THE GULF AND ITS ISLAMISTS

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I'm going to structure this talk in the following way. I want to start with some general remarks about the way the Gulf approach to Islamisms of all sorts has characteristically been framed. I shall focus initially on the responses to the Muslim Brotherhood Review, which I wrote at the request of David Cameron in 2014, because these seem to me to encapsulate something important about regional understandings and western misunderstandings. I shall then move on to a wider discussion of Islamism and why it matters in this context. And I shall finish with an account, as I understand them, of Gulf responses to the issue and where we are now. I shall focus in on Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Iran, because they have been the chief actors in tbis saga over the last three to four decades. There's a lot to say about Kuwait and Bahrain too – and indeed Oman which has an entirely different history. But there's only so much time.

THE MBR AND ITS DISCONTENTS

When David Cameron commissioned the MBR, it was immediately assumed that the reason he did so was pressure from the Saudis and the Emiratis. That assumption is both interesting and false. In fact, neither the Saudis nor the Emiratis were enthusiastic.

I was then told by senior colleagues that there was no such thing as the or even a Global Muslim Brotherhood and I should on no account suggest that such a thing existed. That would be doing the work of certain paranoid Gulf leaders for them. But all you have to do is look at the detailed accounts - written by the Brotherhood themselves - of the various branches of the MB and their relationships across the Middle East, Europe and the US on IkhwanWeb or consult other Arabic-

language sources like the distinguished Egyptian scholar of Islamism, the late Hussam Tamam or widely available interviews with the Brotherhood's former Deputy Murshid (General Guide), Muhammad Habib, to discover the trajectory and vicissitudes of this historically contingent but real phenomenon – neither SMERSH nor the COMINTERN but a sophisticated set of highly personalised and often endogamous international networks, with all the tensions and resilience that that implies. Consider also the Campione-based Yusuf Nada, the Brotherhood's banker and self-confessed international coordinator; or the central role played by the late Yusuf al Qaradawi, a protegé of Qatar, often considered the principal international jurisprudential authority for the Muslim Brotherhood as a whole.

In this context, I might also mention here an interesting exchange I had a few years ago in Washington DC with a Tunisian commentator, sympathetic to Al Nahda, over the question of the notorious remark by the then Murshid of the EMB, the late Muhammad Mahdi Akef, *tuzz fi masr, fi abu masr wa illi fi masr,* ("*Screw Egypt, Egyptians and everyone else who lives there")*, first reported in the Egyptian magazine, *Rose al Youssef* in May 2006. My interlocutor claimed he had never heard of this remark and asked for references, which I supplied. He then argued that Akef didn't have time in 2011 and 2012 to respond to all the lies that were told about him – in spite of the fact that the remark dated to 2006 and in two televised interviews available on YouTube he admits he made it.

The puzzling feature of this exchange is that Akef's position is not at all unusual among Muslim Brothers and all other Islamists. It is possible to compile a long list of similar comments. Yusuf Nada in an illuminating 2014 TV interview with Al Jazeera remarked of his activities in Yemen (where many believe the Brotherhood have long had a particular interest, being involved in the assassination of the Imam Yahya in 1948, the 1962 Republican coup, and behind the main Sunni Islamist jihadi-tinged group, Al Islah), "*I said to them .....your country is our (sc the MB's) country,*

and any country in which there is No God but God is our country – and this is a fundamental principle of the MB [my translation]", thereby appropriating to himself a political role in any Muslim country. Humam Said, the former Controller of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (and a medical doctor), said in an interview with *Asharq al Awsat* in 2005, *"The nation state is an ailment. Foreigners drew the borders. This exceptional situation must come to an end. By advocating this, we are echoing the nation's conscience",* thus pathologising nationalism and associating opposition to it with an almost Kantian moral imperative and a Rousseauesque self-identification with the General Will. Look at Chapter 9 in *Ma'alim fi al Tariq (Milestones), A Muslim's Nationality and Belief,* one of the seminal works of the Muslim Brotherhood publicist and ideologue, Sayyid Qutb, or indeed Abdullah Azzam's *Join The Caravan* and *Defence of Muslim Lands*. Hassan al Banna's formulation "*The Qur'an is our constitution, the Prophet is our leader, Jihad is our way, and death in the way of God is our highest hope*" speaks to the same transnational impulse – the study of which one distinguished commentator on Islamism has called "ummatics". It is a formal part of Hamas' Charter and a characteristic Brotherhood slogan. According to Mahmoud Zahhar of Hamas, "*Secularism completely contradicts religious ideology*" and nationalism is "*an anathema produced by orientalists, missionaries and imperialists*". Banna also said "*It is in the nature of Islam to dominate, not to be dominated …. And to extend its rule to the entire planet.*" You can also find 'Akef on YouTube using the same word to dismiss anyone who doesn't accept "*al hukm al islami" (Islamic rule).*

