



ANNUAL ZEEV SCHIFF MEMORIAL LECTURE

Reflections on Islamism: From the Muslim Brotherhood to the Islamic State

Shimon Shamir, professor emeritus of Middle East history, Tel Aviv University

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

October 23, 2014

When I was a student at (what was called at the time) the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, one of the basic textbooks that all students had to read and be examined on was H. A. R. Gibb's *Modern Trends in Islam*. The book presented the text of a lecture series delivered by this eminent Oxford scholar at the University of Chicago in 1945. The importance of that book was in its being the first influential work to point out that Islam should not be studied only as a classical culture and religion, but also scrutinized as a living reality. In particular, said Gibb, the various responses of Islam to the challenges posed by the West in modern times should be studied thoroughly.

Gibb established a three-pronged model for articulating the basic categories of Islamic response: Liberalism, Modernism-Reformism, and what he called Mahdism. This triple conception of the contemporary Islamic trends has dominated the literature on the subject ever since.

According to this paradigm, Liberals are those who believe that Muslims should open up to accept modern, originally Western, ideas and institutions and implement them in their lives, albeit without losing their Muslim identity. Reformists wish to revive and reform Islam by demonstrating that the values and institutions of modernity actually exist in the heritage of Islam—if correctly interpreted. And the Mahdists believe, as Gibb puts it, "not only that the minds and wills of men can be dominated by force, but that truth can be demonstrated by the edge of the sword."

To the question that has been haunting Muslims for almost two centuries, why Muslims lag behind the West, the Liberals reply, "Because they have not sufficiently internalized modernity," the Reformists say, "Because they do not understand true Islam," whereas the Mahdists want simply to shatter this very question by force.

The name given by Gibb to this third trend (which is going to be the focus of my presentation) is curious. It was inspired apparently by the 1881 revolt of the Sudanese Mahdi, who declared a jihad against the infidels and sought to establish a purified Islamic state in the Sudan. The Mahdi revolt must have been fresh in Gibb's mind, as it was at that time in the minds of many of the British for whom the picture of the massacre of Gordon and his Anglo-Egyptian garrison in Khartoum was still the most vivid image of Islamist insurgency.

However, as a generic name for the third trend, "Mahdism" is ill conceived. While Mahdism may be meaningful to the Shiites, for the Sunni majority it is of little relevance. Sunni Islamists do not aspire for the

realization of a messianic utopia in the future, but for recreating on earth the perfection of the primordial community of the Prophet. They are past-oriented rather than messianic.

Many of the other names given to this trend are similarly misguided. The profusion of suggested names, most of which were short lived, clearly reflects the bewilderment of Western observers facing the excesses of this movement. For some time the media and the public used the term Fundamentalism (*usuliya* in Arabic), ignoring the fact that fundamentalist movements, stressing literary interpretations of the scriptures—a trend that originally emerged in Christianity—often wished merely to be left alone rather than change the world by force.

Political Islam, another name for this particular trend, is manifestly wrong, simply because all Islam is political. The outstanding feature of orthodox Islam is its being a comprehensive system that covers all aspects of life—the spiritual as well as the political. The early Muslims were not slaves in the House of Bondage in Egypt, they weren't persecuted, crucified, and thrown to the lions—they were empire-builders, and the empire was Islam. Those who joined it were not joining just a faith but a polity, and the two remained one ever since.

Jihadism covers reasonably well the militant nature of the movement, but it is reductionist: it does not express its civil objectives, such as state-building and application of sharia. Those are precisely the aspects covered by the term Salafism, which literally denotes the desire to recreate the Islamic community of the *salaf*, the forefathers, but does not convey the militancy of the movement, to the extent that at one time it was used to refer to its opposite: to the nonbelligerent reformist movements.

Recently Wahhabism became a widespread designation, especially among Arab critics of the movement, but its application to movements of our time is problematic. The Wahhabism of the eighteenth century did not come out against the West, with which the movement hardly had any contact, but against a local Muslim regime—leading some historians to define it as a medieval internal Islamic movement. Some similarities do exist, such as the labeling of Muslim opponents as infidels (*takfir*) and purging the land by blood and fire, but the dissimilarities are greater.

So we are left with Islamism (or if you wish, Islamic radicalism), a term that has been gaining ground in recent years. It is not rich with substance, but at least it is free of confusing connotations. Some complain that it sounds too similar to Islam in general, but of course the -ism suffix creates a significant distance between the two.

