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## Report

# Political Islam and the Syrian Revolution

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In light of the conviction of the inevitable Islamist rise to power, as illustrated by election ballots in other Arab Spring countries, questions have been raised about a similar fate for Syria. In fact, certainty of the Islamists' inevitable victory has quickly created a new type of alliances – though still in the making – between secularists and Islamists as is the case in Tunisia.

However, the future of political Islam in Syria and its role in the transitional phase cannot be defined by Aristotle's theory of syllogism, that is by making conclusions based on the results of the Arab Spring. Indeed, any conclusions should be built on intermingling factors that cannot be separated from each other. Among these factors is the political structure of religious movements in the Syrian society and their pre-revolution political dynamism.

Another factor is the results of pre-revolution government policies in addition to the transformation caused by the revolution whether in the political Islam movements' structure, their political aspirations and even their orientations.

### **Hafez al-Assad and the Islamist Movement: An Era of Suppression**

Late president Hafez al-Assad had completely annihilated the Muslim Brotherhood as well as its breakaway political organization, al-Taleea al-Muqatila ("The Fighting Vanguard"), which started its activity after the assassination of its founder, Marwan Hadeed, in prison in 1976. The Muslim Brotherhood represented all small Islamist political groups that were formed during French colonisation and the Ottoman Caliphate.

By 1963, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had grown into a massive organisation and eventually became a leading Islamist political group in the early post-independence period. However, its political influence was minimal relative to its size. What distinguished the group though was its absolute commitment to democracy at the time. Although Hizb al-Tahrir (the Liberation Party), which was formed in the fifties, called for the establishment of a caliphate system of government, it was an elitist party that strictly refused to participate in politics.

There was also a Salafist reformist group whose orientation appeared unusual relative to the traditional Salafis of that time who saw statehood as a concept that conflicted with Islam. Nonetheless, the orientation of its leaders – who were members of a larger group called Jam'iat al-Tamadun al-Islami ("The Association of Islamic Urbanisation") – looked as if it was an extension of Jamal al-Din Al Qasimi and Rashid Rida's Salafism which later came to be known as Levantine Reformist Salafism. This form of Salafism combines the Salafi doctrine with political democracy and found no contradictions in doing so.

During the fifties, bustling political life and social changes in both private and public had left a general feeling of spiritual emptiness as Muslim scholars engaged more and more in the political arena and factional conflicts. In spite of this, by the second half of the fifties, an Islamic awakening had engulfed the entire social sphere. The new development saw the formation of Islamist groups such as the Qubaisiate Group established by Muneera Al Qubaisi, a student of Sheikh Ahmed Kaftaro (who was the Mufti of the Republic for forty years and was closely linked to the Baath regime); the Zaid Group established by Sheikh Abdul Karim al-Rifai, which focused on education and considered mosques a starting point for an Islamic revival; the Kiltawia Group established by Sheikh Mohammed al-Nabhan, a Sufi-oriented group; and so on. The groups stayed away from politics and chose to remain almost purely religious except for Sheikh Ahmed Kaftaro's group in which politics were the basis of its structure and alliance with the regime formed a major element of its policies.

By the end of 1999, through air force intelligence, government authorities arrested all members of the clandestine Liberation Party that had been working in secret and managed to avoid the crisis of the eighties due to its historic antagonism with the Muslim Brotherhood. The events showed the magnitude of the penetration of government intelligence in the organisation. In fact, Syrian intelligence at that time had a list of the names of all the members of the organisation and their contacts. Consequently, the last

political Islamist organisation in Syria was crushed toward the end of the reign of Hafez al-Assad, who was preparing his son to assume a regime not threatened by Islamist movements.

## Manipulating Religion

Certainly, the Syrian government's policies toward Islamists during Bashar al-Assad's reign are matchless. The first ten years were characterised by major changes due to the regime's need to stay in power amidst a world order that was experiencing great political changes. The regime went through difficult times that seriously threatened its very existence including the September 11th attacks, the occupation of Iraq in 2003, and the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri in 2005.

