

From the Arab Spring to the Islamic Winter  
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Much has been made of the opportunities the Arab Spring offers to religious fundamentalism, confirmed by the recent success of Islamist parties in national elections. While some praise Islamism as the first genuine expression of popular sovereignty in a long time, others read those candidates as a 5<sup>th</sup> column for a fundamentalist theocracy, whatever Islamists themselves have to say about their commitment to democracy. Both readings are wrong because history is not written yet. The constraints imposed on Islamists were not just the authoritarian regimes that suppressed them, and the downfall of the autocrats will not hand over a quiescent society to the supporters of sharia. Moving from the conquest to the exercise of power, Islamists will be transformed time and time over by expediency. The temptation of doctrinal social engineering may exist, but the actual impact they will have will be limited by the constraints they face, the kind of society they inhabit, the resources they have to work from, and the choices forced upon them.

The worriers miss the leftist, populist core of the revolt. They dread Khomeini and bin Laden when they should be looking for Nasser or Hugo Chavez. Protesters demanded democracy: elections not intended as an end but as a vehicle for transparency and accountability, for the eradication of corruption and nepotism. There are demands for jobs and higher wages and income redistribution, and feminist demands—from wage equality to the right of Saudi women to drive, even radical demands to reveal the female body. There are also calls for a new economic order, for a rupture with a capitalism seen as Western and exploitative, and those do not come from the Islamists. Mainstream Islamists convey the economically liberal instincts of a socially conservative mercantile class; they are anchored in the global economy, which really means they want to preserve trade with the European Union, and foreign economic aid. In the confusion of the new era, the green blurs with the red, as the religion carries the calls for justice and equity that were once a staple of the left. This affords Islamists a wide scope of populist claims that rake in the votes. But conceptual contradictions will be hard to reconcile over the long-term after Islamists get to rule. Their model is to let people make money and have them redistribute charity to the poor, but policies that create growth and jobs rarely deliver greater equality.

Those who, on the other hand, laud Islamism choose to ignore that it is not by default benevolent, or benign. The Muslim world abounds with reactionary social vigilantes—the so-called salafis. Salafis generally eschew the political for the ethical, outbidding each other in virtuous signaling, intruding in the public space but only occasionally taking it over. The signs of a cultural war to come between the salafis and the leftists, feminists and the religious minorities are already visible. This is not good news for the political Islamists, who will have to referee. Their response will have to be tactical. Political Islam is not the new thing. Its demise has often been proclaimed, but Islamism lives on because it is adaptable and adaptive. A century of Islamist activism shows no pattern in their relation to power other than that they've tried every possible way to seize it. If some have taken the violent and tyrannical route, others have been peaceful social organizers, learning through experimentation and hardship the merits of efficiency and accountability, of strategic compromise. The group of Islamists who rose to power on the wave of the Arab Spring, as they now stand on the wreckage of autocracy, must surely discern that ultimate success will depend on their ability to build, not to impose.

Political Islam was a natural way for people to transition from the disappearing structures of an agrarian society – under the last Sultans-Caliphs, who relied heavily on clerics for local administration – to the crowded anonymity of a modern urban environment. Islamism gratified followers with familiar narratives of hope and redemption, anchoring a society swept away by an exploding demography and epochal change in a tradition that imagines itself virtuous. It was the same with the puritanical breakout of the West's 19<sup>th</sup> century; a world torn asunder by the industrial revolution and all the drinking and gambling that wages afforded the laborious classes. The Christian bourgeoisie then sought refuge in an uppity, "Victorian" morality and in racist nationalism. An insecure present leads the minds to romanticize the past, and to overshoot its normative paradigms.

People looking for certainty in an uncertain world also find security in numbers. The herd behavior is stronger in a stressed society, and in relation to movements about which little is known. An emergent mass movement will grow from its own gravitational expansion, like a viral fad. The fad can then become a norm: in an atomized society that is not well protected by the rule of law, the collective imposes easily on the individual, and Islamists excel at creating a collective dynamic. This is the dark side of the Islamic revival, when the missionaries – the peddlers of *daawa* – turn into vigilantes, when the salafis form militias. Minorities – and often the wealthy – are crisply outlined as the repulsive "other" against which the community imbues its distinctive identity with collective pride. Like the Mormons in the time of Brigham Young, the salafis seek to create a society purified from the corruption of the world.

