, they become divided: some are discontented with the revolution and wish a return to the miserable days of the former regime, whereas others are like drowning men looking to clutch at any straw!

This straw may be offered by a severe political figure that is charismatic enough to convince the general public of his vision and project. Hence, another autocratic character would return to power but in different clothes, and this could occur via an established party – very often an extremist party – that is capable of garnering public support, or via a military coup after public discontent has reached its zenith.

I believe that it is very important, especially for the cultural and political elites, to immediately admit the failure of the so-called Arab Spring revolutions, particularly as admission is better than obstinacy, even if such confessions come too late. This is because admission marks the beginning of the route to restoring awareness and vision, the search for a way to minimize losses and catch a glimmer of hope, even if this involves further hardships.

“Learning the lessons of history is the wisest thing that anybody can do, therefore the ability to predict what is going to happen with regards to any given event is one of the most important weapons in the arsenal of any researchers and intellectuals”

succeeded. Thus, everybody casts doubt on the conduct of others, and conspiracy theories and disputes spread widely as a result, whilst the revolutionary comrades enter into a new conflict, but this time with one another. And so after they have fulfilled their primary objective of toppling the regime, these parties turn away from one another in order to focus on minor partisan and individualistic objectives.

Following this, we have the phase that can be called "revolutionary boredom" whereby the general public become exhausted of the continual presence of revolutionary action, which has had a grave impact on their living standards and security, bringing chaos into their lives,

Now, I hope it is not too late to say that we need conscious and brave intellectuals to say what French thinker Cornelius Castoriadis said, namely that the revolutions which the liberal West came to experience since the Enlightenment, and the revolutions witnessed by the socialist East - specifically Eastern Europe and China – have failed to achieve the promised independence and the anticipated democracy. The social movements that carried out revolutionary projects have all ended in failure, therefore it is crucially important that the course of such movements are reviewed and re-evaluated towards new horizons. ■

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السعي نحو الكمال الثروة، ماذا تعني لك؟

قد يتطلب تحقيق الكمال سنوات من التفاني والالتزام، ونحن في باركليز وويلث نفقههم ذلك تماما. ولهذا السبب، نقدم لك أعلى مستويات الخبرة والخدمة مع التركيز على أهدافك المالية القصيرة والطويلة الأجل. نستطيع مساعدتك في الاستفادة من ثروتك بأكثر شكل مُمكن وذلك كي تكريس وقتك للسعي وراء اهتماماتك. اتصل بنا في دبي على ٣٦٥٢٩٠٠ (٤) +٩٧١ وفي أبو ظبي على الرقم ٤٩٥٨٣٢٩ (٢) +٩٧١ وفي دولة قطر على الرقم ٤٩٦٧٥١٥ (٤) +٩٧٤ وفي المملكة العربية السعودية على الرقم ٨٨٠٦٥٠٠ (١) +٩٦٦ أو تفضل بزيارة موقعنا الإلكتروني barclayswealth.com اليوم.

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Iran's triple mistakes in Syria, Iraq and Bahrain

Amir Taheri

Fearing isolation as a new geopolitical landscape takes shape in the Middle East; the Khomeinist regime is still clinging to three forlorn hopes.

The first is to save the Ba'athist regime in Damascus even if that means accepting a financial burden that Iran's crippled economy could ill afford.

The second is to prevent the re-emergence of Iraq as a viable state and a potential rival. The third is to transform the socio-political crisis in Bahrain into a power grab for itself.

In Syria, the mullahs' strategy is to portray the uprising as a Western conspiracy to punish a regime supposed to be part of "the resistance". The claim is that the United States and its allies wish to exclude actual or potentially unfriendly powers such as Iran, Russia and China from the region.

The mullahs hope to delay the fall of the Assad regime so that they have more time to confirm their foothold in southern Iraq, their second hope.

Emboldened by the victory of their Syrian brethren, the people of Iraq might decide that their country is potentially strong enough to avoid partial or total domination by Iran.