This dichotomy raises a question that has been occupying the minds of both Muslim and non-Muslim observers: what is the exact relationship between Islam and Islamism? To my mind, it is possible to think of three models that suggest answers to this question: "polarity," "concentric circles," and "the tree."

The "polarity" model regards Islam and Islamism as diametrically opposed entities engaged in a bitter struggle over the soul of Muslims. In this struggle, Islamists denounce those who do not adhere to their views as apostates or infidels and brand their rulers as enemies of Islam who should rightfully be killed. Conversely, spokesmen of mainstream Islam accuse the Islamists of beliefs and practices that deviate from the true teaching of the Quran and the *sunna*—which prohibits, for example, the killing of women and children, coerced conversions, and holy wars that are not defensive. They compare their opponents to the rebellious Khawarij of the seventh century who also practiced *takfir* and were cast out by orthodox Islam as illegitimate dissidents.

While the "polarity" model highlights the legitimacy problem of Islamism, the "concentric circles" model seeks to demonstrate graphically the magnitude of its threat. The inner circle of this model is occupied by the hardcore Islamist organizations, like al-Qaeda and Daish, who follow literally the dictum "kill them wherever

you find them" and dream of world domination. This circle includes also terrorist organizations that pursue the same goals, only on smaller scale. The second circle around it contains organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood with its many offshoots, and various Salafist movements. They share many tenets with those of the first, and their record is not exempt from terrorism, but their actions are occasionally tempered by pragmatic or tactical considerations. In the third circle are placed those Muslims who would not join any of these militant organizations but nevertheless sympathize with them, cheer their exploits, and refuse to call them terrorists. If they criticize the Islamists, their criticism would always be followed by a "but"—by reservations that show understanding toward Islamists' motives and blame everything on the West. Only the largest fourth circle contains the Muslims who reject Islamism as a matter of principle. This circle has a vast expanse yet is susceptible to penetration from inner circles at critical times.

The "tree" model draws a direct connection between Islam and Islamism, but it also makes clear that the two are different. In this model, orthodox Islam is the trunk from which various movements branch out. They draw their inspiration and vitality from that trunk, but develop their particular doctrines under environmental influences as well. Such a branch, for example, is the Mutazila movement, which emerged in the eighth century maintaining that reason is the final arbiter in distinguishing right from wrong. Another would be Sufism, which eventually split up into many orders. And in our days we should regard Islamism as such a branch, drawing ideas from the roots of Islam but modifying them to fit particular responses to the challenges of modernity.

How are these models applied in Western discourse? The "polarity" model is clearly endorsed by those who want to conceptualize good relations with Muslim governments, societies, and diasporas while conducting a resolute struggle against Islamist terrorism. This is the model that has been embraced by the administration of President Obama, whom we heard only recently declaring in his speech at the UN General Assembly: "The United States is not and never will be at war with Islam. Islam teaches peace...When it comes to America and Islam, there is no us and them." In other words, a "clash of civilizations" does not exist; there is only a war on terrorism.

The "concentric circles" model is popular with those experts and politicians who keep warning that the West is not sufficiently aware of the dangers posed by the Islamist movements. They regard Islamism as a cancer that spreads within Muslim communities, benefitting from the numerous references existing in Islamic sources that can potentially serve their cause, and from the anti-Western mood prevailing among many Muslims. They claim that Islamism is now deeply entrenched in the realities of the Muslim world and therefore the well-intended conception of the two as sharply separated might be misleading and counterproductive.

Contrary to these two models, the "tree" model does not carry political ramifications; it merely depicts a historical process figuratively. After all, at least according to one definition of history, historians are expected to show how one thing grows from another. Factually, Islamism did branch out from Islam, just as outlawed Kahanism branched out from Judaism. However this by itself does not warrant normative judgment. It certainly does not justify collective denouncement: Islamism is not an excuse for Islamophobia, just as the existence of extremist Jewish movements does not sanction anti-Semitism.

The "tree" model brings to mind a statement recently made by Prime Minister Netanyahu in his UN speech, to the effect that "Daish and Hamas are branches of the same tree." Putting this statement in the frame of the "tree" model would lead to the conclusion that indeed the two are branches of the same tree, yet they are not the same branches. True, they both represent Islamism, but of different types. Hamas indeed engages in terror, launches rockets against civilian populations, does not recoil from executing its opponents, upholds in its Charter the precept of Holy War, and propagates Islamist *dawa*—but it does not claim exclusive caliphate rights, does not massacre arbitrarily labeled infidels, does not engage in a global war against the West, does not

fight Shiites in the name of *sunna*, and does not impose the sharia with its harsh *hudud* (amputation for theft, stoning for adultery, etc.) on the population under its control. Yes, Hamas is both Islamist and terrorist, but this is bad enough without trying to make it look even worse.

