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Wahhabis, the Brotherhood and the Empire: Syria and the Limits of Political Islam

By Tim Anderson

Abstract

Religious identity can unite communities but rarely nations, let alone regions. The limits of 'Political Islam' as a nation building and developmental force in the Middle East cannot be assessed theoretically, or through an appeal to the finest elements of Islamic culture and civilisation. The reason for this is that the phenomenon is a particular historical one. The Saudi current of Wahhabism and the broader political movement represented by the Muslim Brotherhood dominate Political Islam in the Middle East, as also the 'revolution' in Syria. Yet Wahhabism is tightly linked to a semi-feudal network of Gulf monarchies, deeply undemocratic and socially backward but with almost limitless oil wealth. For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood, a wider movement but increasingly dependent on Wahhabi finance, has a history of jealous competition with secular nationalism. From failures in this competition and reinforced by its Wahhabi links, the Brotherhood has developed increased reliance on Salafi-sectarian views. Yet while Islam is extremely popular in the region, Salafi-sectarianism is not.

To make matters worse, the sectarian currents have been repeatedly enlisted by foreign powers to divide and weaken the peoples of the region. The conflict in Syria is just the latest example of this. So the central question of this paper is: 'What does the Syrian conflict tell us about the limits of Political Islam in the Middle East?' It is argued that strong, unified states are necessary to build stable nations, while fostering human development. Further, autonomous regional stability and solidarity are necessary to successfully resist intervention and destabilisation by outside powers. Yet the history of big power-Islamist collaboration serves to emphasise Political Islam's limits in state building and human development. By way of contrast, pluralist integration in Latin America is showing relative success in managing external destabilisation and in fostering a renewal of 'south-south' cooperation. This comparison with the fragmented Arab and Muslim states bolsters the argument that secular integration is needed for a strong and independent region.

Introduction

The Saudi current of Wahhabism and the broader political movement represented by the Muslim Brotherhood have come to dominate Political Islam in the Middle East, and this can be seen in the 2011 Islamist insurrection in Syria, erroneously called a 'revolution'. If an Islamist regime were to replace the secular Ba'athist regime in Syria, it would represent a substantial realignment of forces. But what sort of future does this Political Islam offer, in terms of stability, regional solidarity and human development?

Wahhabism is based on a semi-feudal network of Gulf monarchies, while the Muslim Brotherhood has its own history of jealous competition with secular nationalism. It has developed Salafi-sectarian views and this limits its popularity in the generally tolerant Arab and Muslim world. Aggravating this weakness, both Wahhabism and the Brotherhood have long histories of collaboration with the big powers, against their domestic opponents. This poses further questions about their capacity to contribute to regional stability, neighbourly cooperation and human development. In this sense, the Political Islam of the region is a compromised project; but how compromised? Answers cannot be found in idealised versions of Political Islam, but rather must

be sought in the particular formative histories of the region, up to and including the Syrian conflict.

This paper therefore asks the question: 'What does the Syrian conflict tell us about the limits of Political Islam in the Middle East?' It begins by considering some of the key historical features of Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly in relation to political and social development, up to and including their deployment in the Syrian conflict. It then contrasts this with the human development needs of postcolonial states, adding a comparison on the value of regional integration in Latin America. A key consideration in this comparison is how to best manage destabilisation by foreign powers, and how to best foster genuine regional cooperation.

1. Imperialism, Wahhabis and the Muslim Brotherhood

A lot might be said about the philosophical currents which bear on Political Islam in the Middle East, but I suggest this idealistic complexity cannot really help us understand the phenomenon. It has been formed by and remains rooted in some quite particular historical experience. Nevertheless, a little background on Islamic values is useful.

Islam is strongly community oriented and socially inclusive, recognising plurality and urging tolerance. The Holy Quran stresses mercy and abjures abuse of other groups (Quran 49:11), while urging cooperation amongst diverse groups of believers (Quran 5:69, 5:48). However there is no centralised authority and small but influential sectarian variants have developed, over the centuries. Despite this, tolerance and 'secularism', in the sense of political governance not tied to particular religious doctrine, have been widespread in the Middle East. Baktiari and Norton (2005) cite contemporary and influential Egyptian, Syrian and Iranian writers who, in different ways, promote tolerance and diversity, without renouncing Islamic identity. Yet the Syrian writer Muhammed Shahrur equates the 'caliphate' of the Ottoman Empire as a 'despotism' which Mustafa Kemal Ataturk managed to overthrow (Baktiari and Norton 2005: 39).

The issue is not one of Islamic values. Carroll pointed out that, while Islam is 'one of the most powerful sources of Arab political identities', its impact on political community formation depends on particular 'geopolitical conditions' (Carroll 1986: 186). Similarly, Ayoob has written of Islamism as 'a political ideology and not a theological construct'. It varies from region to region, depending on the social environment and external forces (Ayoob 1979: 535).

While the history and social environment of Islamism varies considerably, the Middle East does have some common 'external forces'. First amongst these is the role of the hegemonic powers, including former colonial powers. The last century has seen constant engagement by these powers, in concerted efforts to dominate the oil and gas rich region. Big power support for the state of Israel is another conditioning factor. Ayoob points out: 'unless the contribution of these critical external factors to the growth in Islamism's popular appeal is recognised, it will not be possible fully to comprehend this phenomenon' (Ayoob 2005: 960-961).