The Islamist surge was a child of its time: it was born at the turn of the twentieth century, and really got going in the 1930s, the heyday of Communism and Fascism. Islamism imbibed the reactionary zeal of Western nationalism along with its antithesis: the revolutionary passion of Western socialism. It saw itself as a transnational conservative revolution: the recreation of a global *ummah* (Muslim community) ruled by *shariah* (Islamic law). From its Western peers, Islamism also learned that it could not rely on ideological appeal only. The quest for power demanded structures and institutions that are material rather than spiritual affairs. There are costs, and people to be fed, demands to be accommodated, and long term development requires good management, responsiveness to the needs of members, and ultimately, solvency. Islamists have long left the field of ideology alone and moved into institutionalization.

In theory, ideological movements live off contributions from their followers—dues in the secular sphere, tithes in the religious one. The very motor of proselytizing is a redistributive Ponzi scheme: the resources of existing members are pooled to lure in new members. Like any such scheme, ideologies spread until numbers grow and enthusiasm wanes. Success will attract newcomers less and less interested in contributing and more and more interested in the entitlements that come with membership—a job, or a stipend. The tide turns when receipts equal expenditures, and an ideological movement in that situation has reached its limits if it is to rely on tithing only. Islamist movements have all faced those constraints, and the only way to overcome them was to acquire power.

In its rawest form, power allows to shift from voluntary to coerced tithing, which would be more aptly called racketeering. One example is the Shabab movement in Somalia. Originally the youth movement of local Islamic courts, al-Shabab's militiamen rose to prominence fighting Ethiopian troops that invaded Somalia in late 2006. Militarily successful, they have since imposed through violence a fundamentalist utopia, racketeering a vulnerable population. But the vulnerability of the Somalis was also that of the Shabab, and when famine hit the region in the summer of 2011, and people started dying or migrated in droves across the border to refugee camps and the foreign aid they could find there, the Shabab

fragmented. Their dwindling resource base could not sustain their existing level of organization, and all the Islamist fervor on the ground, never that high to begin with, could not make up for it.

To borrow Mancur Olson's image of a "stationary bandit," the most durable form of racketeering is that executed by a sovereign eager to see its resource base thrive, if only to have more to tax from. In a few cases radical Islamist movements have either taken over a state, or lived in so close association with one that their resources were those of the state. State-building in Arabia has been from the start, in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, a material affair carried out on the shoulders of Wahhabism, a fundamentalist narrative that gave meaning and justification to the worldly project of the Saudi rulers. It is at times difficult to distinguish where Wahhabism ends and Saudi realpolitik begins. This longstanding association, often betrayed or remodeled, still stands in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are the mutawwa'in, the religious police to enforce appropriate public behavior. There are the antiquated laws, an embarrassment for Saudi diplomacy, but whose sentences have to be executed as a matter of national sovereignty. There are also the mosques and religious universities built by the state, the clerics employed by the state, and their counterparts across the Muslim world at the receiving end of Saudi generosity.

The ideological fortunes of Wahhabism went hand in hand with the material fortunes of the al-Sauds. The Arabian business model has always paid close attention to revenues: from withholding tribute owed to undeserving overlords to looting, from foreign aid to oil sales. By the 1950s, royalties from oil companies filled the treasury of what would become a fundamentalist rentier-state, giving permanence to the Saudi enterprise, even sparing it from further taxation. It could be argued that oil is the single most important factor to explain the rise of Islamism since the 1970s. Muslim migrants who flowed to the oil-rich countries of the Gulf were exposed to the local forms of the faith, and returned home a more fundamentalist lot. Petrodollars financed conservative congregations throughout the Muslim world and in the diaspora. Whether through governmental or non-governmental channels, petrodollars paid for the glorious Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union which formed the future cadres of al Qaeda.

If Saudi Arabia has been an essential if partly unwitting financial backer of radical Islam, Iranian sponsorship has been more purposeful. The radical fringe of the Iranian clergy that imposed itself in the wake of the 1979 revolution has been a poor administrator of the national economy, and 30-some years later popular rancor abounds for poor standards of living and the self-inflicted wounds of an international pariah status. Nonetheless, there are enough revenues from energy exports for the Iranian theocracy to go by, buying off a segment of the electorate and putting thousands of basiji – street thugs protecting the regime – on state payroll. From the early days of the revolution, the brutality of the Islamic Republic has had less to do with religious doctrine than with a tenuous grip on power, what with the liberal opposition, the war with Iraq, and the persistent economic failure. The state of emergency imposed in the 1980s by Saddam Hussein's aggression became addictive, and when that war ended Tehran artificially maintained the pressure with a game of cat and mouse with the United States. Iran's nuclear program and the occasional seizure of weapon shipments from Iran to neighboring militias opposed to American designs are reminders that, for all its fiduciary shortcomings, this is a middle income country with enough of a surplus to meddle in regional affairs.