Indeed, Hafez al-Assad had followed a careful policy of maintaining political balances in his relations with Islamist groups and religious sectors - particularly after his experience with the al-Murtadah Association, a group that had been established by Jamil al-Assad in 1983 for the integration of the Alawite sect into Syrian society through the expansion of Shiitisation and the expulsion of his brother, General Rifaat al-Assad in 1983. The aim of this policy was to weaken the aspirations of any Islamist or nationalist group. Thus, Hafez al-Assad was assiduous in the absorption of majority and minority religious and ethnic groups in government posts that were insignificant and similar in nature and did not involve any decision-making. Meanwhile, the role of security bodies expanded and their involvement in daily life grew.

The objectives of Hafez al-Assad were to achieve stability in the country through the implementation of carefully balanced policies and a firm security grip. In this manner, he managed to prevent any threats to the stability of the regime. Indeed, he managed to do away with all Islamist political groups inside Syria except the Liberation Party, which was a strong opponent of the Muslim Brotherhood and worked secretly but under close government surveillance.

During the first ten years of Bashar al-Assad's rule, and amid complex international developments, such balances went through major changes. Thus, while some religious groups and sects received political and social privileges – in most cases inappropriate for their actual influence (such as Syrian and foreign neo-Shiites) – many religious groups and sects were deprived. However, such imbalance was dealt with in most cases through tough security measures such as the arrest of youth influenced by the Egyptian Muslim preacher, Amr Khalid, calling themselves “makers of life”. Another means of dealing with the imbalances was the harsh trials held against Islamists that criticised the government for the privileges it granted to the neo-Shiite sect. Many Sunni Muslim groups publicly expressed their feelings about such injustice, particularly those who were considered supporters of the regime.

Still, the regime benefited from the change in international politics the growing suspicion of Islamist groups and movements, and the spread of Islamophobia in the United States and Europe. Hatred for Islamists started to mushroom and strict international security measures were taken against them without differentiation between moderate and militant, national and international, and elite and grass root factions.

Despite the change in the United States' policy during Obama's presidency, however, the effects of that stage are still visible. Examples of this was the heated debate that took place in the United States recently regarding whether to permit the construction of a mosque near Ground Zero and the ongoing debate in Europe over whether to permit Muslim women to wear the veil or allow the call for prayer in mosques, all of which occurring on the eve of the Arab Spring toward the end of 2010.

However, the most important and dangerous change in the Syrian policy addressing the issues of Islamism and Islamist groups has been the shift from being prompted by “internal” considerations to being prompted by “external” ones. It is through such drastic shifts that one can understand the many and fast changes in official government policy over the course of just a few years.

An example of this is that when the decision makers in the Syrian government felt that their contribution to the "war on terror" would benefit and help them in integrating into the international community, they did not hesitate to shift from the "extended hand" policy towards Islamist groups to one that was harsh and callous.

On the other hand, when they felt that the regime was in danger during the occupation of Iraq, they were quick to consolidate their influence by welcoming alliances, particularly with Jihadi-Salafis by encouraging them to volunteer to fight with Iraqis. When they found that the entire regime was being directly threatened by the United States and the international community, they were quick to not only adopt a policy of tolerance toward Islamism but also encourage it so as to frighten the international community of ensuing "extremism" if the regime collapses. Also, when they felt they needed Tehran as a savior after the occupation of Iraq and the assassination of al-Hariri, they returned once again to their iron-fist policy against Islamist groups while boosting the privileges of the Syrian and refugee Shiite minority.