There is too often in the West a tendency to start with conclusions and then work backwards to the facts; a determination, for example, to see the Saudi position on the Muslim Brotherhood as monocausal and unreflective and the lack of Saudi state capacity as the product of institutional primitivism; a wish to see the British government simply as the dupe of others; a refusal to accept that the small but rich and often socially permissive – if highly securitised – emirates of the lower Gulf might have good reason to fear the revolutionary designs of Islamism, both Sunni and Shia. A

fixed belief that the Muslim Brothers have over time evolved into a set of national, and allegedly more moderate, actors within quasi-democratic and representational systems, hand in hand with a conviction that politically organised Islamism is something more than a cunningly crafted ideologically modernist and populist movement intent on building normative hegemony and eventually monopolising power – often indeed the authentic expression of a distinctive and fixed Muslim political sociology. A reluctance to acknowledge that there had also been strong and equally authentic secular, leftist and nationalist moments in recent Arab history which did not simply wither but were actively suppressed or suborned – and that this might be the real reason for the absence across the Arab world of a Habermasian public sphere, not – as is commonly held – fear of an Islamist planet.

I now want to focus on two specific themes which interact in complex but meaningful ways, Islamism in general and the response to it in the wider Gulf, which I understand to include Iran and its emergent satrapies in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

ISLAMISMS

When it comes to Islamism and its consequences, there has been a long-standing academic debate about "moderation" v "extremism", "essentialism" v "contextualism" and "preconditionalism" v "universalism". This mirrors a debate about whether what we have seen with the rise of radical and often violent forms of Islamism is the radicalisation of Islam or the Islamisation of radicalism. Understanding Islamisms is essential. But the attempt to place them on some scale of relative extremism or moderation only tells us something about Islamist methodology not ideology and how we measure relationships within a closed system of our own devising. And it is generally not the way in which Gulf states frame the question.

First of all, of course, it is perfectly possible to be contextual and essentialist at the same time, less inclined to the performative theatrics of exemplary violence but equally inclined to ideological extremes. That does not mean that social movements jettison their original goals as they manoeuvre, a lesson I thought we had all learnt long ago from Gramsci. They are historically and contextually contingent and highly adaptive.

For me the two most original and enduring responses to the crises of governance, legitimacy and social justice that have afflicted the region since the emergence of the modern Middle Eastern state system in the 1920s both involved the innovative mobilisation of Islam as an ideology. This was done to shape, not tradition, but modernity – in very different ways. The first, the creation of a classically reimagined but territorially defined Islamic state, buttressed by the consolidation of power in the name of an allegedly authentic but in fact constructed nativism, happened uniquely in what became Saudi Arabia.

The second response was to dismiss the nation state entirely. Apostles of this approach called for the placing of a highly textualised Islam at the centre of political, social and economic life, defined the largely Christian and secular West as the moral and cultural Other and claimed that the restoration of a specifically pan-Arab caliphate would restore the allegedly lost glory of the Muslim world.

This vision of a revived caliphate was a project created by the Muslim Brotherhood, the first and foundational mass movement of mobilised Islamism, launched, in his own rather mythopoeic account, by Hassan Al Banna in the Egyptian provincial city of Ismailiyya in March 1928. In contrast to the Saudi narrative of tribal unity in Islam within a single state, it involved reimagining the boundaries of the political, not just the religious community: logically, if Islam was the criterion, then that community was not ethnic, linguistic or national – as with the original Muslim

community in seventh century Medina, it was defined exclusively by religious affiliation, the Umma. Al Banna drew on the ideas of the so-called Islamic modernists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mixed with elements of what came rather misleadingly to be known as Salafism, as well as Sufism, Egyptian nationalism, German romanticism, and European – particularly Italian – fascism, together with badly understood and rarely acknowledged twentieth century European prophets of decline like Oswald Spengler or Arnold Toynbee There were others - in Sudan and Syria - calling for similar movements of moral regeneration and renewal – ***tajdeed*** – under the banner of Islam as a precursor to true independence, the restitution of legitimate authority and the revival of Arab and Muslim power in the wider world. The great Shia mujtahids of Iraq made many of the same claims. And in Iran, many of the most heated disputes of the Constitutional Revolution between 1905 and 1911 had revolved around similar questions - which continue to echo to this day.

