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THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY: The Chatham House Version Revisited

The Inaugural Elie and Sylvia Kedourie Lecture

Policy Exchange

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Introduction: The Importance Of Precision

I am honoured to speak here this evening. I first came across the writings of Elie Kedourie 36 years ago when I started studying Arabic at SOAS (the School of Oriental and African Studies). The first of his essays I read was ***Afghani and Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam***. I loved his waspish and scrupulous attention to the evidential basis of what a historian can and cannot properly say. ***The Chatham House Version***, after which this lecture is named, is a definitive example of the manner. It is also an *ad hominem* attack on someone - Arnold Toynbee – whom Kedourie seems to have regarded as embodying all the faults of a late-imperial elite who viewed the world through lenses ground by an exclusivist western modernity, shaped in the distorting crucible of C19th European nationalism, polished by a meliorist and patrimonial incrementalism and framed by cultural pessimism.

Kedourie believed it was an offence against history to make claims that either could not be substantiated or distorted the available truth (however unavailable it might be in its totality) - in the interests of an unacknowledged ideology or epistemic framing system.

We are all – to paraphrase Keynes – usually the slaves of some defunct ideologue. But unacknowledged ideologies and ideological biases lead us astray. My distinguished friend and colleague, Professor Toby Dodge, Elie Kedourie's successor at LSE, continues in his work to illustrate in great and compelling detail how they undermined not just the first British adventure in Iraq from 1917 to 1932 but the later Anglo-American adventure after 2003 – a theme that would have spoken to Elie Kedourie, with his own background in the prosperous (but now vanished) Jewish community of early twentieth century Baghdad and his dismay at the undermining of an existing, if emergent Arab modernity by the exoticisation of the post-Ottoman Middle East.

Too often today, those charged with formulating and implementing state policy, seem to labour under delusions that are framed by a Procrustean cropping of the facts to serve an often-unexpressed purpose. 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 a willing agent of the malign designs 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 Political Islamism, both Sunni and Shia. A fixed belief that the Muslim Brotherhood had evolved into a set of national and 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 constructing a normative hegemony and eventually monopolising power – often indeed the authentic expression of a distinctive and fixed Muslim political sociology. A refusal to acknowledge that there had also been strong and equally authentic secular, leftist and nationalist moments in recent Arab history which had not simply withered but had actively been suppressed or suborned by more organised power centres within individual states - and that this might be the real reason for the absence of a Habermasian public sphere not – as is commonly held – fear of an Islamist planet. And finally a cavalier disregard for historical accuracy in the interests of a self-verifying narrative.

And lurking behind much of this is a solipsistic historicism. The history of the modern Middle East is understood chiefly as a product of western misdeeds and misprisions. Not only does this deny agency to the people of the region – a curious form of occluded orientalism – but it suggests that western policy can only ever properly be penitential, clouding any clarity about interests or advantage.

Ironically, too, as I hope to suggest, by their readiness to repeat such narratives, western policymakers and diplomats effectively exhibit a form of ideological Stockholm syndrome. Often, they place themselves in the invidious position of glibly repeating the worst accusations leveled against the West by those who wish to do us harm. At minimum, they simply fail to challenge any number of myths about presumed western malfeasance. In some ways, is not that we are losing the ideological battle – but rather that we are refusing even to fight it, by our ready adoption of lazy "conventional wisdoms" about the forces at work in the region.

So let me set out in a Kedourian spirit how we might understand some important contemporary aspects of the Middle East and North Africa. Not the Chatham House but the Policy Exchange Version, perhaps.

I want to focus on two specific themes which interact in complex but meaningful ways, Political Islamism and the wider ideological crisis in today's Middle East before turning to how we make our own policy choices. Given the current tensions in the GCC, the continued advance of Iran, the unease that this in turn creates in the Sunni-ruled states of the region, the highly contested issue of sectarianism and continued policy debate about how we should collectively react to the range of metastasising Islamisms across the region, this seems to me highly topical.