In historical terms Islamism is a modern movement. While its adherents claim that theirs is a purely indigenous venture—striving to restore the authentic community of the Prophet and purging from Islam alien elements that have penetrated it in the modern period—in fact Islamism was born, in our time, out of the friction between Islamic loyalties and Western-dominated realities. The greater part of the leadership of Islamist organizations did not emerge from the heartland of traditional society but from the Islamic-Western frontier. Since Islamism is a response to Western challenges, it follows that it would thrive where Western power and culture abound—both in colonized or Westernized Muslim countries and in the lands of the West itself. Thus, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood did not emerge from a traditional Egyptian community, but from Ismailia, which was at that time a semi-French colonial town. Many of the activists of Islamism were Western-educated professionals who had spent years in Europe or the United States. Terrorist cells were formed by Muslims living in the cities of Germany, Britain, or Belgium. This Western connection facilitated the absorption of modern methods and instruments in their campaigns. Islamist organizations have been employing tactics of modern political movements. They have been operating using modern tools: communications, weaponry, Internet, aircraft, banking systems, smartphones. The ironic truth is that a movement rejecting modernism is itself, in many ways, modern.

Born out of a historical process, Islamism evolves and changes in time. Present-day Islamist movements are quite different from the MB of Hassan al-Banna, which was in the 1930s and 1940s the first modern Islamist organization and served as the prototype for many Islamist movements of the time. The MB has established the main elements of Islamism: They defined the enforcement of sharia as their ultimate goal, they proclaimed and exercised jihad, they sanctioned political assassinations, they placed the *umma* of Islam above the nation, and they created a type of binding spiritual-political leadership. On the other hand, unlike their successors, the declared objective of their jihad was to liberate Egypt (and Palestine), not to devastate the West, and they operated within the existing state system, occasionally even seeking participation in election campaigns.

Since that period Islamism has undergone three major developments: radicalization, globalization, and territorialization, more or less in this sequence.

The most significant radical reformulation of the Islamist creed took place within the MB itself. Its initiator was Sayyed Qutb, a member of the MB who studied in American institutions of higher learning, including Stanford University, and who upon his return to Egypt published a book denouncing America as the great evil. In another book of his, *The Milestones (Maalim fil-tariq)*, he elaborated his revision of the MB's doctrine. He claimed that the infidels against whom jihad should be directed are not only the non-Muslim foreigners but also the so-called Muslims who do not adhere to what he considered to be the "true" mission of Islam. Those people, their societies, states, and leaders, he said, constitute a "new paganism." Jihad should be offensive, not defensive, it must strive to eliminate this paganism not only from the lands of Islam but from the face of the earth. Qutb was executed by Nasser in 1966 but his influence spread rapidly. His views are clearly reflected in positions taken by such Islamists as Zawahiri, bin Laden, and of course Abd al-Salam Faraj, who coordinated the assassination of President Sadat as a fulfilment of Qutb's decrees. Qutbism thus provided a common platform for the extreme organizations, facilitating dialogue between them.

The second development was globalization. While the original MB-type movements operated within the framework of each separate Muslim country, in the 1990s a global network of Islamists emerged. As we all know, it became evident in the war of the mujahedin in Afghanistan, to which numerous volunteers flocked from wherever Muslims live—Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Yemen, Bangladesh, Indonesia,

Britain, and many other countries. The same happened in Bosnia and in other arenas where Muslims confronted non-Muslims. Returning to their countries of origin, these volunteers, now thoroughly trained and indoctrinated, formed an extensive web of Islamist activism. This development has served Islamism both operationally and conceptually. Operationally it improves their capabilities to launch terrorist actions in places and times of their choice. Conceptually it purports to validate some of their fundamental claims: that the unity of the Islamic *umma* is a living reality overriding national and ethnic differences, that the most meaningful struggle presently taking place in the world is that between Islam and the West (in their terminology Dar al-Islam against Dar al-Harb), and that in this struggle the West lacks a successful strategy that can repel the offensive launched by Islamists—be they the Taliban, the Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, the IS, or others.