Except for the Iranian variant, 'Political Islam' as developed in the Middle East revolves around two minor but influential currents: Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood. These two, and their role in Syria, will be the main focus of this paper. The Islamism developed in contemporary Iran has two important historical differences. In the first place, Iran's secular nationalism was effectively crushed by a US backed coup in the 1950s, and by the subsequent quarter century of repression under the Shah, a dictatorial monarch. US-backed dictatorship, mixed with western consumerism, was thus the experience of a full generation. Resistance was organised through the

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mosques and Islamic conceptualisation was central to the expulsion of the Shah and of US influence. The Islamic Republic of Iran thus developed as a popular anti-imperial force (see Ayooob 1979: 543), unlike the Muslim Brotherhood which has drawn on foreign assistance in attempts to depose an indigenous secular nationalism.

Both Egypt and Syria have built and maintain, to this day, secular nationalist regimes with strong traditions of anti-imperialism. A collaboration between the Egyptian Government and the US and Israel began in the late 1970s, while Syria maintained its independence. The current alliance between Iran and Syria has much to do with that common anti-imperialism. It is hardly a coincidence that these two are the only countries of the region not to host US military bases, and are thus both subject to intense 'regime change' pressures. Iran's second distinction is in having an overwhelming majority (around 95%) of Shia Muslims. So while apostasy is a contentious issue in Iran's Islamic Republic, it can be seen from a more relaxed position at home, along with a sensitivity to the position of Shia minorities in regional countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt. There seems no real Iranian Shia equivalent of the Wahhabi-Salafi doctrine of 'takfir', where people may be denounced and attacked simply for having a different faith.

For the above reasons, I suggest, a different set of considerations must apply when considering Islamism in Iran. On the other hand, a common Salafi network exists in Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and many of the Gulf states, coordinated for almost a century by a political group known as the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan: the brothers). Because this network does indeed represent an intolerant Salafi current within Sunni Islam, it links with the Saudi current of Wahhabism and has been engaged in big power collaboration for most of its existence. As the relationship between western hegemony and the most intolerant of Muslim sects may not at first glance seem apparent, a little history is called for.

The British were the modern experts of imperial rule, but they learned lessons from the Romans, putting divisive forces to work, at first in India, then in the Middle East. 'Divide et empera [Divide and rule] was the old Roman motto' wrote Lord William Elphinston in 1859, to an inquiry set up to investigate a mid-nineteenth century armed rebellion, 'and it should be ours' (in Desai 1948: 354). After that rebellion Sir John Lawrence reorganised the Bengal Army into a variety of ethnically diverse regiments (Mehta and Patwardhan 1942: 57). Similarly, British Secretary of State Charles Wood wrote in an 1862 letter to Governor General of India, Lord Elgin: 'We have maintained our power in India by playing one part against the other and we must continue to do so. Do all you can, therefore, to prevent all having a common feeling' he directed (Wood 1862; Pande 1987). This campaign of divide and rule would extend into emphasising ethnic divisions in school curricula. Secretary of State Viscount Cross wrote to the colonial Viceroy Dufferin in 1887: 'This division of religious feeling is greatly to our advantage and I look forward for some good as a result of your Committee of Inquiry on Indian Education and on teaching material' (in Pande 1987). After the formation of a unified anti-colonial front, the Indian National Congress, British administrators searched for ways to divide it. So Secretary of State, George Francis Hamilton, wrote to Governor General Lord Curzon: 'If we could break the educated Hindu party [Congress] into two sections holding widely different views we should, by such a division, strengthen our position against the subtle and continuous attack which the spread of education must make upon our system of government' (Hamilton in Curzon 1899: Sept 20). He knew the empire was unviable, against a united people.

By the early 20th century K.B. Krishna (1939) noted that 'divide and rule' was practised widely across the British Empire: including in Ceylon, Ireland, Palestine and Kenya. He described the

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fomenting of 'communalism' as a key element of British administrative policy toward India; yet he argued that the struggle for national independence required complete opposition to this 'communalism' (Desai 1948).

After World War One and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, British administrators looked for likely divisive collaborators in the Arab world. First in their sights was the Saud family, with their highly sectarian doctrine of Wahhabism. The Saudis both horrified and fascinated the British. Winston Churchill wrote that King Ibn Saud's Wahhabis:

'hold it as an article of duty, as well as of faith, to kill all those who do not share their opinions and to make slaves of their wives and children. Women have been put to death in Wahhabi villages for simply appearing in the street' (Churchill 1921).

Nevertheless, Churchill would later write: 'my admiration for [Ibn Saud] was deep, because of his unfailing loyalty to us' (Churchill 1953). A British Government memo from the mid-1940s noted that 'Ibn Saud's influence in the Middle East is very great, and it has been used consistently for a number of years in support of our policy' (Wikeley 1945; see also Sheikh 2007: 47). When Egyptian President Nasser emerged in the 1950s as the hero of Arab nationalism (having nationalised the Suez Canal and defeated a planned British and French invasion), the USA began to take an interest in the Saudi royal family. US President Eisenhower was looking for: 'a high class Machiavellian plan to split the Arabs and defeat the aims of our enemies [the Soviet Union] ... building up King Saud as a counterweight to Nasser'. Eisenhower said: 'The King could be built up, possibly as a spiritual leader. Once this was accomplished, we might begin to urge his right to political leadership' (in Curtis 2012, 62, 68). The close US-Saudi relationship, to this day, is not simply that of global power and oil supplier, but rather that of the great power with a principal political collaborator in the region, and one with a long record of sectarianism.