Political Islamisms

I first want to address the issue, central to the choices we face, of Political Islamism and more particularly the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and movements such as Al Qaida or the Islamic State, other varieties of less activist and brutal Salafism and indeed the actual practice of majority Muslim nation states. I have recently read a number of intriguing pieces on the subject: one on the relative moderation of elements within Hayat Tahrir al Sham in Syria, another drawing a distinction between Saudi "*Wahhabis who object to concerts and mixed parties*" and allegedly moderate Muslim Brothers; and more particularly a pair of articles by Colin Clarke on the "moderation" of Al Qaeda compared to ISIL, and another by the distinguished French scholar, Olivier Roy in which he suggested that there is a distinction to be drawn between essentialist and contextual views of the Brotherhood. This debate continues to shape policy discussions here and in the US too. Understanding Islamists 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. As a guide to policy or action, I think it is almost worthless.

First of all, of course, it is perfectly possible to be contextual and essentialist at the same time, less inclined to the 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 all historically contingent, arise from particular causes and adapt to their environments.

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 with which 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 authentic nativism, happened uniquely in what became Saudi Arabia, about which I shall speak later.

The second response was to dismiss the nation state entirely, call for the placing of a highly textualised Islam at the centre of political, social and economic life, define the largely Christian and secular West as the moral Other and claim that the restoration of a specifically pan-Arab caliphate to replace the tarnished Ottoman version - would restore the lost glory of the Muslim world.

This was a project created by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), 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 under a legitimate ruler 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 C7th 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 C19th and early C20th, mixed with elements of what came rather misleadingly to be known as Salafism, as well as Sufism, Egyptian nationalism, German romanticism, European, particularly Italian fascism, and badly understood, but rarely acknowledged, C20th European prophets of decline like Oswald Spengler.

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. 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 5th 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 remains its most significant and protean ideologue - remain central to Brotherhood thinking everywhere and continue to be used to justify multiple forms of Islamist violence.

More generally, Political 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. 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. It is constitutively anti-semitic and homophobic; its approach to education and societal cohesion is unlikely to promote inclusivity; it seeks power first; and as we saw in Egypt in 2012 and 2013 its understanding of how to run modern states is fatally flawed and was rejected by a majority of Egyptians. Its eschatalogical and self-justifying narratives of conspiracy and righteous endurance represent not a form of cognitive primitivism but a sophisticated Gnosis that promises to unmask occult forces and secure eventual triumph.

History shows that this message that speaks powerfully to the emotional needs of those adrift in a dysfunctional world where sinners' ways prosper, disappointment ends all righteous endeavours, the signs of salvation seem endlessly deferred and the hidden hands of the enemies of Islam – not a benign Weltgeist - turn the wheels of time. It has 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.

That suggests we should resist the temptation to seek to understand the MB through our own cultural or epistemological categories. The common tendency to think of them as a version of the Christian Democrats where the

men have beards, the women are veiled and they pray 5 times a day is misguided. 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 vehicle of salvation and therefore the only legitimate Islamic polity. But this reflects what the distinguished scholar, Aziz al Azmeh, 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 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.

In the western tradition there is, of course, a more formal doctrinal distinction between Caesar and God. Christians have accepted the legitimate authority of the secular state at least since Constantine. They draw a distinction between *sacerdotium* and *regnum*, *spiritualia* and *regalia*, the two Cities, the two Bodies and the two Swords. Canon Law is not divine law. And – partly as a consequence of the post-Enlightenment privatisation of religion - Christian Democrats do not believe that legislation is preempted by the Deity. They promote Christian social doctrine but in contrast to the MB constitute a *Hizb (party)* but not a *Harakah (movement).* They accept individual equality before the law. They operate according to the same set of rules as other actors in Western democracies and have the same idea of the state and society.