Tehran's plan for Iraq is to encourage the creation of a Shi'ite enclave in the south in the name of federalism. That would enable Tehran to dominate the Shi'ite theological centre in Najaf thus pre-empting a possible challenge to the Khomeinist ideology.

It is clear that Ali Khamenei, the "Supreme Guide" of the Khomeinist regime, lacks the qualifications to be marketed as a religious leader for Iraqi Shi'ites. This is why Iranian security services are working on a scenario under which a mid-ranking mullah is cast in the role of ayatollah and marja al-taqlid (source of emulation) for Iraqi Shi'ites.

The mullah in question is Mahmoud Shahroudi who has been on the payroll of the Iranian government for three decades. Initially, he was member of a guerrilla group created by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to fight Saddam

Hussein. He then started wearing a mullah's outfit and transformed himself into a cleric. Currently, he heads an advisory committee attached to Khamenei's office.

While Tehran is trying to annex Syria with money and arms shipments to the Assad regime, the plan for Iraq is domination through a religious network backed by paramilitary groups controlled by the IRGC.

The plan for Bahrain is, in a sense, more straightforward because it aims at the annexation of the archipelago on the basis of Iran's historic claims.

"In Iraq, Iranian intervention has prevented the consolidation of a national consensus"

In an editorial last Tuesday, the daily Kayhan, published by Khamenei's office, had a front page banner headline asserting that "Bahrain Is A Piece of Iran's Body". The editorial claimed, "A majority of the people of Bahrain regard Bahrain as part of Iran.... It should return to its original homeland which is Iran."

In an earlier article, the newspaper recalled the circumstances in 1970 under which Bahrain ceased to be a British protectorate to become an independent state.

In recent weeks, convening supposedly academic conferences to "prove" that Bahrain is part of Iran has become fashionable in Iranian seminaries. According to Khomeinist folklore the Shah's decision to accept a United Nations' "assessment mission" to decide the fate of Bahrain had been one of his "greatest treasons".

One of Khomeini's first acts after seizing power in 1979 was to create the so-called Bahrain Liberation Army. The group tried to invade Bahrain with a few boats but was

stopped by the Iranian navy that was still controlled by Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan's government. With the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979 by "students" and the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 the idea of conquering Bahrain was put on the backburner.

Tehran's intervention in Syria, Iraq and Bahrain has had a doubly negative effect.

In Syria, Iranian intervention has increased the human cost of a transition that seems inevitable. That intervention has given what is essentially a domestic struggle for power an external dimension that the Syrian people cannot control.

In Iraq, Iranian intervention has prevented the consolidation of a national consensus that had taken shape after the fall of the Ba'athist regime in 2003 and the bloody struggles of 2004-2009. Iraq is bound to end up finding its way and rebuilding the structures of a state. However, the cost of doing that has been increased by Iranian intervention.

Similarly in Bahrain, it is unlikely that a majority of Bahrainis, who are seeking greater reforms and better power sharing would want to live under Walayat al-Faqih (rule by mullah). Nor would they wish to sacrifice their national interests at the altar of a regime whose fate is under question in Iran itself.

Khamenei's triple gamble in Syria, Iraq and Bahrain also has a negative effect on Iran's own interests as a nation state.

As a nation, as a people, Iran has no interest in enabling the Assad regime to kill the Syrians in their own cities and villages. Nor could Iran reap any benefit from sowing dissension and violence in Iraq and preventing a national consensus in Bahrain.

Once again, in these three important cases, the interests of Iran as a nation-state do not coincide with those of Iran as a vehicle for the Khomeinist ideology. ■

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behind the news



Islamists on Art

*Egypt's arts and culture scene
hanging in the balance*

When Asran Mansour, a Salafi lawyer, filed a case against Adel Imam, renowned Egyptian actor, for "defaming Islam" in his films, no one expected that the verdict issued on 24 April 2012, by Judge Mohamed Abdel Aty would sentence Imam to three months hard labor and a fine. Though the case was dropped on 26 April afternoon, the news outraged Egypt's artists and equally angered international supporters of freedom of expression and creativity.