Surely, one of the newest policies of the regime is the intentional mixing of "displays of religiousness" and "extremism." Although this policy was one of the practices of the international community that might not always be intentional in its war on terror, in Syria, it was meant for propaganda, and was both intentional and selective. When the Syrian ruling elite felt that the regime was threatened, they began to promote Muslim extremism as an alternative. One of the means used indirectly to co-relate the "sudden growth" of religiousness "extremism" has been the reporting of attacks by armed groups as they are carried out. Such instances occurred during the period when the regime's threat reached its apex between 2004 and 2006.

Simultaneously, talk of the growing displays of religiousness at the Al Sayida Zainab shrine and the increasing number of Shiite pilgrims to shrines and holy places in the form of arithmetical progression was avoided and kept undisclosed.

### **Political Islam: An Epoch of Expectations**

The outcome of the domestic and foreign policies of Bashar al-Assad's regime has been an unprecedented growth of religious groups' political expectations and political orientations. Indeed, the period witnessed the emergence of Islamist political groups that had been absent for about two decades (e.g. Islamist Kurds, the Islamist Democratic Faction, Jihadi-Salafists, and non-violence Islamists). What is astonishing is that most expectations were expressed either in the form of civil democratic demands – as if one of the intentions to emphasise their democratic identity and acquire political legitimacy – or alliance and organic merger into the regime and its institutions.

The result was the formation of what appeared to be mass emigration of religious groups (including Islamists) to politics in the form of an organic alliance, other sorts of connections to the regime, or opposition to its policies in response to government policies and the state of events in the region, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon.

The most important groups are the following:

1. Religious-social groups that opposed government policies (e.g. the Zaid group and many religious leaderships)
2. Religious-political groups that seek to change the regime itself on religious and/or national and religious grounds (non-violence Islamists, Jihadi-Salafists, Kurdish Islamists). It is worth mentioning that none of these Islamist groups undertook armed struggle against the regime within Syria for many reasons, including the society's disapproval of such an approach.
3. Religious-social groups that support the regime and have always sought to create an alliance with it in aims of becoming an organic part of its institutions or decision-making process (e.g. Al Kaftaria and other religious leaderships).



However, with the exception of the Qubaisiate Group that has remained neutral, all other religious groups have shown political aspirations and orientations of varying intensity towards the government. This may be attributed to the fact that the Qubaisiate group is entirely female and society sees it as a female organization, thus rendering it reluctant to engage in politics as part of its intellectual makeup.

A number of religious leaders are moving to politics by allying with the regime, objecting to its policies, or opposing it with the decrease of independent clergy who prefer to focus on purely religious matters. This situation has led to the increasing political role of religion vis-à-vis its spiritual and social role. However, the decline of the political role of other religious factions is most probably due to abstention since all the policies adopted by the regime promote their political aspirations. Reluctance to engage in politics could be either a sign of despair or a quest for safety and peace of mind. The Islamist group that allied with the regime (Kaftaro's group) has since been dismantled due to its close relations with the regime and its submission to the regime's political disposition, as well its own contradictory intellectual set up.

### **The Turban and the Revolution: New History**

The revolution introduced new and deep changes in the political landscape while also clearly reflecting the results of the government policies as expected. Thus, religious groups and their leaders have played a negative role in the revolution in the case of Aleppo and Damascus and a positive one in the case of Deraa, Hama, Homs, the Coast and Deir ez-Zor. Accordingly, the revolution has pushed the regime's allies to defend it while those who opposed the regime policies moved further away from it (e.g. the Zaid group and its supporters). In addition, the revolution impelled its religious leaders to get directly involved in politics, an expected course of action based on their history and the effect of government policies that encouraged such political aspirations. However, the great role these religious leaders and social religious groups have played in the revolution is unprecedented. Meanwhile, political Islamist groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, observed the situation looking for a role to play. One reason for the increasing role in politics and the rising political aspiration of Islamists could be the provocative and extreme policies of the government months before the revolution. Another reason is the role of mosques as demonstration starting points igniting the fuel of the revolution.