That idea in the MB's modernist, decontextualized and dehistoricised version of Islam is very different from the western tradition or that of classical Islamic state practice, its jurisprudents and theorists.

This is not simply a historically contingent anomaly which can be removed by exposure to even more liberalism: it matters because Islamism – to which the Brotherhood is central – like other totalising, anti-rational and authoritarian ideologies is a profound ideological challenge to the modern western conception of the rational state and its foundational principles and because it continues to threaten the constitutive basis of most 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 that need addressing urgently by Middle Eastern powers 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. That is more dangerous than the cure. Islamists are revolutionary in a fundamental sense of the word. And the history of the modern Middle East tells us that revolutions destroy. 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.*" 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 sorts 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 vital 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. And 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 and many of the same texts that produced the Iraqi branch of the Brotherhood. Links between the Brotherhood and the Khomeinist trend in Iran go back as far as the 1950s.

Now the claims of Iran itself are based in a specific form of ethno-nationalist and cultural exceptionalism as well as in religious identity. And the ideological ferment of the last 60 years has produced different currents, as with Sunni Islamism. 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.

This strategy is in practice the model that Khomeini and his heirs first adopted within Iran. They were a vanguardist movement, espousing a heterodox Imamism - Velayat-e-Faqih. The Iranian revolution - like Egypt's in 2011 - was produced by students, leftists, bazaaris, people whose children had been educated into an economy with not enough jobs. But it was hijacked by part of the clerical class - which had always had an awkward relationship with constitutionalism and representational norms. To sustain this new system, it created its shock troops, the Basij and the IRGC. If you look at opinion polling in Iran recently you will see significant and often majority support for normalising relations with the US and for greater social and political freedoms. In 1997 over 70% of the IRGC may have voted for the reformist Ayatollah Khatami. The response of the conservatives was to increase the indoctrination of IRGC recruits and existing cadres and create a new ability in this and other pillars of the clerical state to reproduce themselves - as an elite instrument, a nomenklatura, of authoritarian Islamism in spite of currents in the wider society. Iran is a highly complex and sophisticated society but the state is sustained by ideologically motivated security forces and armed levies against its own people.

And 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, 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. We have progressively seen the same thing happen in Iraq, where the three most powerful men today are probably Hadi al Ameri of the Badr organisation, the effective commander of al Hashd al Sha'abi, Abu Mahdi al Muhandis of Kata'ib Hizbollah and the effective deputy of the *Hashd* and Qais al Khaz'ali, the leader of *Asa'ib Ahl al Haq* (The Leagues of the Righteous) - all ideologically Islamist, all revolutionary, all backed by Iran and fighting on its behalf not just in Iraq – most recently over Kirkuk and Tel A'far - but also in Syria.

This should tell us something important. As should the expressed desire of Iran, with its subalterns, to control a swathe of territory from the Iraq/Iran border to the Mediterranean and down to the Golan Heights. None of this is a secret. Iranian and Iraqi Shia commanders tell us openly this is what they want. They make a display of meeting and greeting each other on the Iraqi/Syrian border and in Southern Syria. More recently Hizbollah, in its campaign to expel Da'esh from Arsal on the Lebanese-Syrian border and its expansion down into southern Syria, has undermined the Lebanese Armed

Forces, struck prisoner exchange deals with Da'esh as if they represented the Lebanese State, infringed Iraqi sovereignty and national security by seeking to transport freed Da'esh fighters back to Iraq and proclaimed its intent to continue to act as both the principal guardians and recoverers of Lebanese terrritory and as one of the key guarantors of the Assad regime in Syria - on behalf of Iran.

And it is this ideological competition that underpins the sectarianisation of political conflict in the wider Gulf and in Syria. Saudi Salafism is certainly part of the dialectic from which sectarianism and other extremisms spring. But the Saudi government sees domestic sectarian division as a major national security concern. And internationally it often tends to back secular politics - including the Shia, Ayad Allawi, in Iraq and the secular Hariris in Lebanon.