Islamism used to consist only of movements operating, underground or openly, within political regimes that strove to suppress them. No more. Nowadays Islamists control territories of their own in which they are free to exercise their programs. This territorialization takes place in two forms: either by taking over existing states, or by occupying lands from existing states. The Islamic Republic of Iran is, obviously, the most notable example of the first type. So was the Sudan under the National Islamic Front and Hassan al-Turabi. In a way, the rule of Hamas in Gaza belongs also to this category. At some point in the future perhaps Afghanistan, taken over by the Taliban, may also join this class.

The second method led to the rule of al-Qaeda over substantial parts of Yemen, to the recent declaration of an "Islamic State" by Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria, and above all to the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The control of territory now allows the Islamists to establish their own institutions, make sharia the law of the state, set up regular armies, use schools and the media for disseminating their ideology, recruit masses into their ranks, and use their territory as a launching pad for intervention in other places.

There is no escape from the conclusion that Islamism, upgraded by these three developments, has demonstrated its vitality and endurance. Expectations for an effective eradication of their threat by a "war on terror" should definitely be reconsidered. Islamism today is on the map, it has a place in the international system and must be regarded as such.

What is the secret of its success? While the authenticity of the Islamists' creed can be refuted readily by Islamic scholars, the authenticity of their motivation is unquestionable. Islamists give expression to the mood of anger that prevails throughout the Muslim world. This has been articulated—years before the emergence of al-Qaeda and before 9/11—by Bernard Lewis in his groundbreaking essay "The Roots of Muslim Rage" (*Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990). Since then the discussion of the intrinsic causes of the Islamist offensive against the West has expanded. In academia, and often outside it, the tendency is to interpret Islamist activities in terms of their deeper roots, not just as responses to circumstantial situations. Of the many versions of this interpretation let me sum up the one nearest to my thinking.

As a point of departure we should take the military defeats inflicted on Muslims by European powers. Their victories were followed by occupation, colonization, and exploitation of Muslim lands. For Muslims, the shock of encountering European military supremacy was followed by the troubling discovery that Westerners possessed greater wealth, more advanced science and technology, thriving industries, impressive political institutions, and stimulating, innovative ideas. The ensuing traumas were not just a matter of hurt pride. The fundamental problem was that this new situation could not be rationalized within the conceptual framework of Islam. The toolbox of Islamic ideas and beliefs simply lacked the implements that could make sense of Muslim inferiority and backwardness. Islam, by definition, represents perfection. As said before, it is a comprehensive system that does not differentiate between the spiritual and the material. Consequently, if its faith is supreme, so must be its power, wealth, politics, and knowledge.

Past history seemed to have validated this conception. For a thousand years Islam had been victorious: from its initial expansion all the way to the borders of China and the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, through the triumph over the Crusaders, to the conquests of the Ottomans penetrating the heart of Europe. Now, for bewildered Muslims, history appeared to have been derailed.

At the beginning, awareness of the ramifications of European superiority was low enough to allow eager admiration and emulation, but soon a sense of disorientation, humiliation, and frustration took over. The liberation of Muslim countries from direct foreign rule, several decades later, only intensified this crisis because it revealed that the problems did not result just from the occupation, as it was consistently claimed, but from within. Dependence on the West did not vanish, and it became hard to conceal that even the rich, oil-producing countries are actually consumers of Western assets and are not partners in creating them. The scores of experts—incidentally all of them Arabs—who prepared the UN's Arab Human Development Report (2002) showed that Arabs lag behind most of the world in all the dimensions of development: economic, social, civil, political, and cultural. The report divided the world into six cultural blocs and found that by many variables the Arab bloc stood above only sub-Saharan Africa, and by some even below it.

Among many Muslims frustration turned into anger. Blame was externalized. This whole adversity, it was felt, originated with the appearance of the West. And even now Westerners continue to maintain their hegemony, they feel free to intervene militarily in any part of the Muslim World, they support authoritarian, corrupt rulers who perpetuate backwardness, their influence undermines indigenous culture and weakens the moral fiber of society.

In line with this resentment, a very negative image of the West has become prevalent. The West came to be seen as power-thirsty, oppressive, and exploitative. Popular views claimed that its values are materialistic and devoid of any spirituality, its nationalism is racist, its capitalism is greedy, its democracy is a sham, its liberation of women is permissive and immoral, and so on.