While the regime has all meeting places under its surveillance, places of worship remain beyond its control. Consequently, youth demonstrators found such places suitable places for meetings, causing religious leaders to be in the midst of the events perhaps undesirably.

Still another reason is the suppressive approach adopted by the regime against rebels according to a leaked security document prepared by a small security committee that was dated 23 February 2011. According to the document, suppression extended to religious leaders as well.

### **Jihadi-Salafism: The Regime's Scarecrow?**

What is interesting is that the strategy adopted by the regime for the suppression of peaceful demonstrations under the pretext of fighting "armed Salafi" or "terrorist" groups has proved to be a failure. There are no Jihadi-Salafi or extremist organisation bases. The regime has used violence against peaceful demonstrators, killing thousands of innocent civilians (including hundreds of children and women) unrestrictedly. Perhaps only a very small amount of such savage violence would have been sufficient to expel the jihadi-salafi monster.

The continuous insistence that the revolution is peaceful and the keenness to avoid using violence in contrast to the regime's savage suppression conflicts with Jihadi-Salafist ideology, which is why those who advocate such thought were expelled from previous groups. In addition, Jihadi-Salafism was formed by small unorganised incohesive groups

that were united by intellectual, not Jihadi or political, harmony. Many studies, including those conducted by legal organisations, find that Jihadi-Salafist ideology in Syria is limited to very few groups of varying sizes that have been influenced by international "terrorist" groups which they probably have no organisational links to. Therefore, organisations like Jund al-Sham lil Da'wa wa al-Jihad ("Levantine Soldiers for Da'wa and Jihad") and al-Takfeer wa al-Hijra ("Excommunication and Immigration"), and even al-Qaeda that are repeatedly mentioned in the media are but names on a list of accusations that has been prepared in advance based on unreliable evidence.

Although studies suggest that Salafi ideology is spreading rapidly and that many of its young followers have turned from traditional Salafism to Jihadi Salafism under the pressure of their experiences in detention, holding that the majority of detained Salafis originally were not members of Jihadi groups and that there are only a few advocates of Jihadi ideology, there are in fact no groups that believe in acts of Jihad within Syria. The tough security measures taken against militants and the exceptional courts established to indict them do not provide the minimum conditions of justice, and the government's harsh reaction has only increased the intensity of the Salafi ideology.

However, amid such developments, a culture of peaceful resistance has suddenly appeared in a dramatic way following the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions that played a great role in restraining the wave of violence, and maybe in changing the political Salafi approach. Thus, new traditional Salafi groups have started to emerge for the first time in the form of political organisations. These include Harakat al-Mu'minin Yusharikun (the Believers Participate Movement) led by Lu'ay al-Zu'bi, one of the later members of al-Talee'a al-Muqatila ("the Fighting Vanguard") and Tayyar al-Umma fi Bilad al-Sham ("the Nation's Current in the Levant") led by Nader Assad Bayyoud al-Tamimi (a Palestinian). The greatest surprise, however, is that the emergence of armed Salafism has been very limited. Thus, we have al-Salafiyyoun al-Demoqratiyyoun ("the Democratic Salafists") - an updated version of the previous Levantine movement. (We say "updated" here because while Levantine Salafism was based on what we call today "scholarly Salafism," the basis of the new democratic Salafism is Jihadi Salafism which may shift to violence within a short period of time and become a bridge for extremist organisations. Such a scenario could become feasible if violence escalates and the international community fails to interfere militarily. The fact that the people are not armed and experienced enough to resist the regime and defend themselves could pave the way for the entry of radical organisations.