The other regional collaborator was less reliable but had a wider, popular network. The Muslim Brotherhood was formed by Hassan al Banna in Egypt in the 1920s. At first the Brotherhood opposed British influence. They wanted independence, but their narrow Salafist views drew them into competition with Arab nationalism, which was more inclusive and far more popular. From this competition it was soon seen that the followers of al-Banna, 'instead of railing against non-Muslim and Western colonial or imperialist powers', began to 'denounce the Muslim rulers' (Butterworth 1992: 35). The British initially tried to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood, during World War 2; but pro-British monarch King Farouk began to fund the Brotherhood in 1940. Farouk was said to have seen the Brotherhood 'as a useful counter to the power of ... the secular, nationalist Wafd Party' (Curtis 2012: 24). In 1941 British intelligence regarded the MB as 'the most serious danger to public security' in Egypt (in Lia 1998: 181); yet 'by 1942 Britain had definitely begun to finance the Brotherhood' (Curtis 2012: 24). They sought to further divide the group. The British agreed 'an effort would be made to create a schism in the party by exploiting any differences which might occur between Hassan al Banna and Ahmed al-Sukkari (another Brotherhood leader)' (British Embassy Cairo, 1942).

The CIA was said to have been backing the Muslim Brotherhood, while the Saudis funded it, by the end of the 1950s. The Saudis liked the Brotherhood's 'ultra-conservative politics and its virulent hatred of Arab communists' (Draitser 2012). The two currents were different but found many points of convergence. While Wahhabism had begun in an openly sectarian way, the Muslim Brotherhood began as a reaction to European domination and cultural invasion (Commins 2009: 140-141). Yet both aimed to create a community of believers. Covert relations between the foreign powers, the Wahhabis and the Brotherhood set the terms for collaborations across the region.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had a history which ran from political negotiations to assassinations and sectarian attacks. The group was banned and many imprisoned under almost all regimes. In the late 1970s, when Muslim Brotherhood linked militants assassinated Egypt's President Anwar al-Sadat, there was further repression of the group and a public debate ensued over the legitimacy of attacks on 'apostates'. A justification of the assassination was written by Abd al-Salam Faraj, arguing that Muslims had neglected 'at their peril' the imperative of the holy struggle (jihad), and the battle against apostasy. In the Salafi-Takfiri tradition he argued that the violent overthrow of apostate regimes was 'the only path to guarantee the establishment of a truly Islamic state' (Akhavi 1992: 95). In a subsequent denunciation and fatwa against this tract, from Egypt's leading cleric, Mufti Ali Jadd al-Haqq, the Mufti acknowledged the Quranic references relied on by Faraj but drew attention to 124 other verses 'that counsel patience or abjuring armed conflict with the non-Muslims in a spirit of peaceful persuasion' (Akhavi 1992: 95-97). None of this seems to have much influenced the tactics of the Brotherhood, still less the foreign powers.

By the mid-1980s Washington and London, in efforts to dislodge Soviet troops in Afghanistan, were funding the most vicious of sectarian Islamists, including many well known for atrocities against civilians. Hadji Abdul Haq, who admitted bombing a civilian aircraft in 1984, was received as a 'freedom fighter' in 1986 by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (Curtis 2012: 145). Millions in US aid went to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, famous for throwing acid in women's faces, skinning his opponents alive and slaughtering rival groups. Hekmatyar worked closely with Osama bin Laden and visited British officials in London in 1986 and 1988 (Keddie 2006: 118; Curtis 2012: 146). He remains linked to the US-backed Afghan regime. Saudi Osama bin Laden enjoyed US support in the 1980s but fell out with Washington over US military bases in Saudi Arabia. He organised several attacks on US targets in the region and was suspected (but never charged) of masterminding the September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York, which killed three thousand people. Bin Laden's 2011 obituary in the New York Times refers to: 'Freedom fighter Osama bin Laden in 1989 ... building his terrorism network, with American help' (Zernike and Kaufman 2011).

After the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Washington began to speak of a 'New Middle East', which might be facilitated not so much by further direct invasions but by what Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called a 'constructive chaos'. This could generate conditions of conflict, upheaval and transformation throughout the region, allowing the United States, Britain, and Israel to redraw the map in accordance with their geo-strategic needs and objectives (Nazemroaya 2006). Consistent with this ambition, Israel mounted an abortive attack on South Lebanon, in an attempt to weaken the Iranian-allied Lebanese Shia group, Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia, obsessed by what it saw as the threat of a 'Shia Crescent' which could link Iran, Iraq, Syria and South Lebanon (see e.g. Khashoggi 2013), then funded Salafi groups to attack both Shia and Christian civilians in Iraq, to destabilise a likely Shia dominated regime in Baghdad (IRIN 2007). In 2007 retired US General Wesley Clarke published a memoir which revealed that, back in late 2001, there was a Pentagon plan to topple seven Middle Eastern governments in five years, 'starting with Iraq and Syria and ending with Iran' (Conason 2007). Regional collaborators would be important for this task.

At a practical level, the political economic program of the Muslim Brotherhood remains far from the mix of democratic and socialist ideas adopted by most Arab nationalist platforms. It was dominated by middle level merchant and landowning classes, and combined charitable relations reaching across classes. It functioned 'like a parallel society: richer members provide poorer members with food, medicine and clothing through financial donations' (Hansen 2012). In Egypt as in Syria it reinforced private property and private enterprise relations, consistent with the

economic agenda of its occasional western patrons. Magda Kandil of the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies said of the Egyptian Brotherhood: 'It's very easy to confuse their economic platform with that of the previous regime: private-led growth, free market economy, scaling down the role of government, empowering the private sector', she says. 'The big difference is which private sector you are talking about' (Hansen 2012).