But al Banna was the first person to make these issues the key to mass political activism in the service of not just a socially or religiously but also politically revolutionary and ideologically totalising movement. He was often ambiguous about what he wanted and what he meant. The Muslim Brotherhood had sometimes violent political rivals in 1930s and 1940s Egypt - the Wafd, the Sa'adists and Misr al Fatat. It was co-opted by and also encountered hostility from national political elites. But it created the foundational template for all future dissident and insurgent Islamist movements, from those which saw a route to absolute power through electoral politics to those which chose instead vanguardist violence.

Al Banna may initially have conceived of *jihad* as primarily one of social transformation through preaching and persuasion. But he soon came to promote what he called "*fann al mawt" – "the art of death"*. He urged his followers to scorn life; claimed that ultimate martyrdom could only be attained through death in the service of the divine; articulated a doctrine of armed physical force at

the MB's fifth conference in 1939; contemplated a frontal attack on power; and allowed the creation of a paramilitary force and violent attacks – including assassinations – against the Egyptian government, Egyptian Jews and the British. On top of this, the writings of Sayyid Qutb – executed by Nasser in 1966, who gravitated towards the Brotherhood in the late 1940s and became its most significant and protean ideologue – remain central in complex ways to Brotherhood thinking everywhere and continue to be used to justify multiple forms of Islamist violence – from *Al Gihad* (the assassins of Sadat) and *al Gama'at al Islamiyya* (*GaI),* to the Syrian *Fighting Vanguard*, the *Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA)* in Algeria in the 1990s, the *Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)* from the 1990s to the early 2000s and *Al Qaeda* and its various offshoots today, including the *Islamic State, Jabhat al Nusra* and *Ahrar al Sham*. That violence has been characterized by the distinguished scholar Aziz al Azmeh as an inevitable consequence of the search for an unattainable authenticity.

More generally, Islamism as construed by al Banna, and most systematically Qutb, rejects most existing political systems as un-Islamic. It seeks to replace the secular and post-Westphalian with a new Islamised order nationally and internationally. The Brotherhood is prepared to use physical force where events do not move in its favour or they are not allowed to operate with sufficient freedom. It gives little space to the tolerance, choice and individual freedoms we claim to value: ultimately it is the interpretation of Sharia that sets the limits. It has no commitment to democratic choice as the fundamental expression of a political community. It rejects what we consider to be the self-evident legal equality of individuals regardless of gender or religion. Its approach to education and societal cohesion is unlikely to promote inclusivity; it seeks power first; and as we have seen in Egypt, in Sudan, in Gaza, in Libya and indeed in Iran its understanding of how to run modern states is fatally flawed. It has also been a school for many of the most violent Islamist radicals of our time – from Usama bin Laden through Abdullah Azzam to Abu Mus'ab al Suri and Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

And its message is seductive. The Brotherhood's eschatalogical and self-justifying narratives of conspiracy and righteous suffering represent not a form of cognitive primitivism but a sophisticated Gnosis that promises to unmask occult forces and through divine guidance and Godly endurance achieve eventual victory. We see this in the regular use by Islamists of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, or their insistence that it was the US or the Jews who were responsible for 9/11. We see it in the belief widely held among Islamists that the British helped create the Muslim Brotherhood and they and the US created the Islamic State. We see it in their not entirely consistent claims that "moderate" Islam is also a western plot. We see it in the Turkish AKP's constant invocation of the Hidden Hand. We see it in the theologisation of history, where Islamists such as Hamas can evoke the Battle of Khaybar, the Prophet Muhammad's victory against the Jews of that place in the seventh century, as evidence of victory promised in the future. We see it in their reading of the present as a mirror of the past. We see it in their belief that the disasters of 1954 and 2013 are tests of faith and destined to be overturned. The world is full of signs for those who can read them.

All of this suggests we should resist the temptation to seek to understand the MB through our own cultural or epistemological categories. It is undoubtedly true that the MB contains a range of views. And there have been MB reformists who want more openness and plurality. But true reformists (like extremists) tend to leave. It is also true that in orthodox Islamic jurisprudence the properly constituted politico-religious community is the caravan of salvation and therefore the only legitimate Islamic polity. But this reflects what Aziz al Azmeh again describes as the utopian element in Islamic political thought, which in practice Muslim rulers have invariably sought to reconcile with the more urgent needs of the profane present. In the tenth century, drawing heavily on Plato and Aristotle, Al Farabi described an ideal rational state in his treatise, *al Madinat al Fadhilah*. Slightly later the Abbasid jurist, Abu al Hassan al Mawardi, in the second chapter of his *Al Ahkam al Sultaniyya*, accepted that the Caliph, within the framework of a religiously legitimate state, may delegate either limited or – in cases of necessity – absolute political power to a temporal