### **The Return of the Muslim Brotherhood: Mending Bridges**

The Muslim Brotherhood has received special attention as its influence in the Syrian political arena ended with the Hama massacre in 1982. With the annihilation of the remaining armed Islamic opposition, the regime had wiped out armed opposition in the country, including the Muslim Brotherhood, through arrests, executions and the psychological effect of Law No. 49; as a result, the Islamist opposition did not exist thereafter. The regime even pursued its members beyond the country's borders until the end of the nineties. Abroad, the group split after it was unified in the early eighties while it had no presence in the country aside from memories of their fate. However, due to the regime's extensive media propaganda and the Syrians' frustration with the killings, imprisonment and torture, all Syrians blame the Muslim Brotherhood for all that has happened. Indeed, hundreds of thousands of Syrian families in various parts of the country have suffered; and since then, the regime has been keen on reminding the people of such events regularly. For more than half a century, the regime has deprived the children and relatives of those jailed, lost or exiled of most of their civil rights. In addition, the regime has confiscated properties of many of them by having senior officers seize them. The remaining members of al-Talee'a al-Muqatila, like those of the Muslim Brotherhood, have been forced to leave the country, and each faction blames the other for the failure. They have now taken refuge in various countries in the Gulf region, Jordan, Iraq and Europe.

In the early stage of the protests, the Brotherhood was hesitant to participate but when they became an actual revolution, it quickly established its return through relief operations as well as social-regional relations, particularly in Hama and Aleppo. Thus, it

managed to gain new political allegiance from Syrian society. With the development of events in the Arab Spring countries and the victory of Islamists, the Brotherhood aspired to eventually seize power. According to its strategy, the group has managed to establish fragile alliances with leftist and liberal groups, thus mimicking the Tunisian model in a country of diversified political orientations. To regain their influence, they embarked on relief campaigns to help victims of the revolution and provide logistic support to the revolutionaries, particularly in Idlib and Hama where they have strong influence.

However, the Aleppo-Hama regional split in Brotherhood leadership had led to the decline of relief and logistic assistance to Aleppo and the eastern region relative to that received by Hama and Idlib. This split has led to the emergence of a new organisation that relies on Aleppo members (the second generation of the Brotherhood of the eighties) and the support of godfathers Ali al-Bayanouni and Zuhair Salem, otherwise known as the National Action Group (led by Ahmed Ramadan). It is clear that by giving itself such a name, the group seeks to promote its civilian nature by distancing itself from any reference to Islam and Islamism. Still, its internal influence is very weak and so its activity is directed mainly toward Syrian communities in Jordan and the Gulf.

On the other hand, the charismatic Syrian leader, Issam al-Attar, has come back with his group, al-Talee'a al-Islamiya ("the Islamic Vanguard") to resume activity in Syria. The group's potentials, however, are limited and capabilities to engage in activity in Damascus (its strong-hold) is still weak relative to the role played by the Muslim Brotherhood, its mother organisation.

### **Political Islam: Many Voices**

Driven by its ambitions, the Muslim Brotherhood generally relied on an assumption promoted by both the regime and the movement itself, namely that it is the only body representing Sunni Islam as it is possibly the only body that represents political Islam and rivals no one. Nonetheless, things have changed for after the revolution, new political Islamist organisations were formed and others re-emerged. Examples include al-Tayyar al-Watani ("the National Current"), al-Islamiyun al-Akrad ("the Islamist Kurds") and al-Kutla al-Turkomaniya al-Suriya al-Watania ("the National Turkoman Syrian Bloc").

Meanwhile, some Islamist organisations that had been established during the middle of the first decade of the 21st century have started to breakdown and have had no influence on the revolution like Harakat al-Adala wa al-Binaa (the "Justice and Reconstruction Movement") and Wihdat al-'Amal al-Watani li Kurd Suriya ("the National Action Unity of the Kurds of Syria). What came as a surprise, however, is the split in al-Haraka al-Nisa'iya al-Islamiya ("the Women's Islamist Movement"), or al-Qubaisiate, as a result of the pressure and influence of the development of the revolution. The group has worked hard to distance itself from any political stances on both the revolution and the regime. However, the actual course of events did not allow it to fully adjust as some members had to take a clear position on the revolution. Thus, a new women's organisation that supports the revolution appeared under the name Hara'er al-Qubaisiate ("Free Qubaisiate Women") at the end of November 2011, but it is not yet clear how consolidated and influential it is.

### **Where is Political Islam in Syria Heading?**

The revolution clearly differentiated between those who are pro- revolution and those who are anti-revolution. This has prompted both independent religious leaderships and social Islamist movement leaderships who always opposed government policies to take stances that are more clear in their opposition to the regime. Thus, at a relatively early stage, Sheikh Kareem Rajeh, Sheikhs Saria and Osama al-Rifai (of the Zayed group), Sheikh Ibrahim Salqini and Sheikh Ahmed al-Sayasna emerged in Damascus, Aleppo and Deraa in particular. It should be noted that the Kaftaro group that has been scattered after the death of its founder and had suffered from the interference of the regime saw many of its followers join the revolution; some even became revolutionary leaders in certain cities.



Certainly, the peaceful revolution seemed like a spring to the anti-violence group that adopts the ideas of the well-known Islamist thinker, Jawdat Saad, but at the end of a year of systematic killing; the escalation of violence against unarmed demonstrators; the shelling of cities with tanks and rockets, mortars, military helicopters; and anti-aircraft guns that leveled homes and killed families; and systematic sectarian murder, the Syrian people eventually found themselves forced to carry arms for self-defence as the international community drags its feet, failing to act swiftly to protect them. The spring of the unique Islamist trend that calls for non-violence, then, has turned into a cold winter that has left behind politically-oriented civil organisations that support the revolution. These include al-Harak al-Silmi al-Suri ("the Peace Syrian Movement"), a civil society organisation that aims to consolidate the democratic civil nature of the Syrian revolutionary movement and post- revolution Syria, and has played a great role in peaceful demonstration and the development of its tactics.

The more oppression increases, the more resistance requires a decisive discourse capable of pushing people toward sacrifice and steadfastness in the face of brutal suppression. Concurrently, such a situation will allow military leaders to take control of the transitional period. If violence continues, it will be only natural that the Salafi discourse will have greater influence so long as international intervention and a steady armament of opposition under a national umbrella are delayed. Nonetheless, because Salafi discourse does not have wide social bases or previous organisations and is not in harmony with the overall public mindset that is somewhat conservative liberal, its increasing military role will most probably be unaccompanied by a great political role.

During the transitional period, the Muslim Brotherhood and new Islamist organisations that follow moderate Islamist ideologies to a lesser extent will have a clear role. Nevertheless, the role of the Brotherhood itself will not be as influential of that of its counterparts in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt due to the contribution of left-wing and nationalist organisations to the revolution in a manner that highlighted the civil nature of the revolution in its first year.

The new development represented by huge explosions gives rise to many doubts about the party responsible. The opposition accuses the regime because it is the only beneficiary from the explosions and because the opposition would not target its own men. The regime, on the other hand, accuses al-Qaeda to convince the international community that things are getting out of hand, and that it is in the interest of the international community that the regime stay in power as the alternative would be continuous mass blind violence, reminding the United States of its still vivid and sad memories in Iraq. Irrespective of the accusations, the explosions may have been carried out by some party that is associated with al-Qaeda and has been penetrated by the regime. As it is known, the regime released members of al-Qaeda that it had detained, particularly the foreign nationals. One member who was released recently but remains under house arrest is Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (Mustafa Sit Mariam Muzayek), a prominent al-Qaeda theoretician. The message the regime seeks to deliver to the international community is that it is ready to turn the country into a hell and drag the entire region into to an abyss of violence.

Currently, matters appear to be as though someone is trying to rub the magic lamp and there is no proof that the genie will come out; and if it comes out late, it could turn on its master. The international community should realise that the regime's game with al-Qaeda could drag the entire region to destruction and therefore should be convinced of the necessity of military action to removing the regime before it succeeds in drowning the entire region in endless violence.

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