The Brotherhood claims to represent all Sunnis, but certainly does not. By the 1980s in Sunni-dominated Palestine, for example, the Brotherhood's political strategy (as in Egypt) was a primary phase of transforming the Palestinians into an Islamic society, and a second stage of waging a holy struggle against Israel. This meant that nationalist Palestinians were targeted before the occupying power. Yet polls showed this strategy had less than 10% support amongst the Palestinian population, which broadly backed the PLO's unified nationalist agenda (Shadid 1988: 677-680). Further, other Sunni Islamist groups, such as Islamic Jihad, stayed within the PLO and maintained strong relations across Sunni-Shia lines, including with Iran (Shadid 1988: 677). Israel, for its part, was well aware of this strategy and regarded such internal division as an asset. It saw that 'any success by the Brotherhood would be at the expense of the nationalists [PLO]; consequently the latter will be weakened'. One result was that 'the Brotherhood is treated less harshly [by the Israelis] than the nationalists' (Shadid 1988: 674-675).

Islamists can point to opinion polls which show strong support for Islamic law in the region. Strong majorities in many countries (e.g. 74% in Egypt, 89% in the Palestinian territories) support sharia to be 'the official law of the land'. However those same polls show similarly strong majorities supporting freedom of religion for people of other faiths. This effective anti-Salafism is said to be partly due to the idea that sharia only applies to Muslims, partly because of widely varying views of what sharia law means and partly due to differences over what role religious leaders should play in politics (Pew Research Centre 2013: 9). Strong majorities of Muslims in most countries (e.g. 67% in Egypt, 67% in Tunisia, 68% in Iraq) are concerned about extremist groups, and particularly about Islamic extremists (Pew Research Centre 2013: 11). All this suggests that Salafi-style attacks on apostates have little support amongst Muslims.

Further, the sectarianism of the Brotherhood has worried minorities - that is, all non-Sunni Muslims, Christians and others - from the beginning. Minorities in the early years, as now, felt themselves in a 'precarious' position in face of the Muslim Brotherhood's discriminatory and threatening approach (Hourani 1947: 21-25).

Nevertheless, foreign powers in the Middle East have decided to make occasional alliances with the Brotherhood as it is the 'oldest, largest and most influential Islamist organisation'. It is obvious that the Brotherhood has much ugly sectarianism but, what is thought important from the US perspective, is that 'there is a current within the Brotherhood willing to engage with the United States'. Perhaps to make the relationship more palatable, it is argued that 'this current ... has pushed much of the Brotherhood towards moderation' (Leiken and Brooke 2007: 107). 'Policymakers should recognise that the Muslim Brotherhood represents a notable opportunity'. This approach speaks of 'divide and engage', and to adopt a 'case by case' approach to engagement with Brotherhood Islamists (Leiken and Brooke 2007: 121). This demonstrates the ongoing appeal of the Brotherhood to hegemonic strategy.

2. Insurrections by Syria's Muslim Brotherhood

When the 'Arab Spring' erupted in Tunisia, then Egypt and Libya, Salafi groups and the Muslim Brotherhood became the beneficiaries of change. Syria saw an armed Islamist insurrection, under

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cover of political reform protests. Contrary to the western promotion of the notion that there was a secular rebellion in Syria, which gradually attracted more Islamist-jihadis or, alternatively, was 'hijacked' by Islamist-jihadis, the armed groups in Syria's 2011-2013 conflict have always been overwhelmingly Islamist and mostly allied to the Muslim Brotherhood. The idea of a moderate Muslim Brotherhood at odds with violent jihadis also has some traction in western writing (e.g. Leiken and Brooke 2007: 107) but little grounding in Syrian experience. Indeed, the extreme 'takfiri' ideas, where those of other faiths can be attacked and killed (al-Amin 2012) has been part of the Syrian brotherhood at least since the late 1970s. These ideas were encouraged by the Saudi-Wahhabi sponsors of Syria's 2011 insurrection, and seem to have become well embedded in most of the 'Free Syrian Army' groups.

This section will demonstrate that the first armed attacks in Dara in March 2011 were not by government troops on civilian demonstrators, but by Saudi-supplied Islamists on security forces and civilians (Daily Mail 2011; Queenan 2011; Truth Syria 2012), and that the 2011 insurrection was always Salafi-Islamist dominated. The Dara attacks closely shadowed the modus operandi of the Brotherhood's earlier failed insurrection in Hama, in 1982. The political reform movement of 2011 was rapidly derailed by the armed attacks, which drew in government forces. This conflict has been prolonged because a coalition of outside governments, committed to regime change in Syria, armed the insurgency and, when local efforts stalled, sent in thousands of foreign Salafi-jihadis. By 2013, despite some reshuffles, the leadership of both the exile political leadership of the 'revolution' and the Supreme Military Council of the 'Free Syrian Army' were both still firmly in the hands of Salafi groups, dominated by the Brotherhood (Barkan 2013: 5).

What is distinct about Syria's Muslim Brotherhood? It has its own history characteristics, though all its public positions have been closely aligned with the Egyptian Brotherhood, including the brief Brotherhood-led government in Cairo (Draitser 2012). It came to Syria from Egypt as a parliamentary group in the late 1940s yet, by the 1960s it began to focus on the Alawi leaders in the Ba'ath Party as heretics who could not represent Muslims. From then on the Brotherhood began to engage in battles with the secular government (Teitelbaum 2004: 135, 154). The Brotherhood put its representatives forward as 'the natural spokesmen of the Sunni community' and tried to characterise its conflict with the Ba'athist Government as 'a conflict between Sunnis and Alawis' (Batatu 1982: 13). Nevertheless, according to Batatu, it was never the religious beliefs of the Sunnis which were under threat from the Ba'athists, but rather 'the social interests of the upper and middle elements of their landed, mercantile and manufacturing classes' (Batatu 1982: 13). The Brotherhood's program, like that of the mother party in Egypt, emphasised liberal freedoms and also the transfer of state enterprises to private hands, consistent with 'the outlook and interests of the urban Sunni trading and manufacturing classes' (Batatu 1982: 13-14).