Then again, Tehran's real contribution to the treasury of movements like the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas is anybody's guess, and it is the treasury that matters. Hezbollah took control of the Lebanese government in the summer of 2011, and Hamas has alone run Gaza since 2007. It is well known that they did not get there on the basis of ideological seduction only, but by spending big money on their constituents, which got them elected. Both provide an array of social services – schools, clinics, counseling, employment in "security forces" – to populations grossly neglected by official authorities,

and exposed to the devastation of wars those two movements are paradoxically accused of having provoked. If it is easy to understand the material appeal of Hamas and Hezbollah, it is more arduous to follow the money trail that made their success possible. There is a degree of tithing, of semi-extortion from the local business class. In a September 2010 interview with Thanassis Cambanis, Mahmoud Komati, the deputy chief of Hizbollah's politburo, admitted that while his movement hoped to develop independent revenue streams, it had not reached 50% self-sufficiency yet. Iranian aid is acknowledged by Hezbollah.

Tehran's support is less obvious in the case of Hamas given the tight blockade of the Strip. Syria, an Iranian ally, harbors Hamas-in-exile, but Damascus is far from Gaza. Official foreign aid to Gaza has been restricted since Hamas took over, specifically to prevent the Islamist movement from diverting those funds. Nevertheless, the IMF reports a double-digit growth rate for Hamas-run Gaza, twice that of the West Bank—a high growth figure which has to do with post-war reconstruction. Hamas' financial resilience is puzzling given the stunted and introverted nature of the economy of Palestine, where a first-rate business consists of bottling sodas for the local market. The main exports of Palestine are not goods but emotions, and foreign aid and remittances are the almost exclusive source of financial inflows. The money the vastly unemployed population of Gaza receives from abroad has fed traffic in the tunnels under the border with Egypt, allowing Hamas to skim off and redistribute revenues through its social works. Sara Roy, who closely studied Islamic charities in Gaza, is discrete about sources of funding: she points to donations from the community. Lately, Hamas' Islamic Foundation has even come to investing in for-profit business ventures ranging from amusement parks to bakeries.

The idea that "big" spenders like Hamas and Hezbollah could ever be financially self-sufficient defies the imagination, but the pattern has been observed with other non-state actors in conflict zones, like Kurdistan and Somalia. A strong demography amidst political chaos creates masses of refugees, who send remittances back home. Those remittances, and other foreign aid, pay for smuggled goods. That makes for a runt local economy, but large enough to be "taxed" by an armed group. At the very least, money buys the weapons that protect and, at the same time, intimidate the people. In the most advanced nations, the ratio of public expenditures to GDP is in the 40-50% range. There are no reliable figures for areas where militias have carved out a territory, but the most forward looking and most solvent militias seem to have enough going around to pay for basic services that earn the loyalty of the population, creating over time a symbiotic relationship similar to that between nation and state. That even gets them the votes to legitimize their authority if they bother with the finesse of electioneering.

Islamist movements of Pakistan have tried the electoral route, but their rise came about through an evolving symbiosis with a weakening military state. Islamist non-governmental organizations issued from the Deobandi and Ahle-Hadith movements were a palliative for the shortcomings in educational and social services, in the same way that the militias issued from those movements were a palliative for the shortcomings of the military. In a page taken from Iran's textbook, Pakistani security forces nurtured organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Haqqani network and the Afghan Taliban to pursue strategic goals. Thanks to diversified revenue streams, the creatures escaped in part the control of their creator.

While the Afghan Taliban would never have emerged around 1994 from Deobandi madrassas without funding and equipment from the Pakistani government, a diversified resource base has protected them from subsequent policy reversals from Islamabad. When they ruled Afghanistan until 2001, the Taliban could "tax" the busy truck trade between Central Asia and Karachi. Some were then, and still are, involved in lucrative opium trafficking which binds them to local growers and allegedly builds shadowy bridges with Pakistani state officials. Like the Khmer Rouges in their times, the Taliban are the worse

kind of financially solvent ideologues. The abuse they have visited on the Afghan population is directly related to their financial autonomy, all the more impactful that Afghanistan is so poor and their opponents, a ragtag assemblage of warlords, are themselves so brutal and corrupt.