administrator. And in fourteenth century North Africa the great Arab historian, Ibn Khaldun, distinguished between *khilafah* as an ideal religio-political position and the admittedly inferior *mulk* (*kingly power*). He accepted the latter as something potentially profane – underpinned by the practice of *al siyasat al 'aqliyya* (rational politics) or *qawanin al siyasah* (political rules) rather than *shari'ah*. In the actual practice of Muslim-ruled states the conduct of politics has generally been autonomous, framed by a 1400-year old corpus of sophisticated, subtle and usually pragmatic textual, jurisprudential and credal exegesis and political philosophy. The ruler and the scholar occupy distinct spheres. The latter checks the former's exercise of power; the former controls affairs of state.

Islamism is not simply a historically contingent anomaly which can be remedied by exposure to even more liberalism. Islamism – to which the Brotherhood is central – like other totalising, metaphysical and authoritarian ideologies is a profound ideological challenge not just to the modern western conception of the state and its foundational principles but to the fragile constitutive basis of contemporary Muslim majority states, the embedded historical practice they reflect and the state systems within which they operate.

We and others may believe – quite rightly – there are deep seated political, social and economic problems within the states of the region that need addressing urgently for our mutual benefit. But we need to guard against this shading into a belief that the answer is the drastic political rupture represented by Islamism. Such a cure would be more dangerous than the disease. Islamists are *revolutionary* in a fundamental sense of the word. And the history of the modern Middle East tells us that revolutions destroy. There is not a single persuasive example to the contrary since 1945. Some may still be tempted to hope that when a malign or otherwise unsatisfactory regime is overthrown the subsequent trajectory must be progressive. Experience suggests the reverse. As Hannah Arendt said nearly 50 years ago, "*The practice of violence, like all action, changes the*

world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world." Or, as John Gray has observed, "*If there is anything approaching an iron law in history, however, it is that revolutions are followed by injustice worse than existed in the ancien régime".* Authoritarianism is not weakened in such circumstances: it recurs.

THE REGIONAL IMPACT OF ISLAMISMS

This brings me to my second theme: the modern Middle East and the impact that Islamisms of all kinds have had on its conflicts and its cohesion as a political space – leaving the Gulf, with all its tensions, as almost the last surviving functional sub-state system in the Arab Middle East. And here it is important to consider Iran and Shia Political Islam. For Islamism is not simply Sunni. Radical Shia Islamisms have undergone a similar process of globalisation and deculturation to their Sunni counterparts. There is a fascinating process of simultaneous attraction and repulsion between the Sunni and Shia Islamist poles. The first mobilised Shia Islamist movement in the region, Al Da'wa in Iraq, arose after 1958 out of the clerical opposition to Abdul Karim Qassim's revolutionary dispensation – and particularly to its leftist leanings – drawing on the same intellectual milieu that produced the Iraqi branch of the Brotherhood. Indeed the former modelled itself on the latter – to the extent of including the latter's chief ideologues among its own principal sources. In an extraordinary interview with *Al Sharq al Awsat* in 2013 the then Iraqi Prime Minister and Da'wa leader, Nouri al Maliki, claimed his family had strong MB connections and that he had been significantly influenced by Sayyid Qutb, his brother, Mohammad and other MB-related Islamists. Under Muhammad Taqi al Mudarisi, the Shirazi current also used Qutb's writings for the formation of their cadres. More generally links between the MB and the Khomeinist trend in Iran go back as far as the 1950s. Navab Safavi, the founder of the Feda'iyan-e-Islam, a violent Iranian Shia analogue of the Egyptian Brotherhood, attended the MB-organised Islamic Global Congress conference on Palestine in Jerusalem in 1953 and was an inflammatory speaker at the MB rally in

Cairo in January 1954 that precipitated the initial dissolution of the movement by the Free Officers. Safavi was reportedly a frequent visitor to Khomeini's home, who sought to prevent his execution after he had been convicted of the assassination of the Iranian PM, Hajj Ali Razmara.

Of course, the claims of Iran itself are based in a specific form of ethno-nationalist and cultural exceptionalism as well as in religious identity. The ideological ferment of the last sixty years has produced different currents, as with Sunni Islamism – Shariati-islamo-leftist, Khomeinist or Shirazi, for example. Some strands are clerical, others anti-clerical. But all are revolutionary. Together these strands represent as powerful a challenge to national loyalties as that represented by the MB and its analogues. And they have been backed by an aggressive militia-led Iranian activism across the region for the last 38 years.