The Brotherhood had been marginalised in the early 1960s, when there was a brief union between Egypt and Syria (the United Arab Republic); a union with a charter which contained 'a baffling combination of ... [ideas] in addition to nationalist and religious sentiments – Marxian socialism, side by side with Egyptian revolutionism, Arab nationalism with internationalism, secular politics with Islamic precepts' (Najjar 1968: 184). Yet Islam was not declared the state religion in the charter of the UAR (Parker 1962: 19), nor would it enter the Syrian constitution. Hafez al Assad, who came to the Presidency in 1971, kept Islam out of Syria's constitution but agreed to a compromise where the head of state had to be a Muslim. In 1972 he got a senior Iraqi Shi'ia cleric to recognise Alawis as a branch of the Shi'ite community. Despite this, the Brotherhood considered him and all Alawis as non-Muslims (Talhamy 2009: 566-7).

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The Brotherhood's opposition became more violent in the late 1970s (Batatu 1982: 19-20). Despite narrow Salafi doctrine they were said to have been inspired by the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, and sought Iran's help against Syria's secular system. However they received no response from Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhullah al-Khomeini (Batatu 1982: 13). Shortly after this Sa'id Hawwa, the Syrian Brotherhood's chief ideologist, 'stressed that the people of the Sunna are the real Muslim community, thus widening the gap between the Muslim Brothers and Iran' (Talhamy 2009: 570; Batatu 1982:13). This anti-Shia stance linked to the Wahhabi theory of a Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Shia 'threat', which was attempting 'to stir up fears ... of a possible Shiite takeover of Syria and other Sunni states' (Talhamy 2009: 579).

With the Ba'th system well entrenched, the Brotherhood banned for its violent attacks and President Hafez al Assad showing few concessions to Islamism, the Islamist group began a series of bold and bloody insurrectionary moves. The group's *takfiri* thinking was demonstrated in 1979 when it launched a series of attacks on Alawis, as well as government officials, including the massacre of several dozen young Alawi cadets at an Aleppo military school (Seale 1988: 325). The government jailed and executed many Brotherhood members, accusing the group of being subservient to Israel and the US. In April 1980 armed clashes in Aleppo left more than a thousand dead (Seale 1988: 328; Talhamy 2009: 567). By mid-1980, according to US intelligence, President Hafez al Asad had 'broken the back' of the Brotherhood's rebellion. Despite this, a new strategy was launched in 1981, after death of Brotherhood leader Issam Attar, with the aim of an Alawite coup. However the plot was exposed and the Brotherhood 'felt pressured into initiating' an uprising in their stronghold of Hama (DIA 1982).

As Patrick Seale describes it, the uprising in Hama began this way:

'At 2am on the night of 2-3 February 1982 an army unit combing the old city fell into an ambush. Roof top snipers killed perhaps a score of soldiers ... [Brotherhood leader] Abu Bakr [Umar Jawwad] gave the order for a general uprising ... hundreds of Islamist fighters rose ... by the morning some seventy leading Ba'athists had been slaughtered and the triumphant guerrillas declared the city 'liberated' (Seale 1988: 332).

The Syrian Arab Army responded with a huge force of about 12,000 and the battle raged for three weeks. It was a civil war, and there were defections. Seale continues:

'As the tide turned slowly in the government's favour, the guerrillas fell back into the old quarters ... after heavy shelling, commandos and party irregulars supported by tanks moved in ... many civilians were slaughtered in the prolonged mopping up, whole districts razed' (Seale 1988: 333).

Final accounts of the casualties vary, with the independent, more contemporary accounts putting a total death toll at between 2,000 and 10,000. US intelligence wrote: 'The total casualties for the Hama incident probably number about 2,000. This includes an estimated 300 to 400 members of the Muslim Brotherhood's elite 'Secret Apparatus' (DIA 1982: 7). Patrick Seale notes that government forces also suffered heavy losses, but that 'large numbers died in the hunt for the gunmen ... government sympathizers estimating a mere 3,000 and critics as many as 20,000 ... a figure of 5,000 to 10,000 could be close to the truth' He adds: 'The guerrillas were formidable opponents. They had a fortune in foreign money ... [and] no fewer than 15,000 machine guns' (Seale 1988: 335). Subsequent accounts have often inflated the casualties.

Hafez blamed a large scale foreign conspiracy for the Hama insurrection. Seale observes that he was 'not paranoid', as many US weapons were captured and foreign backing had come from several US collaborators: King Hussayn of Jordan, Lebanese Christian militias (the Israeli-aligned 'Guardians of the Cedar') and Saddam Hussein in Iraq (Seale 1988: 336-337). Despite the US hand in the conflict, US intelligence held the outcome at arm's length, dryly observing

that: 'the Syrians are pragmatists who do not want a Muslim Brotherhood government' (DIA 1982: vii).

Almost 30 years later the insurrection in Dara in March 2011 began in a very similar way, but under the cover of political reform rallies and counter pro-government rallies, sparked by the much publicised 'Arab Spring'. But this was to be another 'Islamist Spring'. There were reports, several days before the rallies of mid-March, of arms being smuggled into the country (Reuters 2011), and then being distributed from Dara's al-Omari Mosque (Truth Syria 2012). Yet many western media accounts ignored the armed insurrection, maintaining a remarkably monolithic 'peaceful protestors' line, for many months. Understanding some of the detail is important.

