

71 VALDAI PAPERS

July 2017



ARAB UNCERTAINTY AFTER THE 'SPRING'

Nourhan El Sheikh

About the Author

Nourhan El Sheikh

Professor of Political Science, Cairo University, Member of the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs

The views and opinions expressed in this Paper are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Valdai Discussion Club, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

After six years of rapid and successive developments that have engulfed Arab countries, they could not reach a safe path towards the future. They are still suffering instability and bloody conflicts along the most critical phase of their history. Dramatic changes, since early 2011, led to people's unlimited expectations for improving their quality of life, and reaching social justice and democracy. It was a moment when all different political and social powers together were calling for 'change' without a clear common vision to what should be that wishful change. Instead of the 'spring', Arabs fell into deep dark winter. Political Islam powers, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, led the scene as they were more organized. They raised religious slogans appealing to the majority of citizens. However, they have never been tested in power before. For decades, they have played the role of suppressed opposition and victims of dictatorship. They were also supported by some liberals who allied themselves with the Muslim Brotherhood seeking for power regardless the supposed contradiction between the two political trends.

The Islamic powers could not maintain their popularity as they failed to achieve social justice and to improve living conditions that have deteriorated dramatically than ever before. They also did not fulfil their promises concerning secular state and democracy. They rushed towards the establishment of Islamic dictatorship regimes. They launched structural changes in the identity of states to move from semi-secular to pure Islamic. They used excessive violence against opposition, including killing some of them e.g. Egyptian journalist El-Husseini Abu Daif, and two Tunisian opposition leaders – Shukri Belaid and Mohamed Brahimi. The experience of the Islamists in power revealed that there are no moderate factions among them; they all use violence in different degrees and forms. They formed a network of organizations that are seemingly competitive but in fact support each other, particularly in critical moments. That was obvious when Mohamed Morsi called for 'Jihad' in Syria on June 15, 2013, to consolidate Syrian Islamists.

This provoked anger of people who rose up supported by state institutions to remove political Islam from power. Moreover, a critical polarization has increased between Islamist factions (the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, Islamic Jihad Group) on one hand, and secular powers along with the supporters of the old regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, on the other.

Instead of moving strongly and steadily towards democracy, prosperity, and stability – ambiguity and uncertainty dominate the Arab scene. There is no clear path for any Arab country. Several alternatives are possible.

First, the nightmare of the Islamic scenario is still hanging over some Arab countries, particularly Egypt and Tunisia. Political Islam has retreated relatively after the 30 June 2013 Revolution in Egypt and the decision of the Islamist party of Ennahda in Tunisia in May 2016 to separate its religious activities from the political ones. However, the decline of political Islam does not mean the end of it in the Arab region. There is a number of factors that maintain opportunities for political Islam.

Although political Islam has lost its fight for leadership, it is still a part of political process in Tunisia (Ennahda Movement Party), Egypt (Salafis), Jordan (the Muslim Brotherhood), Morocco (Justice and Development Party) and others. They have just moved from the centre

of power to a participatory or marginal position. This gives them opportunities to reorganize and survive. Their members and sympathizers also continue penetration into various institutions and assume key positions within them. Even in jail, leaders of political Islam are attracting young people who have been imprisoned for participating in the unrest and protests and protests. Political Islam's followers from the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis and others are part of the society in Arab countries. Their relative disappearance from the political scene does not negate their continued integration into economic life and the administrative apparatus of state.

This is not the first crisis the political Islam is facing in Arab countries. After a short period of reconciliation between President Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Muslim Brotherhood, the latter attempted to assassinate Nasser. As a result, the Muslim Brotherhood organization was dissolved, its activities were prohibited, and its leaders were arrested in 1954. The second crisis came in 1965 between the Muslim Brotherhood and Nasser after the involvement of the former in a new attempt to assassinate him, and a series of terrorist attacks and assassinations in Egypt prepared by the organization. The Egyptian authorities launched a massive campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood and executed their Supreme Guide, Sayed Qutb. Although President Sadat allied himself with the Muslim Brotherhood to confront the Nasserites, the clash began between the two sides in 1977, when Muslim Brotherhood members participated in January 1977 protests that fiercely opposed Sadat's approach to peace with Israel. In September 1981, Sadat arrested about 1,500 people belonging to different political factions including Islamic ones. Similar scenarios took place in Tunisia under Ben Ali's rule and in Algeria after the Islamic Salvation Front won the elections in the 1990s. *In all the cases, the powers associated with political Islam were never defeated and made a strong return to the political scene.*

There is great support for political Islam from some regional and international powers with Doha, Ankara, and London at the head. With the outbreak of the 'Arab revolutions' in 2011, Turkey became the greatest supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood in Arab countries, providing them with political and media support. In September 2011, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the then Prime Minister of Turkey, paid a visit to the house of Ahmed Seif al-Islam, who was a son of Hassan Al-Banna – the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, showing clear and unprecedented support for the group. This Turkish policy comes in the context of Ankara's strategy to dominate the Arab region by reviving the 'Ottoman Empire' and the 'Islamic Caliphate' under its leadership.