In parallel with this we have seen what I call the sacralised satrapisation of the Levant. The 1989 Taif Agreement, which ended the Lebanese Civil War under Saudi sponsorship, sought to take militias out of politics. But it only succeeded in ceding power to one of them – the most powerful, Hizbollah, which operates as a state within a state, with its leader Hassan Nasrallah, effectively Iran's resident proconsul in Southern Beirut. In the last two decades, we have seen the same thing happen progressively in Iraq, where the three most powerful men today are probably: Nouri al Maliki, the principal Da'wa political leader, Hadi al Ameri of the Badr organisation, and Qais al Khaz'ali, the leader of *Asa'ib Ahl al Haq* (The Leagues of the Righteous). All are ideologically Islamist, all are revolutionary, and all are backed by Iran. You could add Muqtada al Sadr to that list too. His relationship with Iran is clearly more complicated. And he has personal grievances with Maliki and Khazali. But he represents a similar phenomenon.

And it is this Iranian-backed drive for Shia Islamist hegemony that has in my view underpinned the sectarianisation of political conflict in the wider Gulf. It is not, as some would have it, simply about

Saudi Arabia. Saudi Salafism is certainly part of the dialectic from which sectarianism and other extremisms spring. Without question, the Saudi state has worked with some highly questionable sectarian actors over the last decade – for example, the late Zahran al Alloush in Syria. But the Saudi government sees domestic sectarian division as a major national security concern. And internationally it has often backed non-sectarian politics where it can – including the Shia, Ayad Allawi, in Iraq and the secular and liberal Sunni Hariris in Lebanon.

THE MIDDLE EAST IN CRISIS?

This brings me to the long-standing dispute between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain on one side, and Qatar on the other. It has been parked. But it is not over. And it illustrates for me some important and often neglected structural features of the region as it currently stands.

Many analysts seem to believe that the fundamental reason for this dispute – as with events more generally in Saudi Arabia since 2015 – was a clash of egos. I disagree. The crisis arose out of the logic of five decades of Gulf socio-economic development, the evolution of different, politically legitimating discourses and the urgent challenge of all varieties of political Islamism. It reflects important emerging differences in the political sociology of the Gulf. And it poses fundamental questions – not just about the GCC, but about the future of the wider region. This matters to all of us but not necessarily in the way we think.

As many have pointed out, it is perhaps surprising that the Muslim Brotherhood in itself should have become such a contentious issue. Links between the Gulf and the Brotherhood go back to its foundation. Hassan al Banna, like many others in the region, saw in the rise of the Saudi state after 1902 an emblematically authentic Arab and Muslim response to colonialism and the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate. By his own account – and that of the not entirely reliable Lebanese memorialist,

Amin al Rayhani – he and Abdul Aziz al Saud had established a personal relationship by the late 1920s. Abdul Aziz famously forbade the MB to organise formally in the Kingdom. But he also reportedly invited al Banna twice to settle in the Hejaz, once in 1928 and a second time after the Egyptian Government had sought to dissolve the Brotherhood in 1948, just before al Banna's assassination. The annual Hajj, where al Banna and his successor, Hassan al Hodeibi, was allowed to operate freely, was the key to much of the MB's early proselytisation and its later reconstitution. By the early 1950s, the MB had also managed to organise in Kuwait and Bahrain – politically the most advanced of the emerging Gulf Arab states.

The Saudi state in particular gave huge material and moral support to the Muslim Brotherhood and related groups, from the late 1920s down to the 1980s. In response to Nasserism and Baathism, its rulers encouraged pan-Islamism. King Saud sought to intercede on the MB's behalf during the crisis of 1954 after the attempted assassination of Nasser and received Hassan al Hodeibi, the then Murshid in Jeddah. King Faisal gave material help to Sayyid Qutb while he was in prison and asked Nasser in 1966 to spare his life; Qutb's works were published in Jeddah even when they were banned elsewhere. Faisal and his successors allowed prominent Egyptian Brothers in exile, such as Qutb's brother, Muhammad, to establish themselves in business, government or universities inside the Kingdom.

But in each instance, the driving impulse was *raison d'état* not ideological convergence. The Saudis wished to harness the Brotherhood as an instrument of statecraft, in the battle against other more immediate and obviously revolutionary threats. If they were short-sighted, they were not alone. Certainly, it came back to haunt them. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, welcomed by the Muslim Brotherhood internationally, exposed the deep fault lines in the Arab world between republicans, monarchists, pro-Palestinians, nationalists, Islamists, rich and poor. It suggested that the pan-Islamist aims of the MB, and other more extreme groups which sprang from it, might be

irreconcilable with the increasingly worldly and national ambitions of prosperous Gulf states. This led to a temporary estrangement of the Kuwaiti Brotherhood from the main international current of the Brotherhood.

In addition, in some places the presence of committed proselytising and increasingly Salafised Muslim Brothers and the support provided to the MB and its offshoots by Saudi religious institutions produced an ideological ferment, combining MB political activism and Qutbist *takfirism* with an intense Salafi focus on issues of doctrine and personal conduct. From the 1960s this produced a regional movement – known as the Islamic *Sahwa* ("*Awakening"*) – which came in the 1990s to pose a powerful ideological challenge to existing political dispensations. In the eyes of some, this helped set the scene for the al Qaeda-related terror campaigns of the early 2000s. In reality, the connections were complex and often indirect, fuelled as much by ideological fissures as by agreement. But this is characteristic of all Islamist movements. And the perception of threat was heightened by the involvement of Sahwa scholars in the petitions movement fuelled by the US presence in the Kingdom after 1990.

The unease this all caused perhaps became first apparent when the then Chief Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz, issued fatwas in the late 1990s, stigmatising the MB as deviationists. Then in 2002 came a more decisive caesura when, in an Arabic press interview, the late Prince Naif spoke bitterly about the Saudi and Kuwaiti experience in 1990/91 and accused the MB of betraying the trust of the Gulf States. Some claim this was stimulated by the MB seeking to organise in the Kingdom after all, particularly among women. In fact, it was symbolic of a more decisive parting of ways between the Saudis and the Brotherhood.

This complex experience forms the background to the current situation. In Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE it combined in 2012/13 with a cacophony of events arising out of the Arab Spring: the

rise of MB-inflected politics in Tunisia; the Brotherhood victory in Egypt; a new MB assertiveness in Jordan and indeed the Gulf (notably Kuwait); and the appearance of MB-associated movements in Libya, alongside and sometimes in alliance with violent *takfiris*, supported by Qatar. This sense of "Islamism on the march" helped provoke the regional counter reaction.

And this brought into sharp focus a fundamental difference of approach in the Arab states of the region that has profound implications for its future. This divergence rests upon differing interpretations not only of the precise trajectory of events in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Tunisia and Syria, but of their political significance and likely consequences. Broadly speaking, there are three distinct groups: first, those who saw and perhaps still see political Islamism, notably but not exclusively in its MB manifestation, as the wave of the future; second, those who saw and see it as a permanent and significant feature of the landscape that needs to be integrated but constrained within existing or emerging security-political systems; and third, those who saw and will always see it as the most serious challenge to the stability of the region, its prosperity and security and the survival of its ruling elites since the high tide of Nasserism in the 1960s.

For the first two groups (which include Qatar and Turkey), the key to the future prosperity and stability of all Arab and perhaps Muslim states is to domesticate political Islamism and harness it as the motor of a modified version of pious authoritarianism in religiously modernist disguise. Given events since 2013 and the clear fragmentation of the Egyptian Brotherhood, those two groups have needed to live with the counter-revolution. But – given the teleological determinism of most Islamisms – this has not changed their fundamental stance: they believe it is only a matter of time before another change takes place.

Those in the third group profoundly disagree, as do many on the receiving end of external interventions in favour of the MB and other Islamisms – for example in Libya. They believe that the

raw will to power underlies all regional politics, given added life by revolution. On this view, the only rulers who can tame this rough beast, generate sustained legitimacy and deliver stability and prosperity are those who arise naturally from the cultural contours of a particular time, place and culture – like themselves. For them, the behaviour of the Brotherhood, from the beginning of the Revolution in Egypt and most egregiously once they secured power, confirmed beyond a shadow of doubt that the ultimate goal of the Egyptian Brothers and indeed the MB as a whole, was to gain control of the Arab world's most populous and culturally resonant state, remake it as a Brotherhood stronghold, arrange matters in such a way that they remained in power indefinitely and use that platform to promote Brotherhood ideology across a region prepared for it by eighty years of sustained effort. They believe the activities of the MB and its associates in Libya, Tunis and Yemen were part of this plan. They believe the MB would not have stopped at the Red Sea. Nasser, of course, saw the same countries as the key to his own very different hegemonic ambitions: many in the Gulf fear this was the Islamist reboot.