Adel Imam's case is one of the many indications that Islamists are implementing limits on culture and freedom of expression. Also on trial with Imam were directors Nader Galal, Sherif Arafa, and Mohamed Fadel, and writers Wahid Hamed and Lenin El-Ramly, who faced the same charges of "defaming Islam." Their cases were also dropped on 26 April.

The arts and culture scene will not be silent regarding Imam's sentence—just as it will not remain passive when challenged by many other limitations posed on culture. The fight against such religious-based censorship is expected to be a long and painful one for all of Egypt's creative minds. Among Imam's criticised works are *Al-Irhabi* (The Terrorist), in which the actor plays an Islamic fundamentalist and the comedy play *Al-Zaeem* (The Leader), in which he pokes fun at the region's autocratic leaders.

In Egypt—and in other countries involved in the Arab Spring—Islamists gained a significant popular support and made their way into a number of legislative bodies. Egypt's Freedom and Justice Party (formed by the Muslim Brotherhood) and a number of more radical Salafi parties gained a total of over 70 percent of seats in Parliament. Though the Brotherhood and the Salafis differ in their visions, it is the concept of creating 'culture' within this conservative society that is troublesome to Egyptian artists and intellectuals.

The past few months have seen numerous incidents in which Islamists have

challenged freedom of creativity in the Arab World. In Tunisia, recent attacks by Islamists on artists participating in an event called The People in Defense of Theater outraged the whole theater community. Another example is the physical assault and trial of head of Tunisian station Nessma TV, Nabil Karoui. The incident, which occurred after the station aired *Persepolis*—a film with a scene depicting God—hit a nerve in the international cultural scene.

*“Censorship
remains an open
debate among
artists and
intellectuals”*

In Egypt, the Salafis' statements not only oppose intellectual freedom and progress but also testify to lack of understanding of their country's cultural wealth. In his speeches Abdel Moneim El-Shahat, the spokesman of *Al-Da'wa Al-Salafiya* (The Salafist Call), has called for a ban on works by Naguib Mahfouz, a 1988 Nobel Prize laureate in Literature, for being an "atheist literature that calls for vice" with themes revolving around "prostitution and drugs." El-Shahat also suggested covering statues of the Pharaohs in wax to put an end to the "idolatry." No actual action was taken, and El-Shahat failed to win a seat in the parliamentary elections. His ideas are, however, an example of a mindset that

artists and intellectuals fear the most. Meanwhile, other Salafis have called for banning all love scenes in past and present Egyptian movies, including scenes in cinematic gems with Abdel Halim Hafez and Nadia Lutfi, both indisputable icons of Egyptian culture.

In March, filmmaker Ahmad Abdalla was refused permission to shoot a scene for his movie in a mosque because of a decision issued by the Egyptian Ministry of Awqaf—a government body in charge of religious endowments. This decision was reversed by a senior Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohsen Rady. In his statement for *Ikhwanweb*, the Muslim Brotherhood's online platform, Rady said: "We safeguard the principle of freedoms for creativity, so long as it does not conflict with prayer times. We want to fulfill the mission of art that benefits the community."

Still, the Brotherhood has not condemned any other statement or any other action made by Salafis. Equally, the Brotherhood never commented on Adel Imam's case. Neither did they release a comment denouncing the security forces storming the Ismailia Cultural Palace and destroying theater seats on 5 April 2012. While the Muslim Brotherhood claims to have promoted a number of cultural activities in the film and theatre sectors, artists remain skeptical that these works will be anything other than a propaganda machine serving the Muslim Brotherhood's own interests, without addressing culture as a whole.

Bahaa Taher, one of Egypt's foremost literary figures, does not seem concerned



Adel Imam at the Doha Tribeca film festival



God scene from Persepolis (2007)



Adel Imam in Al-Zaeem (The Leader)

about the Muslim Brotherhood's plans to get involved in culture. "They are free to create their own cultural products and become competitors in the field. However, what Islamists need to keep in mind is that they cannot impose their ideas on the creative productions of the others," Taher told *The Majalla*.