After the June 30 Revolution, which overthrew the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Turkey became the main incubator for the group. In addition to Erdogan's personal attack on Egypt's new leadership, Ankara organized a number of mass rallies against what happened in Egypt and held many meetings for the Muslim Brotherhood. The later allied itself with the terrorist groups that were behind a number of terrorist attacks in Egypt on churches, state institutions, public figures, army officers, policemen, and judges. In addition, Turkey received members of the Muslim Brotherhood who managed to escape from Egypt or were abroad during June 30 Revolution.

Qatar is another key Muslim Brotherhood supporter and a shelter for the largest number of political Islam members. It highly supported the Muslim Brotherhood (Ennahda Party) in Tunisia to control the power, as well as in Egypt, and participated in NATO military operation in Libya. It has also supported the terrorist and armed groups in Syria seeking to establish a new regime led by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

London, in its turn, provides an important foothold for the Muslim Brotherhood as well. It is the headquarter of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe, hosting many of their leaders, including Ibrahim Munir, Secretary General of the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is known that the relationship between Britain and the Muslim Brotherhood is deeply rooted. The British have supported Hassan Al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt since the inception of the group. The point was proven by British historian and journalist Mark Curtis in his book 'Secret Affairs: Britain's Collusion with Radical Islam', which was based on the official secret documents of the British Government. London has also provided a safe haven for a large number of extremists, including leaders of Jamaa al-Islamiya, who carried out the notorious Luxor massacre in Egypt in 1997.

The continuing deterioration of economic conditions provides a suitable environment for political Islam to revive in Arab countries. Although improving living standards has been the essential demand from Arab peoples, the situation is still far from satisfactory. The social tensions that marked the first half of 2015, as well as the combined effect of the three dramatic terrorist attacks were the main factors of Tunisia's poor economic performance in 2015. According to the World Bank MENA Economic Monitor Report, Spring 2016, Tunisian GDP growth reached a mere 0.8%. Most sectors of the economy contracted or stagnated. Inflation steadily decelerated. The unemployment rate remained high at 15.4%, particularly among women (22.6 %), university graduates (31.2 %), and the youth (31.8 %). The economic situation in Egypt and the rest of Arab countries is not much better. Even Gulf countries are facing growing economic difficulties in the light of the deterioration of oil prices. It is usually said that during hard times, Muslims turn to religion and increasingly believe those who speak in the name of God.

Predominance of conservative Salafism in culture and society is a very important factor that gives great opportunities for political Islam to revive. For example, Egypt has always been proud of its moderate Islam, but the last two decades have encountered a dramatic rise in religious radicalism in social and political life. Those who often show sympathy to political Islam are a solid base for relaunching its activities.

All these factors have ensured – and will ensure - the survival of political Islam in Arab societies, waiting for an opportunity to seize power again, repeating what happened after 2011.

Second, the disintegration and chaos scenario is still strong, particularly in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. The map of the region is being redrawn both geographically and politically. Peace and stability remain elusive in the region due to many reasons.

Despite the relative progress in combating terrorism, it remains the main challenge for Arab countries and the whole world. *The failure of regional and international powers, which are fighting terrorism, to cooperate and unite efforts increases the threat of disintegration.* In Syria, there are many groups on the ground under the cover of fighting ISIS and terrorism. Among such groups are Syrian Democratic Forces, which are backed by the international coalition, Democratic Union Party, and the Kurdish People's Protection Units. There is also the Turkish military that was able to take control over 5,000 km² in northern Syria by the end of the 'Euphrates Shield' operation in cooperation with the so-called Syrian

opposition factions affiliated to the Free Syrian Army. In addition to that, there are also factions supported by Jordan acting in southern Syria.

In Libya, there are three main forces: Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in the east, the internationally recognized Libyan government in the west, and the tribes supporting Saif al-Islam al-Qadhafi in the south. The leader of al-Qaeda in Libya, who is one of the leaders of the terrorist Benghazi Shura, Mohammed al-Dursi, nicknamed 'Mohammed al-Nus', asked his followers to focus attacks on the capital of Tripoli, the city of Benghazi, and the oil Crescent in order to ensure control over these territories. It increases instability and may push Libya towards the disintegration scenario as well.

At the same time, several studies have revealed that many terrorists that have joined ISIS in the past will not return to their countries, particularly in the light of tightened security measures adopted there. They will head to new conflict spots and other unstable countries. ISIS terrorists might move from Libya to Tunisia and Egypt, or to Europe. In December 2016, Ferhat Horchani, the Tunisian Defence Minister, said that "terrorists are fleeing from southern Libya not only to join Boko Haram in Nigeria, but also to move towards the West, to Tunisia in specific". In February 2017, he stressed that the return of fighters poses a threat to Tunisian national security.