In early March some teenagers in Daraa were arrested for graffiti that had been copied from North Africa 'the people want to overthrow the regime'. It was reported that they were abused by local police. Time magazine reported that President Assad intervened, the local governor was sacked and the teenagers were released. What followed was highly contested. The western media version is that protestors burned and trashed government offices and that 'provincial security forces opened fire on marchers, killing several' (Abouzeid 2011). After that, 'protestors' staged demonstrations in front of the al-Omari mosque, but were in turn attacked'. The demonstrations were said to involve crowds of up to 300,000, with 15 anti-government 'protesters' killed (AP 2011). Yet Dara is a border town with just 150,000 inhabitants.

The Syrian government, on the other hand, stated that armed attacks had begun on security forces, killing several police, along with the burning of government offices. There was corroboration of this account. While its headline blamed security forces for killing 'protesters', the British Daily Mail showed pictures of guns, AK47 rifles and hand grenades that security forces had recovered from the al-Omari mosque. The report notes that 'an armed gang' had opened fire on an ambulance, killing 'a doctor, a paramedic and a policeman' (Daily Mail 2011). Israeli and Lebanese media also gave versions of the events of 17-18 March closer to that of the Syrian government. An Israel news report said 'seven police officers and at least four demonstrators in Syria have been killed', while the Ba'ath party headquarters and courthouse 'were torched'. Police had been targeted by rooftop snipers (Queenan 2011).

Al Jazeera (2011), owned by Qatar's royal family, key financial backers of the Muslim Brotherhood, implied the rooftop snipers in Dara were government forces, however the claim that secret police snipers were killing 'soldiers and protestors alike' was both illogical and out of sequence. The armed forces came to Dara because police had been killed by snipers. Once in Dara they engaged in a fire-fight and stormed the Omari mosque to seize the arms. Saudi official Anwar Al-Eshki would later confirm to the BBC that these arms had indeed been provided to militants in Dara, supposedly for self-defence (Truth Syria 2012). However evidence shows these arms were provided before the violence broke out.

Despite this the western media, almost unanimously, went on to report for many months that armed opposition in Syria did not exist. Government violence was said to have been used against 'peaceful protestors'. Only many months later did these protestors take up arms. The US-based group Human Rights Watch claimed 'protestors only used violence against the security forces' in response to killings by the security forces or 'as a last resort' (HRW 2011). This was a terrible deceit. Washington's allies – at first Saudi Arabia then later Qatar, Turkey and some elements in Lebanon – were sponsoring the armed insurrection, through established Brotherhood channels. In October 2011 the Istanbul-based Arab history academic Professor Jeremy Salt observed: 'The claim that armed opposition to the government has begun only recently is a complete lie. The

killings of soldiers, police and civilians, often in the most brutal circumstances, have been going on virtually since the beginning' (Salt 2011).

On 28 March the head of the Syrian Brotherhood, Muhammad Riyad Al-Shaqfa, issued a statement which left no doubt that the group's aim was sectarian, the enemy was 'the secular regime' and Brotherhood members 'have to make sure that the revolution will be pure Islamic, and with that no other sect would have a share of the credit after its success' (Al-Shaqfa 2011). While playing down the initial role of the Brotherhood, Sheikho confirms that it 'went on to punch above its actual weight on the ground during the uprising ... [due] to Turkish-Qatari support', and to its general organisational capacity (Sheikho 2013).

The subsequent rise of a 'Free Syrian Army' (FSA) – never a centrally commanded army but rather a number of groups loosely coordinated through funders and arms suppliers – was presented in most western analysis as an organic development from the civilian protest marches, in combination with local self-defence committees. The Salafi-jihadi role was played down. One US analyst asserted: 'The Syrian conflict began as a secular revolt against autocracy. Yet as the conflict protracts ... [there is] a small but growing jihadist presence inside Syria ... [President] Assad has used the threat of jihadists within the opposition to build support for the regime' (O'Bagy 2012). Similarly, another US report from 2012 claims: 'The vast majority of the opposition fighters are legitimate nationalists fighting for the country's freedom and the establishment of a democratic state ... most members within the FSA are pious rather than Islamists and are not motivated by sectarianism' (Benotman and Naseraldin 2012: 1). Nevertheless, the latter report goes on to categorise the following FSA groups as 'jihadis', on the basis of their aim to establish an Islamic state: Jabhat al-Nusra (al Nusra Front), Liwaa' al-Ummah (Brigade of the Nation), Sukur al-Sham (Falcons of the Levant), al-Dawla al-Islamiyya (the Islamic state) and Ahrar al-Sham (Benotman and Naseraldin 2012: 2).

Who then were these 'vast majority' of secular nationalists? The US-aligned International Crisis Group (ICG 2012), noting that 'the presence of a powerful Salafi strand among Syria's rebels has become irrefutable', speaks of 'a moderate Islamic tradition' and suggests that two groups which 'have yet to develop a firm ideology' might be secular: the Farouq brigade and the Khalid bin Walid brigade, both based in Homs (ICG 2012: i, 6; also Abouzeid 2012a), and the main forces that seized part of that city over 2011-2012. The Farouq Battalion grew out of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade in early 2012 to become the largest single rebel group up to that point in the Syrian conflict (Holliday 2012: 21-22). The Wall Street Journal has called the Farouq brigade 'pious Sunnis' rather than Islamists (Malas 2013). In their English language media statements they distance themselves from al Qaeda linked groups, so as not to alienate western support; but in Syria they wear al Qaeda-style black shahada headbands and often sport salafi-style beards (Channel4News 2012); The BBC has called Farouq 'moderately Islamist', suggesting they exaggerate their Islamism 'to attract financial support from the Gulf' (Marcus 2013).