Censorship remains an open debate among artists and intellectuals. On several occasions, Egyptian Minister of Culture Shaker Abdel Hamid, showed his awareness of the limitations that challenge the post-Mubarak arts scene: whether they are political, social or religious.

In an interview with *Ahram Online*, the Minister expressed that Egypt had entered an era in which artists will need to hide behind masks: "Artists will have to operate with symbols; they will wear

masks instead of inciting direct artistic conflicts as used to be the case." While artists expect stronger support from the minister, Bahaa Taher tells *The Majalla* that he is very worried about the situation. "It is the government's role to support all the intellectual and creative values. The Ministry has a historical role in supporting the progress."

Unlike in the US, culture in Egypt is not produced by independent organizations. In Egypt, activities of individuals and small artistic organizations will not create a sufficient impact. Taher recalls the 1960s—the golden years of Egyptian culture under the minister Tharwat Okasha, who founded many cultural institutions including the Cairo Conservatory and the Higher Institute of Ballet. But those glory days are long

gone: according to the current minister, Abdel Hamid, ballet will be on the top of the list of Islamists' censorship on culture. Hany Hassan, dancer and choreographer with the Cairo Opera Ballet Company, says, "We need a minister that would protect us with strong public statements." Hassan points to the Minister's direct communication with the artists, which does not find reflection in the mainstream media.

Tamer Fathy, a choreographer, expects fierce confrontation between artists and Islamists will happen very soon. "It is boiling and will explode soon. Only after the direct confrontation, the arts scene will redefine its position and artists will start strongly defending freedom of creativity and expression."

A few days prior to Imam's verdict, Karima Mansour, choreographer and newly-appointed artistic director of the dance centre at Cairo's Creativity Centre, thought this fear has been exaggerated. "I am neither blind nor in denial. As long as there are no concrete actions censoring art on religious basis implemented, Egyptian artists should stop anticipating problems and continue working. Let's cross that bridge when we come to it." In parallel, however, Mansour pointed to another phenomenon: self-censorship exercised by some artists who lack confrontational abilities. While Egypt's Minister of Culture suggests "wearing masks," to date there have been no fierce confrontations comparable to those in Tunisia, for example. Taher comments that self-censorship has no remedy and is one of the worst paths that creative people could choose.

The direction of Egypt's cultural scene has yet to be redefined in light of the increased presence of Islamists in Egyptian politics and society. Taher emphasises that "the revolution is ongoing and it will take time to see the results. It is important however that artists create one strong force and act together." For Egypt, it may be that Imam's sentence is the spark that will trigger the explosion anticipated by Fathy and Mansour. The upcoming weeks will show strength of the Egypt's culture scene and how it will address many troublesome issues. ■

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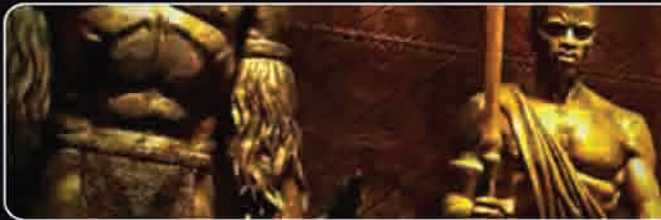
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The Dictator of Laughs

The Dictator (2012)

Seven Stories Press, New York, 2012

Nicholas Blincoe admits the film is "Genuinely funny", but, he asks, does the dictator himself get off lightly in the latest satirical offering from the team behind *Borat* and *Brüno*?

Admiral Shabazz Aladeen, dictator of Wadiya, has much in common with other despots. He is an ophthalmologist like Al-Assad of Syria, and rewrites his nation's dictionary like Turkmenbashi of Turkmenistan. (When he changes the words 'positive' and 'negative', alike, to 'Aladeen' the work of HIV doctors in Wadiya suddenly becomes a lot more complicated). At heart, however, Aladeen is a caricature of the one-time Brother Leader and Guide of the Revolution, Colonel Muammar Qadhafi. He is tall and handsome, bombastic and energetic, a flamboyant dresser who is never without a phalanx of beautiful female bodyguards.