The escalation of ethnic and sectarian strife continues. The region is rife with Sunni-Shiite sectarian division, fuelled by Saudi-Iranian hostility. Although the detente in Saudi-Iranian relations seemed possible at a moment, subsequent developments following the Saudi Crown Prince's visit to Washington and Trump's hostility approach rather than containment towards Iran blocked the chance of mutual understanding between Riyadh and Tehran. The reports about US plan to form the so-called 'Sunni Alliance', which includes Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan alongside Israel to face what is considered the Iranian threat to the regional security, refreshes the tension between the two sides after Saudi Arabia received Washington's guarantees of its support.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Nechirvan Barzani, confirmed that Kurdistan region would hold an independence referendum this year. "We can't go back to the old days", says Barzani, arguing that "Iraq after Mosul is not the same as Iraq before Mosul". Such a step would threaten not only the unity of Iraq, but Syria, Turkey, and perhaps Iran as well, where there are considerable Kurdish minorities. The Kurdish areas are almost autonomous in Syria, and for decades, the Kurds have fought for their independence from Turkey.

Yemen is also a subject to disintegration. Among the possible scenarios, there is Yemen's split into six entities on sectarian, tribal, economic basis and the former Northern Yemen divided into four parts. The first will include the oil areas in Marib and Al-Jouf, and the second will consist of the Zaidi regions (Sana'a, Omran, and Saïda). The third part will unite the coastal areas (Hajjah, Hodeidah), whereas the fourth will cover the area overlooking Bab al-Mandab in Taiz and Ab. The former Southern Yemen may be divided into two parts: oil desert region (Hadramout and Shabwa) and a strategic coastline of Bab al-Mandab (Aden, Abyan).

The US policy in the region based on the 'divide and rule' principle provokes the disintegration and chaos scenario as well. The term 'New Middle East' was introduced in 2006 by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who was credited by the Western media for coining the term, in replacement of the older and more imposing term – the 'Greater Middle East'. From Washington's point of view, the flawed division made by England and France under the Sykes-Picot agreements in 1916 should be changed. A similar plan was put forward by Bernard Lewis, the adviser to the US Secretary of Defense for Middle East Affairs, in the 1970s. American President George W. Bush and the neoconservatives embraced the content of the plan in the framework of the 'Greater Middle East Initiative' that was launched in 2004 with a declared aim of promoting democracy and building a knowledge society. The real goal was to redraw the Middle East map on religious and sectarian basis.

The American occupation of Iraq was a decisive step in this strategy. Given that, the Iraq War was very costly for the United States, and widely shook its image all over the world. The Arab revolutions were one of the American tools to achieve rapid and radical changes in the region at minimum cost from the American point of view. The US played a key role in removing the old regimes and bringing new and loyal Islamist ones to power.

The United States also played a major role in mobilizing Arab peoples against their leaders by providing training and financial aid to civil society organizations working on human rights and democracy. A number of American institutions trained the Arab youth on how to mobilize the masses and direct the public opinion. Young people were also trained in methods of non-violent influence or the so-called 'Non-Violent Action'. Among the most prominent of these training institutions was the Einstein Institute affiliated to the Gene Sharp Foundation. They worked on bringing about a change in the leadership of some Arab countries had lost their popularity, thus giving an opportunity to others who agree to divide their countries on ethnic and sectarian basis under the slogan of achieving democracy. Meanwhile, Washington concluded a deal with Islamists, under which the US administration would support their access to power in exchange for maintaining American interests in the region.

When Trump won the elections there were some expectations that the US may change its policy. For a while it seemed that Washington could really cooperate against terrorism and contribute to the crisis settlement process for Syria, or at least refrain from sabotaging it the way it did in other conflicts in the region. Unfortunately, after the American strikes on Syria in April, it is clear that the US is sticking to its old policies and is moving ahead towards dividing the region, or what is called 'Balkanization' of the Middle East.

Third scenario, which is looming on the horizon, is the return of authoritarian regimes to the region. The search for a way out and an alternative track for the two previous scenarios may facilitate strengthening the grip of the state and its security institutions. This may allow crushing terrorism, suppression of Islamists, as well as undertaking the necessary social and cultural changes to undermine extremists' influence in society and prevent them from seizing power again. It also empowers the state and enables it to stand against disintegration scenarios with the revival of a strong central government. At the same time, this may tie up democratic movement in the short run. Nevertheless, steady and serious steps towards democracy are inevitable for all countries in the region in the long run.

The starting point for a better future better future that goes beyond the previous scenarios to a more stable and prosperous alternative for Arab peoples is a strong national will to crush and eradicate terrorism. Some of the post-Spring regimes use the threat of terrorism and the fear of political Islam to pressure their people, who are suffering from poor economic conditions and undemocratic practices that restrict political freedoms and rights. They repeat the same mistakes their predecessors made. They are 'playing with fire', as some say. This will not lead to real stability. Sustainable stability and security are twofold: they imply eradication of terrorism and ensuring economic development. The strong relationship between the radical Islamic incubator in Arab societies and the rise of terrorism imposes the need to uproot the ideological and cultural base of terrorism. It is to go hand in hand with serious regional and international cooperation to eradicate terrorism in its shelter zones in order to prevent terrorists' mobility throughout the world. Security is indivisible, either we all live safe, or no safety for all.

#Valdaiclub

 **ValdaiClub**

 **ValdaiClub**

valdaiclub.com

valdai@valdaiclub.com



Council on Foreign and Defense Policy



Russian International
Affairs Council



NATIONAL RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY