

THE RISE AND FALL OF POLITICAL ISLAM

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Why and how did political Islam emerge? How is it sustained? And where is it going? Islamist *revivalists* and *reactionaries*, from Abdul-Wahhab and Afghani to Iqbal, Qutb, Bin Laden, Baghdadi and others have appeared to attract the attention of some of their Muslim audience across the vast expanse of West Asia, North Africa and other localities for nearly three centuries. Their grievances mainly focused on an external enemy, Europe, who had colonized their land and people and was now, they believed, pursuing the same policies through neo-imperialism led by the United States. Islamist organizations such as Muslim Brotherhood and *Hezbollah* predicated their ideological foundations on very similar premises. The only way out to defeat the *enemy*, they preached, was to return to the old beliefs and practices of the early Islamic history.

The Twentieth Century's complicated political developments exacerbated their grievances and fueled the drive of the Islamists. Despite victories in the 1956 Suez Canal crisis and somewhat the partial restoration of Arab pride in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the failure of pan-Arabism to defeat Israel had clearly left a huge vacuum in the ideological arena of Arabs and Muslims. Then came the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that awakened the dictum of *jihad* rather dormant since WW I. Iranian Revolution of 1979 led by an Islamist figure officiated the assumption of power and offered the mantle of statehood to political Islam.

Currently the historical Shi'a-Sunni dichotomy plays a pivotal role in sustaining political Islam. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia, as official custodians of Shi'ism and Sunnism respectively, are engaged in proxy wars across the region. In Syria, Iraq and Yemen in particular, the tragic consequences are only too clear. The extremities in violence committed by ISIS and similar groups may successfully deter opposition and help their longevity at least for now. And of course the oxygen of publicity by the international media appears to embolden subscribers to radical Islamism.

Interestingly Western response to political Islam does not always appear to match their rhetoric of fighting it. Three examples illustrate the point. Why has the European Union not been as forthcoming, as expected by Tunisian officials, in granting aid to the best example of an *Arab Spring* country, Tunisia, where Islamism has been democratically subdued? Secondly, why has the government of President Al-Sisi in Egypt been chosen as a permanent subject of human rights discussions in the West, when its predecessor the government of Muslim Brotherhood, was rarely reported for its gross violations of human rights? And last but not least,

how come ISIS can manage to sell oil through smugglers and therefore finance its wars, whereas Saddam Hussein who had the whole machinery of an internationally recognized state at his disposal (and was just as brutal as ISIS) could not even sell a drop of Iraq's oil after sanctions had been imposed?

A brief glance at the political matrix of West Asia and North Africa reveals a horrifying pattern: Almost all those opposed to political Islam in the region were either forced out of power internally with international backing e.g. Mubarak in Egypt, or were forcibly removed by military intervention from outside e.g. Saddam in Iraq and Gaddafi in Libya. The only decisive military action against Islamists was carried out in Afghanistan (the Taliban) in 2001.

As to the future of political Islam some facts are noteworthy: They have achieved spectacular failure on almost all fronts. In all cases of political Islam in power we see economy shattered almost to the point of bankruptcy. Worse still, in the case of Sudan, partition of the country has followed. Even the foreign policy agenda in political Islam, vague other than enmity with the West and in some cases Israel, has only contributed to a polarized world and has strengthened the thesis of *clash of civilizations*. However, let us make no mistake; political Islam can be tamed and/or defeated as was the case in Tunisia and Egypt. There are strong national movements in regional countries that are increasingly demanding more secularism in politics and want to see greater freedoms in their social and political milieus. The future belongs to them.