



***INSS Insight*** No. 530, March 20, 2014

## **Political Islam on the Defensive**

**Oded Eran and Yoel Guzansky**

Notwithstanding the initial successes scored by political Islam with the uprising in the Middle East, the politically-oriented Sunni movements in the Arab world, be they the veteran Muslim Brotherhood or newer groups, have been put on the defensive. From Tunisia to the Persian Gulf, Arab regimes and societies are showing resilience and determination as they confront the attempt to impose a radical Islamic interpretation on their way of life. If there is any kind of common denominator among the anti-clerical protests it is represented by Saudi Arabia, intent on preventing unrest, neutralizing threats, stabilizing regimes, and, to the extent possible, trying to influence Islamists in the Gulf and elsewhere.

The role and status of political Islam, especially the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated movements, are a point of contention among the Gulf states. Some of the monarchies have demonstrated their growing concern for the survivability of their regimes in face of the threat of political Islam. The UAE, for example, is currently trying about one hundred members of al-Islah (“Reforms”), a movement associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. On March 5, 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain announced they were recalling their ambassadors from Qatar because of Qatar’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which they view as subversive and a threat to their stability. A few days later, both Saudi Arabia and Egypt added the movement to their lists of terrorist organizations and arrested some of its supporters.

By contrast, Qatar has not only provided asylum for Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Brotherhood’s supreme religious authority, but also allows him to host a weekly show on al-Jazeera where he is free to preach on a host of subjects, including the attitude to the Muslim Brotherhood in some of the Gulf states. Relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia became particularly tense in 1995 when Hamad Bin Khalifa seized control of the Qatari government, a move that impacted negatively on the Gulf Cooperation Council (and in 2002-2007 Saudi Arabia did not have an ambassador in Doha). Now too, the policy toward Islamist elements has sparked tension among the Gulf States and punctured the veneer of unity created during the Arab Spring (seen, for example, in the common opposition to Qaddafi and Assad).

The specific Saudi concern is that political Islam offers an alternate model to existing governing structures and provides a substitute political framework grounded in religious legitimacy. Political Islam offers not only the possibility of another system – Western democracy does the same – and not only competes with existing systems combining state and religion, like the connection between the al-Saud family and the Wahhabi religious establishment, but represents a threat to the existing order. In other words, because of its religious element and because many movements promote democratic elections and participate in them, it offers a concrete, attractive alternative to the old order and has proven capable of toppling governments, both in Egypt and Tunisia. Moreover, in a tribal society, such as in the Gulf, political Islam is seen as a challenge to social norms and rules, the class structure, and the tribe's elite leadership.

Beyond the Gulf, groups identified with the Muslim Brotherhood or its philosophy are also on the defensive. In February 2014, the Ennahda movement, the Tunisian political party that represents the moderate Muslim movements and won the election immediately after the ousting of Zine Abidine Bin Ali, was forced to cede control of the country to a government of technocrats until an election to be held later this year. The Ennahda-led government failed in the socio-economic realm and likewise failed to improve national security. It was also accused of being soft toward extreme Muslim movements whose militias tried to impose an Islamist way of life on Tunisia. Pressure exerted by Europe and the United States along with internal constraints prompted Ennahda to abandon its objective of establishing an Islamic state ruled by *sharia*, Islamic religious law. In January 2014, the country adopted a generally liberal constitution, though it does promote the Islamic and Arab nature of the state.

The Muslim Brotherhood control of Egypt, from late June 2012 until early July 2013, was short lived. In what seemed like capitalization on the popular protests against the hijacking of the January 2011 revolution by Egyptian Islamic movements, the Egyptian army regained control of the country. The election this coming July will determine if the next president will again emerge from the military, as was the case since 1952, with the exception of Morsi's one year in office. Saudi Arabia's willingness, in defiance of Washington, to stand behind the Egyptian army and funnel money to the Egyptian government is an important element in the struggle for control of a nation whose economy has been badly damaged in the last three years.

In Jordan, a combination of tactical and strategic errors by the Jordanian faction of the Muslim Brotherhood, starting with the boycott of the parliamentary election in January 2013; the government's smart handling of the campaign to diffuse the protests; and what is at least a temporary downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, has significantly eroded the movement's status. Money from the Gulf states, especially Saudi money, made it possible for the Jordanian royal family to provide a relative sense of stability. The House of Saud, despite its historically ambivalent attitude to the House of Hashem,

cannot ignore the enormous burden levied on Jordan by the Syrian civil war, where some of the opposition forces are helped by massive Saudi aid.

Given its perception of the Iranian threat, the Qatari audacity, and Washington's drifting, Riyadh has decided to fight back. The question of whether it can successfully navigate internal problems (including a generational changing of the guard, a low but steady flame of Shiite dissent in the eastern province, changes on the global energy market, and the entrance of new players such as Russia and China into the vacuum left by the United States) as well as assume a leading role in the Arab world remains wide open.

The removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from the Egyptian government also has immediate implications for the Gaza Strip where Hamas is in government. Since the summer of 2013, the Egyptians have closed most of the tunnels and cut Hamas's revenues that relied on taxes levied on tunnel trade and commerce. The budgetary crisis (resulting also from a halt in some Gulf aid) means that the Hamas government cannot pay the salaries of the civil servants and security forces, two vital mechanisms for retaining public support. And indeed, according to various polls, support for the Hamas government has plummeted, even if the erosion in the support for Hamas does not necessarily indicate a subsequent fall of the Gaza Strip government.

The current conflict among the Gulf states, one of the most significant challenges to the Gulf Cooperation Council since its establishment in 1981, stresses the anger and frustration with Qatar's policy in the Gulf and beyond. Saudi Arabia believes that Qatar's policy and actions weaken the GCC and important Arab states, such as Egypt, which intends to hold presidential and parliamentary elections and conclude the political process that began with the ouster of President Morsi last July. Moreover, the split among the Gulf states on the role and status of political Islam is liable to be rife with ramifications for the role and status of Iran. The crisis allows Iran – interested in driving a wedge among the six in order to prevent the formation of a united front against it – to deepen the split among the Gulf states and isolate the Saudis from their smaller neighbors. This has also affected the Saudi attempt to unite the Arab Gulf states announced by King Abdullah (the Riyadh Declaration) in December 2011. Furthermore, the crisis will certainly not make it any easier for the United States to attain goals that require security cooperation among the six Arab Gulf states, e.g., the deployment of anti-missile defense systems meant to provide a better response to the Iranian threat. Israel, of course, has an interest in seeing the moderate regimes strengthened, especially those on its borders – Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. And while a resolution, even if partial, of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no guarantee of the stability of these regimes, calm on the Israeli-Palestinian front will make it easier for them to cope more successfully with their domestic problems.