Nor is sectarianism the inevitable result of age-old enmities. There is undoubtedly deep anti-Shia prejudice among many Sunni communities. And Shia have been disadvantaged and oppressed in many Sunni-majority states. But the most important inflection point for the region was the dramatic mobilisation of the 1979 Iranian revolution which for the first time since the Fatimids made Arab Shia identity politically consequential and coincided with the assault by Juhaiman al Otaibi and his group on the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the subsequent conflict with Saddam's Iraq, which gave life to a thousand forms of adversarial, transnational and often violent Shia activism.

The Middle East In Crisis?

And this brings me to the current dispute between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt on one side and Qatar on the other.

Most analysts seem to believe that the fundamental reason for this dispute – as with more recent events in Saudi Arabia - is a clash of egos. This seems to me both patronising and misconceived. The crisis arises 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. Abdul Aziz

famously forbade the MB to organise formally in Saudi Arabia. But he also reportedly invited Hassan 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 managed to organise in Kuwait and Bahrain - politically the most advanced of the emerging states.

And the Saudi state gave huge material and moral support from the late 1920s to the 1980s to the Muslim Brotherhood and related groups.

But the driving impulse was raison d'etat 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.

This came back to haunt them. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, welcomed by the Muslim Brotherhood internationally, exposed deep fault lines in the Arab world. It suggested that the pan-Islamist aims of the MB and other more extreme groups which sprang from it and the increasingly worldly and national ambitions of prosperous Gulf states might be irreconcilable.

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 in its various forms a powerful ideological challenge to existing political dispensations and in the eyes of some helped set the scene for the AQ-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 apparent first when the then Chief Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz, issued fatwas in the late 1990s stigmatising the MB as deviationists and more definitively in 2002 through an Arabic press interview with the late Prince Naif. He spoke bitterly

about the Saudi and Kuwaiti experience in 1990/91 and accused the MB of betraying the trust of the Gulf States.

This complex experience forms the background to the current situation. In Saudi Arabia and the UAE it combined in 2012/13 with the events of the Arab Spring to bring into sharp focus a fundamental difference of approach that has profound implications for its future. And this 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 schools of thought: 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.

Those in the third group – which include the rulers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Jordan and Bahrain - believe the raw will to power underlies all regional politics, given added life by revolution. 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 80 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 saw the same countries as key to his own very different hegemonic ambitions: this was the Islamist reboot.

The Saudis – and many others on the receiving end of Islamist interventions - now believe that the shape-shifting nature of radical Islamist thought in general is a direct threat to national cohesion and identity, at a time when such things are more important than ever.

Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia see the Muslim Brotherhood as a secretive, partisan, double-talking and divisive organisation dedicated to a self-defined purification of Islam and the establishment of a transnational Islamic state through incremental but ultimately revolutionary political activism, using tactical violence if necessary. It mimics some central features of a state, through its hierarchical structure and the requirement for members to swear an exclusive oath of loyalty to the Murshid. But it repudiates national identity and any loyalty other than that to the Murshid and God.

They have concluded that this represents a dangerously and deliberately radical misreading of Islamic history in the service of anarchy (their term). 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 Salafi-Hanbali tradition as they interpret it. 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 implied in the heterodox doctrine of *Wilayat al Faqih* (or indeed the Shirazi doctrine of *Shura al Fuqaha'*). 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 territorial and historical characteristics, an instantiation and inracination of Islam in rather than against the world. The new Crown Prince 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 are simply cover for a massively ambitious attempt to remake the Kingdom without losing its foundational legitimacy.

Political Islamism of all sorts (not least because it will give political meaning to resistance from the more traditional ulema) is a threat to this project. And 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 has ebbed. But it suggests 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, see the Brotherhood not just as subversive but as reactionary and socially illiberal and

therefore 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 as it is 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.