The Saudis came to believe even under King Abdullah that the shape-shifting nature of radical Islamist thought in general was a direct threat to national cohesion and identity, at a time when such things were more important than ever. Riyadh – and MbS in particular - want to prevent Islamist-inspired and anti-Al-Saud constitutionalism stirring again, alongside *hiraki* and *takfiri* Salafi activism. And the Saudis do not want the two holy cities, Mecca and Medina, to be used as convening points for Sunni Islamists (any more than by Iran) as happened in the MB's foundational years and at times of trial and exile. You can see this at work in the treatment of previously tolerated Islamists such as Salman al Awdha, the author in 2012 of *As'ilat al thawra - "Questions of Revolution",* where, like al Banna and Qutb or indeed Luther, Calvin and John Locke, he sees a legitimate role for physical force in resisting vaguely defined injustice. Al Awdha is now detained, like many others, and his son is in oppositional exile in the US. The only Salafism that will be tolerated in MbS's KSA is loyalist Salafism.

Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia see the Muslim Brotherhood and its Salafised offspring as secretive, partisan, double-talking and divisive. Most important is their repudiation of national identity and any loyalty other than that to the Murshid and God.

The Gulf rulers have concluded that this represents a dangerously and deliberately radical misreading of Islamic history in the service of anarchy (their term). Islam needs no purification. For the Saudi elite, the Kingdom is already a perfectly satisfactory Islamic state, whose ruler is religiously legitimate – manifested in his ability to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and by the unity of belief and of country. All Saudis owe absolute loyalty to him, as Wali al Amr, in the Hanbali (and now Madkhali) tradition, as they interpret it, of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, Ibn Taimiyya and Ibn Qaim al Jawziyya. Anyone who acknowledges fealty to another is therefore disloyal by definition. This is analogous to their problem with those Shia who acknowledge the temporal and spiritual sovereignty of an external Shia religious authority – as implied in the heterodox doctrine of *Wilayat al Faqih* (or indeed the Shirazi doctrine of *Shura al Fuqaha'*). It is not principally for the governing elite a question of being Shia. It is a question of territorial allegiance and loyalty to a sovereign individual. They have been engaged now for at least a decade in the delicate task of constructing a national identity precisely based on loyalty to the ruling dynasty and its reading of Islam, as well as a set of defined – if necessarily constructed – territorial and historical characteristics, an instantiation and inracination – to use another term of Aziz Azmeh's – of Islam *in* rather than *against* the world. MbS is clearly bent on modernising, not just the business structures of the Kingdom, but also its social and educational acquis in the service of a new and more open economic model. This is high risk: talk of robot cities and the recent wave of arrests may simply be cover for a massively ambitious attempt to remake the Kingdom without losing its foundational legitimacy. It can also look high-handed and deeply repressive.

Islamism of all sorts is a threat to this project. The Saudis know it has support with the Kingdom itself. At the time of the clearing of the squares in Egypt in mid-2013 there was an upsurge of sympathy for the Egyptian Brotherhood on Saudi social media. This seems to be regressing to the norm: in 2014 Washington Institute polling suggested 31% of Saudis supported the MB while subsequent polling suggested the current figure is between 15% and 25% (a figure not that dissimilar to other Arab countries). That is not a plurality. But it suggests a latent vulnerability if other things were to go wrong.

In a similar way, the Emiratis, in particular the leadership of Abu Dhabi, who acknowledge a more diverse religious tradition than the Saudis (dominantly Maliki, inflected by imported Sufism and Shiism, as well as the other orthodox schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence), see the Brotherhood not just as subversive but as reactionary and socially illiberal. To their minds it is opposed to everything they stand for in terms of a neo-patrimonial Arab and Islamic, highly securitised and segmented, but also socially permissive modernity. They reject the argument that political Islamism is an irresistibly rising tide. They see it as a real threat to the prosperity and cohesion of the UAE, based on an acceptance that cultures can meet, acknowledge each other, celebrate difference, prosper and still remain intact in a small, rich country with strongly conservative social traditions and major global ambitions in the southern Gulf at the hub of continents. For them the choice is a controlled *aggiornamento* – a modern mirror of the centuries when the multicultural trading cities of the Gulf flourished in the interstices of the Ottoman, Persian and British empires – or a religious closure.

Emirati leaders are acutely aware of their vulnerability – unsurprising when you have the sort of highly successful, but demographically lop-sided and materially vulnerable socio-economic structure of the UAE. That's why the Emiratis were angered by the licence given to Qaradawi and others, on Al Jazeera and elsewhere, publicly to question their Islamic credentials and therefore

their political legitimacy. With at most some 1.5 million nationals in a total population of around 12 million they feel the challenge – in a way larger states might not – of maintaining harmony among large and diverse expatriate populations and solidarity among still highly conservative nationals. They think the MB have instrumentalised the Gulf once before and would do so again. And they are wary of a residual underlying fragility of relations among the constituent parts of the Federation – particularly the northern and largely Hanbali Qawasim emirates – and with some powerful neighbours. Some may dispute this. But if you speak to senior Emiratis there is no escaping the depth of feeling. And the fact is, they have a point.