Islamists gave expression to this mood, magnified it, and derived their strength and influence from its prevalence. In their doctrines they pushed it one step further, arguing that if the West, and particularly the Americans, are the source of Muslims' predicaments, if they are the Great Satan, then Muslims must mobilize for a Holy War against them. Muslims must fight to drive them out of their lands, to curtail their power, or simply—as bin Laden put it in his 1998 fatwa—"to kill all Americans and their allies, civilian and military."

It followed that since this is a struggle to vindicate the honor of Muslims, it must be directed also against Western pride. Only three weeks ago Ayatollah Khamenei called upon Muslims in the United States, in his Eid al-Adha holiday message, "to unite against American arrogance." The symbols of Western supremacy, such as the World Trade Center in New York and the parliament building in Ottawa, had to be targeted, because such icons represent the essence of Westernism, which is the priority target of jihad.

Islamists are inspired by a growing conviction that the fortunes of the West are waning. If the foundations of its civilization are so hollow, as it is believed, then it follows that Muslims can expect not only the decline of the West but also the upsurge of Islam to a position of world domination. This vision is upheld even by a relatively moderate Muslim like Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, probably the most influential Islamic authority nowadays. In a question posted on his website (islamonline.com) on December 2, 2002, he was asked by a young Muslim to explain, How come Muslims are today poorer and weaker than others? Qaradawi answered that the present situation is only a transitory stage. A hadith of the Prophet, he said, predicted that Muslims will capture the two world-capitals—Byzantium and Rome. The first part of this prophecy had already been fulfilled by the Ottomans, who occupied Constantinople and converted it to a Muslim city. The second part, the conquest of Rome—Rome being a symbol of the West—is beginning to materialize in our time. Yet,

Qaradawi pointed out, unlike the occupation of Constantinople, which was executed by force, "Rome" will be Islamized by persuasion, with the help of the growing Muslim population in Europe. On this issue the Islamists differ only over one point: in their vision Rome, the West, will also be taken by jihad.

The IS version of the ultimate triumph of Islam has a more apocalyptic nature. *Dabiq*, the IS organ, distributed in Arabic and English, is named after a place in northern Syria where, according to another hadith, the final battle between Muslims and "Rome," again meaning the West, will take place. The IS conception of the road to worldwide domination is somewhat different from that of al-Qaeda. The Qaeda has a phased strategy—beginning with spectacular terrorist strikes in Western countries, continuing with local attacks on the forces of the West and the "apostate" regimes, escalating into protracted guerrilla warfare, and finally developing into an all-out war against the West. The IS Caliphate, on the other hand, with its extensive recruitment apparatus and control of territories in Syria and Iraq, regards itself as already engaged in the initial stage of the imminent war against the "crusader armies."

Are these dimensions of Islamism recognized by Westerners? Yes, to some extent they are, but too many (especially in Europe) remain unaware of their import. Many still believe, as Muslim propagandists often contend, that Islamism is merely a reaction to Western military interventions and military presence in Muslim lands, to the unresolved Palestinian problem, to America's backing of client regimes, or to its exploitation of Arab oil. Remove these impediments, they allege, and Islamism will lose its *raison d'être*. It seems that it is easier for people to accept such interpretations rather than recognize that the West is hated not simply because of what it does but because of what it is.

Indeed, for many people whose life is regulated by a worldview that is sharply different from that of Islam, it is hard to grasp the nature of Islamism, to make sense of the horrors it inflicts on non-Muslims and Muslims alike. This is a major cause of distorted perceptions and it consequently impedes the formulation of effective policies for coping with the Islamist challenge. Interaction with Islamists is of course intercultural. Dealing with Islamism efficiently requires traversing the cross-cultural barrier and developing some insight into its fundamental attributes. This is not a light undertaking. Values, norms of behavior, perceptions, and aspirations prevalent in one culture are based on experiences that were not shared by observers who are grounded in a different culture. Brooks Peterson, in his book *Cultural Intelligence*, compares them to people looking at the tip of an iceberg: they perceive the visible actions of the other, but what motivated them remains hidden deep under water. Westerners and Muslims are rooted in different civilizations: their value-scales are ranked in different order, their messages are encoded differently; even words do not always mean the same thing—e.g., for Westerners "individualism" is a cherished value, but for many Muslims it may mean *ananiya*, undesirable selfishness; in the West "innovation" is highly esteemed, whereas in Islam it may mean *bida*, a heretical deviation from the right path.