Running for office has been a constant ambition for many Islamist movements, for that was the natural route to power and money. Political parties were spun off from social works whenever the regimes allowed it, which was an infrequent occurrence. In Turkey, a strong military core garbed since the 1950s by a constrained democracy kept communists and Islamists at bay. But Islamists patiently built a political machine, fed by the contributions of rural migrants and emigrants disenfranchised by a fragmented party system dominated by fickle and corrupt elites. Following a financial collapse that shook the establishment, the Islamist AK party was elected to power in 2002, and has since defanged the military and crushed the secular opposition. With a public debt at 50% of GDP, and a structural budget deficit, the Islamists in power have been anything but frugal. But they have sustained a strong rate of growth, reaping the benefits of genuine liberalizing reforms started in the 1980s. Hardball players in a merciless democratic game, they have used the courts to harass critics and competitors, all the while using public spending and patronage to satisfy their constituents. It is hard to see a transition of power there unless a large scandal or an economic bust brings them down to earth.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has been severely repressed since the mid-1940s, and particularly so under the regime of Abdel Nasser in the 1950s. An arrangement of sorts was reached after the military defeat of June 1967, and the Brotherhood was allowed to operate in the social sphere as long as it did not engage in politics. If members ran in parliamentary elections, it was as unaffiliated candidates, and they never competed for all the seats. But Egyptian society was allowed to become more religious, the secular courts sometimes winking at the reactionary judgments of the shariah courts. The Brotherhood was useful for the military regime. First, its social activities palliated the lack of state welfare, whether in rural Upper Egypt or in the slums of Cairo's overgrowth. Second, it lived on the same turf as the traditional left, eating away at the communists. Third, the ubiquitous social-minded Islamists of the Brotherhood were lumped together with the radical Islamists – who had challenged the state militarily in the 1990s – and presented to the West as a pretext to maintain military rule.

Few in the West believed that the Brotherhood was al Qaeda, but few dared to test that hypothesis either. This relationship of convenience between the officers and the Islamists carried until the Arab spring forced the army to jettison Mubarak, and to revisit the terms of their arrangement with the Brotherhood. In the immature political landscape of 2011 Egypt, the Brotherhood stands out as a powerful faith-based machine, well-funded and capable of efficient grassroots work. Its financial firepower comes from contributions of the domestic middle class and from the community of Egyptian expatriates. It counts wealthy individuals in its top ranks, like Khairat al-Shater, a businessman and the movement's number two. When the rolling elections began in November, the Brotherhood's newly founded Freedom and Justice Party exceeded all expectations, as did the al-Nour party—a rare instance of salafists competing electorally. As this success translates in seats in the government, with ministries will come budgets, contracts, and more money for social works—and to grease the wheels of reelection. If Turkey is an example, they are many ways to play that game.

The Islamist *al-Islah* has been the main opposition party since the 1990 reunification of North and South Yemen. It is an odd alliance of religious fundamentalists and tribal interests—the leader of al-Islah is always the shaykh of the largest tribal confederation. Fundamentalism has been doing well in Yemen; its imams are said to be well-funded by regional charities, and they can tap into a vast impoverished and illiterate population. Fundamentalism has allowed the Saudis to keep in check the elusive Yemeni

President, who himself let them be because proselytizing was a way to bind the formerly socialist south to his realm. But relations soured, and for the last two Presidential elections, al-Islah allied with their former socialist nemesis to oppose the bid of President Saleh and his kin to remain indefinitely in power. The Arab Spring sealed the divorce, and from March to November the leaders of al-Islah have been fighting it out with forces loyal to Saleh in the streets of the capital Sana'a. When a Saudi-brokered compromise was finally implemented, the Islamists of al-Islah were brought in the new government.

Other regimes never tolerated Islamists, bringing to bear against them the full force of authoritarianism. In Ba'athist Syria, the city of Hama was shelled by artillery in 1982 following years of unrest from the local Muslim Brotherhood. In Tunisia, leaders of en-Nahdah, an Islamist party who professed non-violence, were sentenced to death. For two decades, under President Ben Ali, the police monitored mosque attendance, and too observant young men could be arrested and detained for extended periods. In Gadhafi's Libya, almost 1300 prisoners, mostly Islamists, were reportedly massacred following a 1996 riot in Tripoli's Abu Salim prison. Islamists who escaped the repression of those regimes were forced into exile, some in London, where they reconciled their ideology with liberalism, others in Afghanistan, where they connected with the mujahedeen milieu from which al Qaeda emerged. This legacy of a scorched earth makes the Islamist resurgence in Syria, Libya, and Tunisia the great surprise of the Arab Spring.