However, Mortada observes that, 'most of the al-Farouq Battalion's members are Salafis, armed and funded by Saudi Arabia while 'Khalid Ibn al-Walid Battalion is loyal to and supported by the Muslim Brotherhood' (Mortada 2012). In early April, the Farouq Battalion was accused of collecting Jizyah, or taxes imposed on non-Muslims living under Muslim rule, in Christian areas of Homs province (Al-Haqiqah 2012; Holliday 2012: 27). Sources in the Christian Orthodox Church then accused Farouq of the large scale ethnic cleansing of Christians that took place in Homs in early 2012 (Agenzia Fides 2012). Farouq has been defended by foreign sympathisers, some of whom said the tens of thousands of Christians who left Homs did so just because of the fighting (Al Tamimi 2012). This might be more credible if all the Muslim population of Homs

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had left, as well; but it did not. Farouq is credibly blamed for blowing up a hospital in Qusayr, to the Islamist chants of 'Allahu Akhbar' (Oxnevg3n22 2012); supporters posted the same footage online, blaming this bombing on 'the regime' (SyrianDaysOfRage 2012). Yet the Syrian Army does not engage in Islamist chants. If this is the 'moderate FSA', we should recall that it was a former Farouq commander, Khalid al Hamad who was infamously shown on video trying to eat a dead Syrian soldier's heart (Greenfield 2013b). The Khalid Ibn al-Walid group is believed responsible for the use of a child to behead prisoners in Homs (HRI 2012). This is hardly 'Moderate Islamism'.

While there are a number of other salafi-jihadi groups – such as Umar al-Khattab, Ali Ibn bi-Taleb, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Rijal Allah, the Ali Ibn Abi-Taleb Brigade, Reef Dimashq Martyrs and al-Radeef al-Thawri (Mortada 2012), as well as various foreign salafi groups (including the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and the Pakistani Taliban), it is notable that none of the proponents of the 'secular FSA' theory seem able to present the names of such groups.

Two distinct features of the conflict attracted great attention in 2012. The first was the constant claims of Bashar al Assad 'killing his own people', linked to demands for foreign intervention. This story was driven by a corporate media which closely echoed the 'regime change' demands of the US, the UK and France. The UK Guardian, for example, ran a consistently partisan line against what was usually called 'the Syrian regime', portraying the conflict in simplistic and sectarian terms: 'Assad the Alawite, versus the Sunni majority' (Greaves 2013). This is a line which pretends that Ba'athist secular nationalism does not exist. The western media often made use of partisan sources (such as the Free Syrian Army aligned, England-based 'Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOHR) (McFarquar 2013). Nevertheless, two years into the conflict that same SOHR concluded that more than 40 percent of the casualties were government soldiers or pro-government civilians, casting doubt on its repeated assertion that the government of President Bashar al Assad was responsible for an overwhelming majority of the deaths (Enders 2013). British, US and French media sources were backed up by the media channels of Qatar (Al Jazeera) and Saudi Arabia (Al Arabiya), two gulf monarchies who were funding the armed opposition. In early 2012 a number of Al Jazeera journalists, mainly in the Beirut office, resigned over what they said was deliberate manipulation of the channel's reports on Syria (RT 2012).

A series of claims over civilian massacres 'by the regime' were used by the armed opposition in ultimately unsuccessful attempts to secure air force backing from NATO countries. The claims were highly contested. The Syrian government said that the anti-government armed groups had either carried out the killings themselves or were citing killings of armed fighters as civilians. A number of independent articles and analyses have since been published on these massacres, so they will not be detailed here. However the contested accounts of violence include: the Houla massacre (see Anderson 2012; Lendman 2012), the Daraya massacre (see Fisk 2012), the Aqrab massacre (see Thompson 2012), repeated attacks on students at the University of Aleppo (Owen 2013) and the use of Sarin gas in Aleppo (see Hall 2013 and Lauria 2013). In each of these cases FSA spokespeople attempted to use the accusations to incite foreign military intervention.

The use of repeated civilian massacres in attempts to secure international 'humanitarian' intervention represents an awful novelty in the annals of war. It demonstrated the danger of that relatively new doctrine of a 'responsibility to protect', which had been successfully invoked to secure NATO intervention and thus destroy the Libyan government of Muammar Gaddafi, in 2011 (Engdahl, 2011). It has since emerged that many of the accusations against Gaddafi were fabricated (Corbett 2011). While the same strategy had only limited success against the Syrian

Government, if even some of the analyses of 'false flag' massacres are correct, the 'responsibility to protect' doctrine has set up an inducement for the killing of civilians.

The second distinct feature of the recent Syrian conflict has been the very large scale participation of foreign Salafi-jihadis, from a range of countries including Libya, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Chechnya, Pakistan and various parts of Europe (Komireddi 2012, Gertz 2013, Kern 2013). This factor demonstrated that the conflict was not simply a national one, between Syrian Islamists and the secular state. The Salafi and Brotherhood forces have been able to prolong their attacks because of the participation of thousands of outside fighters, most often paid by Qatar and Saudi Arabia and trained in Turkey (Draitser 2013).