In both countries, the memory of a powerful Muslim Brotherhood presence in the education, health and government systems since the 1950s remains vivid. When I asked the late Saud al Faisal in 2014 why the Saudi state – under his father – had supported the MB so strongly, he replied: our big mistake was to hand the education of our children over to them. Senior Kuwaitis have said the same. I have had professionally successful Emiratis vividly describe to me, from their own experience, the psychological pressure to conform to pious and reactionary MB norms exerted by Al Islah on students at Al Ain University in the 1980s and 1990s – something I also glimpsed at the time myself. They recall the xenophobic, reactionary, socially intolerant and often inflammatory tone of Al Islah's monthly magazine, *Al Mujtama'*. Above all the rulers know for themselves the attractions of an essentialist, absolutist and self-contained ideology. Some very senior figures will say in private that they only narrowly avoided becoming Brothers themselves. They now see themselves as escapees from a cult (a term they regularly use). They do not intend to be recaptured.

The key point is this: as long as Islamists, including the MB, serve the interests of their host state and its allies, everything is fine. When they become a perceived instrument of *fitna* – sedition – whether under the direction of external actors or independently – it is not. This is the real quarrel the Saudis and the UAE have with Qatar. They believe that Qatar and Turkey have consistently and

in a sustained manner instrumentalised the MB internationally to serve their unilateral visions of a region where political Islamism becomes an instrument of their own national security interests – as defined by AKP ideologues and a small circle of decision makers in Doha. The MB was a willing and active accomplice for them, after decades of lying low. The accession of Shaikh Tamim as emir of Qatar in 2015, was supposed to provide redress. Many senior Saudis and Emiratis were highly sceptical – they told me so - but they were prepared to give Qatar time. By 2016 they clearly concluded that this had not worked. They have now changed tactics. But this is not an argument between unaccountable and frivolous individuals. It is a fundamental dividing line about the future not just of the Gulf but of the wider Arab and indeed Islamic worlds. It has placed enormous stress on the GCC state system as a whole. If that is the price to be paid, then so be it.

The Saudis in particular have not helped themselves: I do not deny that for a moment. Their policies can at times seem clumsy. But the fact is that, on the wider canvas, the Saudis and the UAE have been consistent about all these issues for years – a policy continuity more hostile observers claim does not exist in MbS's brave new world.

And consider this. The precursor of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia – which brought to an end 150 years of mostly religious-driven conflict in Europe – was the 1555 Peace of Augsburg, whose guiding principle was *Cuius Regio, Eius Religio* (the religion of the Prince is the religion of the state). During the protracted Westphalian negotiations that idea became a principle of conditional sovereignty, which restricted the Prince's absolute right to determine doctrinal attachment within his territories by the construction of a system for the justiciability of conflict within the institutions of the Holy Roman Empire and the nomination of external guarantors – France and Sweden. The Saudis would probably accept both the territorialism of 1555 and the reciprocality of 1648. They have always wanted an external guarantor – in the shape of the US. It is their ideologically Islamist enemies – Sunni and Shia – who reverse the Augsburg principle, turning it into *Cuius Religio, Eius*

Regio, reject external juridification of conflict as either un-Islamic, colonialist or prejudicial and wish to expel the US from the region.

We should also remember that whatever we think of the UAE, a plurality of young Arabs in international surveys consistently say that this is the place they would most like to live and work and which their own countries should take as a model. It is a success in a region with few successes. We should bear in mind that the reform programme Muhammad bin Salman has promoted in KSA – and its new emphasis on national development rather than transnational interests and status - is precisely what we have consistently urged upon the Kingdom and its success matters to us more than ever: failure is not an option. Most Saudis take the same view – even if their conceptions of success are not all the same.

When we reflect on all this, we might conclude that far from the GCC crisis being personality driven, it was the elite engagement with Islamists in the first place – constructed as it was on sets of interlocking personal relationships – that was personalised and unreflective: it is the reaction that was structural and rational. And it was at least in part a reaction to the instrumentalisation *by* the MB of those who had thought they were doing the instrumentalisation. That does not mean this is a simple clash between democracy on the one hand and authoritarianism on the other. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are each willing to support democrats, oligarchs, liberals and reactionaries depending on the circumstances. It is rather a question of the nature of the state; of national security; of who gets to determine social and political normativity; and of who uses whom – in an age where the real threats are not simply to political systems but to the existence of states themselves.

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