Aladeen is the star of *The Dictator*, the new film from Sacha Baron Cohen and Larry Charles, the team behind the films *Borat* and *Brüno*. Following the bloody end of Gaddafi, it might be the first post-Arab Spring film. But is *The Dictator* a fitting commentary on these revolutions, in all their optimism, messiness, success and failure? Well, no. It's a series of bum and fart gags. The problem for a reviewer is trying to explain why a very funny and very stupid film is also, unfortunately, quite a bad thing.

The Dictator is genuinely funny, at its best in the rapid-fire micro-sketches that open and close the film. Aladeen is shown at his birth, beard already in place. A voiceover sorrowfully declares his mother died in childbirth, as his mother is seen being smothered with a pillow by her obstetrician. In the Wadiya olympics, Aladeen wins the 100 metres by firing the starting gun after he has left the blocks, and continues to fire at anyone who threatens to overtake him. The sketches may be broad, but who could doubt that they reflect the barbarism of Gaddafi or the Assads who turned murder into state policy?



The plot sees Aladeen visit America, where he is deposed by his wicked uncle (Ben Kingsley). Aladdin always has a wicked uncle, it seems. But with the help of a vegan grocer (Anna Faris), our hero wins out and delivers a speech at the UN. Redeemed by love, Aladeen promises democracy ... while continuing to behave pretty much as before.

The Dictator is a scripted feature yet it follows exactly the template set by Cohen's previous gonzo mock-documentaries, TV's *Ali G Show* and the films *Borat* and *Brüno*. In each case, the big idea is letting Cohen's character loose in America. At heart, these are satires of American gullibility: over and over, Americans are seen failing to condemn or, worse, encouraging

Sacha Baron Cohen
in character as Admiral
General Aladeen



screen. Battling laziness and prejudices is a worthy object for satire, yet in Cohen's case it also opens tough questions.

If Cohen's creations are designed purely to expose the failures of a western audience, how real are they? How real should we treat them? Borat is not meant to be Kazakh, he is a cartoon-figure designed to perform a function. On the other hand, his nationality was not chosen entirely at random, either. The anti-Jewish pogroms of 19th Century Russia were enforced by Kazakh cavalymen, better known in the west as Cossacks. However, these troops were not ethnically Kazakh but, rather, Russian troops who styled themselves as Kazakhs out of a peculiar form of Orientalism. After Borat, the Kazakhs have become a byword for racism and stupidity. How different is Cohen's confusion to the mistake of the illiterate vigilante in Wales who hounded a paediatrician in her home because he mistook her for a paedophile?

“At heart, these are satires of American gullibility”

The emptiness at the heart of Cohen's characters causes other problems. When co-writer, Jeff Schaffer, says that Cohen ensures his “victims are worthy, so that there's a satirical aspect to the comedy ... these are not innocent victims”, he is referring to the targets exposed by Cohen, not to Cohen's characters. In *The Dictator*, the targets are the United Nations, left-wing activists and health-shop owners. As Aladeen attacks this assortment of dupes whose tolerance and indifference has allowed tyranny to flourish, the preening figure of Aladeen becomes our hero, the man who exposes these fools for what they are. By emptying Aladeen of everything but his good looks and braggadocio, Cohen lets real-life dictators off the hook. His Aladeen is Qadhafi stripped of everything that made Qadhafi horrible, and we are left with a fun guy we kind of like. ■

Nicholas Blincoe (Author and screenwriter living between London and the Palestinian city of Bethlehem. He writes regularly for “The Guardian” and “The Telegraph.”)

the excesses of Cohen's monstrous creations. Cohen targets both intolerant conservatives, who indulge his characters' homophobia and racism, and polite liberals who fail to criticise out of dubious respect for foreignness.