Shallow perceptions breed mistakes, and policymakers who approached Islamic issues lightly have indeed made a lot of them. In order to avoid appearing one-sided, let me begin with an Israeli example. In the 1980s, when Hamas first emerged in the Gaza Strip, Israeli authorities did not place obstacles on its growth. They regarded it as a harmless association engaged in social-religious activities in mosques and schools. They did not bother to examine the inherent links between this association and the MB, which could have clarified to them that for such a movement a separation between the socio-religious and the political, and the militant political at that, simply does not exist. Furthermore, at that time the PLO was seen as the main threat to Israel, and Hamas was expected to counterbalance its influence. The authorities even assisted Hamas indirectly, by facilitating the flow of finances to their funds. When the intifada broke out and the true nature of Hamas was exposed, the surprised authorities belatedly outlawed it.

Interestingly enough—as revealed in Shlomi Eldar's new book *Getting to Know Hamas* (Hebrew)—the one who tried to warn the Israelis against fostering Hamas was none other than Dan Kurtzer of the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv. Dan, a well-versed expert in Islamic studies, had served in Cairo at the time of Sadat's assassination and was thoroughly acquainted with the Islamist movements in Egypt. After a tour in Gaza he rushed to meet the aides to the Israeli minister of foreign affairs and, according to Eldar, told them quite excitedly that supporting Hamas was sheer madness. "Haven't you studied any history of Islam?" he asked. "Don't you know what is the real meaning of such an Islamic 'social' association? Don't you realize where all this is leading?"

Well, next I am going to give you a version of a miscalculation committed by the U.S. administration in its policy in Egypt after the ousting of Mubarak, which to my mind is reminiscent of this Israeli blunder. In both cases there was an ill-conceived association with an Islamist movement that harmfully backfired. Now let me state very clearly that I do not presume to be an expert on U.S. policymaking in Washington or on U.S. diplomacy in Cairo. Sitting with us in the audience are experts who have greater experience and knowledge. What I shall try to do will be to give you an account of this affair seen from the Egyptian side, as I managed to put together from conversations with knowledgeable Egyptians, from articles in the Egyptian media, from books that have already been published in Cairo on the subject, and even from expressions in popular culture. (See for example Abd al-Azim Hamad's *Qissat al-irtibat "al-banna" bayna amirika wal-ikbwan*, or "Story of the So-Called 'Constructive' Connection Between America and the MB"). This Egyptian version may be correct, or only partly correct, but this does not matter too much, after all, as the famous Thomas formula has it, "What people perceive as real is real in its consequences."

So, back to the Egyptian story. A year and a half before Obama was elected, Egyptians noticed that American diplomats were conducting talks with MB activists in Egypt and elsewhere. In the U.S. there was an increase of discussions with academics and representatives of the Muslim community, to which some Egyptians were also invited. A principal theme in these deliberations was the need to regard Islam as diametrically opposed to Islamism, to embrace moderate Islamic movements that reject violence, and help them integrate into the democratic process. American officials were no longer heard speaking of Muslim extremists or Muslim terrorists, but of criminals and terrorists in broad terms. The impression in Egypt was that the U.S. administration now believes that there cannot be democratization without MB participation.

Less than half a year after Obama assumed office, he was in Cairo delivering his famous message to the Islamic world. Egyptians were impressed by his call to turn a new leaf with Islam, but they also noticed that sitting in the audience were prominent members of the MB, which was still illegal at that time. After the ousting of Mubarak, which Washington hastily endorsed, contacts with the MB intensified, partly conducted through the U.S. ambassador in Cairo. This nourished rumors that the Americans are conspiring with the Brotherhood behind the Egyptians' back. The Egyptians relate that a delegation of thirty prominent MB activists arrived in Washington and reassured the Americans that once in power they will sustain democracy, peace with Israel, and relations with the U.S., and keep their distance from Iran. In Egypt it was reported that Americans are encouraging the MB to nominate a candidate of their own in the presidential elections, and signaling that they would welcome a MB victory. When the Islamists, namely the MB and the Salafists together, won an overwhelming majority in the parliamentary elections, it appeared as though all the assumptions of the U.S. policy were substantiated. Subsequently, the Egyptians saw the relationship between Washington and MB President Morsi evolve in distinctly warmer terms than the minimum required in normal state-to-state relations.