In Libya, the Islamist current remains ill-defined. Gadhafi was killed by a mob chanting *Allah Akbar* – the same hymn that accompanied the hanging of Saddam Hussein – but such sentiments do not reveal a focused political agenda. Abdelhakim Belhadj, a former mujahedeen arrested in Bangkok in 2004 and renditioned to Gadhafi's jails, famously led a rebel unit in the conquest of Tripoli. But Belhadj went out of his way to explain that his days as a jihadist were over. In Syria, the protest movement issued from the Arab Spring, and brutally repressed by Asad's security forces, has struggled to escape a Sunni sectarian character, despite insistent appeals to minorities. In a short few months, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has morphed from a skeleton of exiles to a front for the rebellion: the newly-formed Syrian National Council, a shadow government in exile.

The most striking rebirth took place in Tunisia, where Islamist en-Nahdah inherited a revolution it did not participate in. The aftermaths of revolutions are volatile periods, with fragile regimes hijacked by radical, authoritarian factions: the French Jacobins, the Russian Bolsheviks, the Iranian Komitehs. In Tunisia, the soul-searching post-revolutionary phase saw the formation of an abundance of new parties. During those months, the historical leader of en-Nahdah, Rashid al-Ghannouchi, returned from London and mobilized local supporters and donors. Rumors of funding from conservative Arabia were belied by the strict monitoring of the electoral agency. The Islamists were funded by local businessmen, like Nejib Gharbi, a wholesaler and spokesman of the movement. Their natural constituency was the hinterland bypassed by the two decades of economic growth, and its unemployed or underpaid children amassed in the suburbs of the rich coastal cities. Their long suffering at the hands of the despised regime also appealed to the coastal middle-class, whom they courted by claiming as their own the more liberal, progressive culture familiar to the Tunisian bourgeoisie. The verdict of the October elections was unequivocal: the government was theirs.

On Arab and Muslim countries have been doing relatively well during the last decade, thanks in part to a controlled liberalization of their economies that brought foreign investments to selected sectors—deals often directed toward those blessed with political patronage. The liberal opening allowed cronies of the regimes to open local sweatshops and beach resorts that thrived on low wages, as well as to run commodity monopolies that skimmed off the surplus of a suffering middle class. Add to that the oil

boom and real estate speculation, and you have good growth numbers but not the kind of developmental model needed by countries experiencing a youth bulge, with half of the population under 30, and which is said to need to create 50 million jobs within a decade. This model of unequal growth, with upward social mobility biased toward the politically-connected, was forcefully rejected in the streets of Tunis and Cairo.

Before it became Islamist, the Arab world once flirted with socialism, and the paradox is that the legacy of great social reformers like Nasser and Bourguiba was picked up by the conservative monarchies and the Islamists. It is the conservative regimes imbued with Islamic legitimacy – either as descendants of Prophet Muhammad (the dynasties of Morocco and Jordan) or as custodians of the Holy Mosques (the Saudis) – who for all those years kept their eyes on social and economic indicators and invested in their people. In Morocco, the Arab Spring was answered with a constitutional reform followed by a general election which brought the Islamists of the Party of Justice and Development to form the government. Monarchal rule hardly skipped a beat through all of it. In Saudi Arabia, the welfare tap was turned wider. The revolution passed them by. The Arab juntas, with their tired revolutionary (Algeria, Libya) and military (Egypt, Syria, Yemen) rhetoric, faltered. The abundance of natural resources was not even a factor: Libya had a greater endowment per capita than Saudi Arabia, but the lazy regimes that relied on rents of all kinds to maintain a debilitating status quo were wiped out one after another.

The contagious nature of the Arab spring reveals a degree of community across the region, based on Islam and the Arabic language, as well as on a shared imaginary and economic predicament. The panArab ummah was not as dead as once thought, but commonality is not uniformity. The Islamist political parties are the children of their nations, and when in government they will have to contend with their own social conservatism that will not be to everyone's liking in a pluralist society. An Islamist winter will not easily smother the calls for individual liberty and dignity that were so spontaneously and stridently expressed in the first half of 2011. And Islamists face a greater challenge than a controversial social agenda. The Muslim world is poised to grasp the benefits of its demographic dividend: a vast population of working age. If the Islamists really want power, they should understand that they are only as strong as the society upon which they preside. It is time to put their reputation for hard work and probity to the pursuit of economic growth.

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