You might say, so what - this is small potatoes. But 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 that the UAE has. That's why the Emiratis are angered by the licence given over the last decade to Brotherhood scholars like Yusuf al Qaradawi, 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 10 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 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.

Above all, within the Arab world their focus - like that of the Saudis - is on Egypt and the impact of events there on their domestic security. The magnitude of this in their eyes cannot be exaggerated. In their view, if Egypt had fallen to the Brotherhood, the whole of North Africa would have eventually become a bastion of political Islamism. This would have been a disaster, occurring simultaneously with: first, the apparently unchecked spead of Iranian power through Iraq and Syria into Lebanon and now Yemen; second, and relatedly, the emergence of a new, battle-hardened, effective and coordinated transnational Shia gendarmerie in these areas, made up of the IRGC, Hizbollah, Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani Shia militias, Syrian Allawites and Houthis, and third, the rise of ISIL. Taken together, this would have amounted

to the worst external security challenge the Gulf as a whole had ever faced – at a time when the US and the UK were in their eyes showing declining interest in the region and a willingness to accommodate the MB and other Islamists in an apparent belief that this represented a vote for pluralism. That is why both countries attach so much importance now to binding Egypt rather than their Gulf neighbours into any serious new security dispensation in the region.

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 - 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.

Some will say these fears are exaggerated and we should feel free to construe the issues differently and act accordingly. This crisis has simply empowered Iran and is hampering US and European policy in the region.

This latter claim seems to me nonsense on stilts. What has empowered Iran has been 14 years of permissive US and European policies in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, where we have collectively made an impressive military effort from time to time but without any clear policy goal. We let the Iranians colonise the Iraqi state. We have let Hizbollah - one of the major potential beneficiaries of the Qatari ransom deal in Iraq earlier this year - transform itself from a regional defence force with a criminal wing into a formidable and mobile transnational praetorian force - with a criminal wing - whose leaders regularly ignore the Lebanese government and threaten Saudi Arabia with partition. We let Maliki, not an Iranian puppet but someone whose interests coincided with theirs and who is now a cheer leader for them inside Iraq, steal the 2010 elections. And we are no nearer finding a sustainable policy response to a decade of Iranian advances through the institutions, territories and command structures of the Levant, plus a campaign of destabilisation on the cheap in Bahrain and Yemen.

Yet now we say the big problem is a split in a GCC that was never united, whose members have never fully trusted each other, who all have border disputes with their neighbours, who don't want to subordinate their defence

postures to each other and who have run divergent foreign polices for years. Who are we kidding?

The Choices Before Us

Before we press ahead with fixing this storm in a teacup while ignoring the ideological elephant in the room, we should at least make an effort to understand how the key regional actors see the situation, what the drivers of their actions are and where our real interests lie.

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 - an impressive one in three in the latest Asda'a Burson-Marsteller Survey of Arab Youth, making it more than twice as popular as the US. It is a success in a region with few successes. We should bear in mind that the reform programme Prince Muhammad bin Salman has promoted in KSA is precisely the sort of socio-economic reform 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. We might also bear in mind that a plurality of Qataris have no time for the MB either and see Iran as the major threat - as do most Saudis and Emiratis. And when we reflect on all this, we might conclude that far from this 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 is structural and rational. It is 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 - as that icon of democracy, C5th Athens, or that model of rational modernity, France during the C16th and C17th, both were. It is rather a question of the nature of the state, national security, who gets to determine social and political normativity and who uses whom - in an age where the real threats are not to political systems but to the existence of states themselves.

And – if I may be allowed a final Kedourian moment - this illustrates the hollowness of any version of history that sees all the problems of the region as the result of a predatory and conscienceless West.