Yet, as we know, this affair did not last for more than a year. Morsi was overthrown, the MB was banned as a terrorist organization, and the prevailing mood in Egypt became intensely hostile to the Brotherhood. Much of

this hostility turned against the U.S., which had supported it. Egyptians were infuriated discovering that Washington, even after the downfall of Morsi, was pressing for the inclusion of the MB in the emerging new regime, and turning a cold shoulder to the new leaders even though they enjoyed overwhelming popular support. In his interview with the *Washington Post* on August 3, 2013, General Sisi expressed what many Egyptians felt when he said to the Americans, "You turned your back on the Egyptians, and they won't forget that."

In my recent visit to Egypt I was astonished to discover—even with my general familiarity with the situation—the high level of animosity toward the U.S. existing among intellectuals and ordinary people alike. In many places I could hear Sama al-Masri's popular song "Ya Obama abuk wa-ummak" addressing the American president with the f-word.

As a result of this policy—which former U.S. ambassador to Cairo David Welch called in a conversation "incorrect," "shortsighted," and "detrimental"—the U.S. position in Egypt is now in deep trouble. It will take enormous efforts to rehabilitate it, building on vital joint interests that still exist. Perhaps a good beginning would be trying to understand how this miscalculation came about. During a February 15, 2011 press conference, President Obama defended his policy in Egypt by saying, "I think history will end up recording that at every juncture in the situation in Egypt we were on the right side of history." Being on the right side of history, a phrase used by Obama repetitively, is indeed commendable, but unfortunately it completely depends on a correct reading of history's trajectory, which is a very bold undertaking. In this case the perceived "course of history" collapsed after just one year. If one would nevertheless venture to guess the direction of developments in the region today, he would not point—as was done in discussions held in Washington—to the rise of moderate, democratic Islamic movements, but to the upsurge of Islamist violence—certainly not a historical direction on whose side anybody would wish to be on, to use Obama's expression.

Another problem was what appeared to be a difficulty in understanding the nature of the MB. Inspired by the sights of popular revolts in the Arab world, as shown vividly on television screens, many in the West tended to believe that a wave of democratization was sweeping over the region—essentially similar to the waves that took place in Latin America and Eastern Europe. To this perception of the "Arab Spring" Washington seemed to have added the formula "democratization equals Islamization," identifying the MB as the moderate, popular, democratic Islamic movement that could favorably replace the former autocratic regime.

In fact, the MB was not really the kind of movement fitting this wishful image. It was not just another religious political party, comparable to Christian movements harmoniously functioning within Western democracies. Trying instead to understand the MB from within, by its own terms, could have shown that in spite of the pragmatism it manifested in the present circumstances, it has remained in essence the same movement that came into being as a militant response to the West and is still committed to the vision of imposing sharia on Egypt. Its slogan continued to declare "Jihad is our way," and its emblem remained the two crossed swords with the inscription calling upon believers to build up their power. The MB was flexible on its tactics but rigid over its final goals. In recent years it has sometimes endorsed democracy but always regarding it as a tool, not as a goal.

The dedicated pro-democracy demonstrators of Tahrir Square watched incredulously as American diplomacy entrusted the role of democratization to the MB, which they regard as a reactionary movement submitting to the directives of its Supreme Mentor (*al-murshid al-amm*) and declaring clearly that sovereignty belongs to God, not to the people. Eyebrows were also raised outside Egypt. In Jordan, where the survival of the regime depends on fending off the onslaught of the MB (IAF), America's supportive commitments were thrown into doubt. In Saudi Arabia, once offering a haven for MB expatriates and now regarding the Brotherhood as a threat both internally and externally, the reliability of U.S. partnership, already shaken by the sharp disavowal

of Mubarak, was further discredited. It is thus obvious that not many in the region shared the image of the MB held in Washington.

Was there an alternative to the path taken by Americans following the eruption of the Arab Spring in Egypt? I think there was and I am not alone in this. I distinctly remember a sober article published by the *New York Times* at that time carrying the message "Don't meddle, some choices are not America's to make." In all such cases, an outside player who finds it difficult to have its hand on the pulse of a different society, who is not adequately conversant with its culture, and who does not thoroughly apprehend the nature of the forces playing in it *should not take sides*. It should allow the local forces to work out their differences without intervention. Only when one of these forces emerges as a grave threat to vital interests, effective intervention is called for, and I agree of course that the situation with the IS in Syria and Iraq is definitely such a case.