The most famous example is the scene in *Borat* where Cohen persuades a rodeo audience to sing a fictitious Kazakh

folksong with the refrain “throw the Jew down the well”. Cohen has said that he believes the road to Auschwitz was “paved with indifference” and wants to shake us out of our complacency. Cohen's Jewish identity is important to him. His company is called ‘Four by Two’, rhyming slang for Jew, and the apparently anti-Semitic Borat and Aladeen speak Hebrew on

The Arab Autumn Recants

Adel Al-Toraifi

When the popular uprisings first erupted in the Arab world, intellectuals and writers were initially engulfed in a state of shock and amazement. However, when it seemed that the moment of change had occurred; those intellectuals changed their view and declared their support for the mass revolutions. Some went even further and began theorizing and participating in the demonstrations and the uprisings, although they did not have any political project other than the overthrow of the regime, and did not provide any values or clear demands for the model that should succeed it.

Interestingly, those intellectuals who welcomed, and in some cases even adopted, these uprisings have now begun to retract their positions, with some choosing to criticize and cast doubt over the future of these revolutions. Yet few of them have acknowledged the failure in their vision, or are deliberately forgetting their role in promoting the sentiments of the rebelling street. Today, some are writing explicitly – or indirectly – about their fears regarding the results of the on-going transformations. The main reason for this is that the results of the democratic elections that they preached for have paved the way for religious parties and forces that are far from the values of democracy, civility and human rights, thus reflecting the fickle attitude of the intellectual elite.

It is possible to look back on the statements and comments that are now skeptical of the results of the “Arab Spring”, and their impact on the future of freedoms and rights in those countries. The advocates of “civil society” and human rights have become aware that the principles and dreams that they clung to have turned into a nightmare because of the rise of radical Islamists to power.

This scene is not new; advocates of independence in the 1940s preached the dream of the nation state, then soon

many of them fled or were held under house arrest, not to mention the assassinations and plots against them. Also, advocates of nationalism and later Baathism in the 1960s and 1970s turned their emerging countries into totalitarian regimes, as yesterday’s “comrades” sacrificed each other by marginalizing institutions and tampering with constitutions. Even the Islamists have battled amongst themselves, denouncing each other as infidels with regards to matters of the emirate, earthly spoils, and the experiences of Iran, Algeria, Sudan and Yemen, which continue to be pertinent today. Today, the advocates of civil society, calling themselves names such as “human rights activists” or “reformists”, are facing the same fate. They offer a

the same people began to justify or repudiate the failure of the revolution, under the pretext that it had been hijacked by radical forces and currents, whether leftist or Islamic.

The purpose here is not to criticize the revolution or to rebuke the revolutionaries, but rather a call to correct its path. The regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak were corrupt and full of negative aspects, but there were also positive aspects, good projects, and functioning institutions, albeit weak ones. Because of this it was necessary following the departure of the president for the country to move gradually towards a democratic transition without disrupting the economic wheel or damaging state institutions and their prestige. Trying to perform a radi-

Even the Islamists have battled amongst themselves, denouncing each other as infidels with regards to matters of the emirate, earthly spoils, and the experiences of Iran, Algeria, Sudan and Yemen, which continue to be pertinent today

revolutionary or coup-like discourse that justifies civil disobedience and inciting violent protests, even jeopardizing the interests of the country and its people; even after the ballot boxes delivered their verdict, some are still trying to change the reality by force, under the pretext of peaceful demonstrations.

Intellectuals and writers have gone through what some socio-political scientists call “revolutionary romanticism”, a state of emotional glorification of a radical transformation, and then when signs of failure and disarray appear, these same people move into a state of denial, accusing remnants of the former regime of trying to sabotage the revolution. However, when other revolutionary forces are able to make gains or monopolize power,

cal change in societies that are not yet capable of this will lead to disaster. The Egyptian case is clear, the suspension of work on the constitution has led the revolutionary forces to conflict, and this comes at the expense of the economic and security stability of the citizens.

The citizen is the one who gives laws and regulations their value, not vice versa. It may be possible to overthrow the president and his men and call this a revolution, it may be possible to change the constitution and the regulations, but you cannot change people’s lives for the better if it is at the expense of their security and livelihoods.

Such words were written at the beginning of the uprisings, but few paid any attention to this. ■

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