The states and peoples of the region have always been agents in their own right, however much they have sought to disguise the fact. The Sherif Hussein and his sons were as responsible as the Arab Bureau in Cairo for the failings of the Hussein-MacMahon correspondence. The emergence of the modern Middle East in the 1920s was the result of a complex interplay of forces. Now that we see agency more clearly asserted – as we strikingly saw in polling and popular protest in Egypt between 2011 and 2013 and most recently in dramatic developments in Saudi Arabia – many people sneer, as if they are more comfortable with a curiously old-fashioned version of the region in which the locals are victims, and outsiders generally the shapers and always the villains.

A final thought. We often say that British values form the basis of our policy – in opposition to those of some but perhaps not all forms of Islamism. But we seem unable to define what these values are. And one reason is that they are themselves ideological, reflecting a particular history and intellectual tradition, something with which we have become deeply uncomfortable. But how we respond to the challenge of C21st post-modernity and its deformations is as fundamental for us as it is for nationalists, leftists, Trumpians or Islamists. This demands an ideological self-awareness and confidence that seems in short supply.

Post-modernists - like Islamists - textualise reality and, in the absence of a God, aestheticise politics. This epistemological aporia is disabling when we are faced with Islamist opponents who, like Dr Johnson refuting Bishop Berkeley by kicking a stone, simply proclaim the foundational necessity of revelation and find in our radical doubt an intellectual decadence to match the moral collapse that al Banna, Qutb, Khomeini and Osama bin Laden all diagnosed as the root of western weakness. Their diagnosis is offensive, ignorant and self-serving. But it serves the Manichaean purposes of Islamists to present the struggle as one between the morally pure and divinely guided and the malign and conspiratorial low lifes of the West, whose worldly power and wealth are Satanic illusions sent to test faith.

We need openly to rebut this nonsense, not simply, as Kedourie thought the Toynbees of this world did, internalise the charge or regard it as an allowable and epiphenomenal prejudice.

When he wrote his combative doctoral thesis at Oxford in the early 1950s, Elie Kedourie believed that western policy elites had lamentably failed to achieve an accurate understanding of political dynamics in the Middle East and indulged instead in fantasies of transplanted nationalism and a corrosive

and narcissistic guilt. Our own fantasies are of transformed and benign Shia Islamist rule in Iran and Sunni Islamist acceptance of pluralist politics, the Rawlsian veil of ignorance, the Habermasian version of unprejudiced political debate in a liberal agora and of a region where the biggest challenges are not absolutist ideologies but illiberal state security structures. Yet successful electoral democracy requires the development of sustained habits of mind and social practices, a culture of civility and a shared sense of the past and the future. It needs an acceptance that power can be transferred peacefully; a living memory of efficient and non-predatory state behaviour; and an unintimidated civil society. It needs a common sense of justice and acceptance of the rule of law. And it needs strong, independent and impartial state institutions to arbitrate. Hardly any of that is currently present in the Middle East.

This absence is not foreordained. But elections there continue for complex reasons to produce tribal, reactionary, sectarian and unstable governments. As a result it is lifestyle liberals and the rulers of prosperous Gulf states who tend not to want elections. The latter have been more successful in material terms over the last 30 years and at least one has become a more attractive model for young Arabs than any other state or set of states in the region. They also work as state actors within state systems and mostly accept the same premises as we do about the conduct of external relations. Islamists in contrast have been a disaster, mistaking ideational coercion and social provision for ideological consent. If we think the future belongs to the young but that revolutions made by them tend to be hijacked by the more disciplined, then paradoxically this could mean that the Gulf states, with their growing cohorts of better educated, articulate and demanding young people, their fear of revolution, their recognition of the need for economic and social reform at least, their securitised authoritarianism and their awareness of historically pluralist traditions within Islam may also eventually be the ones where political change without violent rupture and a restabilisation of the region becomes thinkable. We need this to happen. And that for me is an ideologically more rational choice than believing that Political Islamism in any of its forms has abandoned its revolutionary quest for sacralised hegemony and become a more acceptable partner for us than those who want salvation in this world rather than the next.

NEW HAVEN

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