The foreign powers have usually not been direct belligerents, mostly acting as funders, trainers and arms suppliers. The US, Britain and France have led a diplomatic offensive, attempting to isolate the Syrian government and to impose successive non-elected groups as the 'legitimate representatives' of the Syrian people (Barkan 2013). Along with their regional Islamist collaborators, in particular Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, they have funded and armed the various FSA groups. Turkey has provided training grounds and a staging post for attacks on northern Syria (Edmonds 2013). Qatar has funded the Brotherhood and has provided arms through Turkey, recruiting foreign fighters, for example from Yemen, to be trained by US Special Forces in Qatar before being sent to Syria (*Al Alam* 2013a). Saudi Arabia, which armed the insurrection from its beginning in March 2011, has backed various foreign Salafi-jihadi groups, including Pakistani Taliban (Press TV 2013).

The role of Israel was cryptic, at least until 2013 when the Zionist state carried out several direct missile attacks on Syria (Gordon 2013), then gave assistance to Islamist fighters on the Golan border (Israel Today 2013). It is clear that Israel backs the ousting of President Bashar al Assad. In 2012 head of Israel's northern command, Major General Yair Golan, while focused on Syria's formidable South Lebanon ally, Hezbollah, said 'I would be very happy if [Assad] goes (Hayom 2012). Israel has issued what might be considered 'smokescreen' statements, saying they prefer secular Bashar to Islamist rebels (Times of Israel 2013), but this does not accord with the broader fear of what they call an 'axis of evil' between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah (Hayom 2013). Senior Israeli defence officials have made the issue plain, by saying that 'al-Qaeda control over Syria would be preferable to a victory by Assad over the rebels' (Pontz 2013; BICOM 2013). There are also reports that Israel is selling arms to the Saudis, for use by their client groups in Syria (Alalam 2013b). That is, although both al Qaeda type groups and Syria are seen by Israel as enemies, the squabbling, extremist sectarian groups are as a lesser risk than an organised and disciplined block across three countries. Israel is obsessed with breaking that nexus.

By late 2012 international support for the FSA had weakened somewhat, with widespread news of rebel atrocities (beheadings, public executions) and a steady fracturing of the image, carefully crafted over 2011 and 2012, that the 'revolution' was largely a secular uprising, with only marginal participation by religious extremists.

In November 2012, just a little more than six months after the US-led 'Friends of Syria' group had installed the exiled Syrian National Council (SNC) as the 'legitimate representatives' of the Syrian people, this group was demoted to a component of the 'National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces' (Barkan 2013: 1, 4). One of the foreign powers' aims was said to be to reduce Muslim Brotherhood domination of the group. Despite this, the Brotherhood rapidly came to dominate both this new Coalition and the FSA's 'Supreme Military Command' (SMC) (Draitser 2012). The SMC would gain influence by being made the principal channel of

weapons. However two-thirds of the 30 members of this 'Military Command' were said to be associated with the Brotherhood, along with some other independent Salafi-Islamists (Barkan 2013: 5). Further, this FSA-SMC grouping does not include Jabhat al-Nusra, the Salafi group most closely linked to al Qaeda in Iraq. There is clearly considerable popular support, amongst the FSA, for al Nusra. When in 2012 the US declared al Nusra as 'terrorist', FSA fighters sprang to its defence, 29 FSA groups declaring 'we are all al Nusra' (Cockburn 2012). There is thus a loose and sometimes fractious alliance between the Salafi fighters. After entering the war in Qusayr, Hezbollah confirmed that most of the fighters were takfiri groups (Daily Star 2013).

In 2013 General Salim Idriss was appointed head of the SMC. He was an FSA leader in whom Washington was prepared to place some trust (Greenfield 2013a). Idriss made some weak attempts to distance himself from al Nusra, but admitted that [at least] 50 percent of the rebels were Islamists and that he could work 'alongside' al Nusra (Greenfield 2013a). Despite suggestions of a battle between the 'moderate' FSA and extremists, a series of reports have noted, first, that Islamist fighters dominate and, second, that the Muslim Brotherhood 'has emerged as the leading western sanctioned force' in the region, dominating both the SNC and the SMC (Draitser 2012; Barkan 2013). The rivalry between groups seems likely to be power struggles amongst Islamists. The New York Times has observed 'nowhere in rebel-controlled Syria is there a secular fighting force to speak of' (Hubbard 2013). Others have noted that the FSA is selling arms to al Nusra (Roggio 2013). The myth of a secular uprising was losing traction, just as the rebels began to suffer significant military defeats, at Qusayr and Homs (Spencer 2013).

3. The Failure of Political Islam in Syria: some implications

In mid-2013, as internal and external forces began to shift in favour of the Syrian Government, mass protests against a Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt led to a military coup. President Mursi was deposed and, with him, the plans to constitutionally embed a sectarian regime. This coup also removed an important regional ally of the FSA. There was an immediate reaction from Syrian President Bashar al Assad: 'What is happening in Egypt is essentially the fall of political Islam'. He reiterated the classical secular opposition to 'using religion for politics', linking sectarianism to its manipulation by foreign powers to divide the region (Al Assad 2013). It seemed that the rise of Islamism in the region had hit a rock (see El-Amine 2013), in the form of the popularly-backed secular armies of both Egypt and Syria. Indeed, after more than two years of foreign backed attacks, mostly from religious-fanatics, and including targeted ethnic killings, it is very hard to imagine how multi-cultural Syria could have survived without its popular and secular institutions, not least the Syrian Arab Army.

The Brotherhood in Syria, as in Egypt, pretended to represent all Sunnis. However this was not the experience in the largely Sunni city of Aleppo. The western media reported a series of FSA commanders in Aleppo complaining about lack of support from local people. 'I know they hate us' one told The Guardian (Abdul-Ahad 2012). Time magazine reported another saying: 'The Aleppans here, all of them, are loyal to the criminal Bashar, they inform on us' (Abouzeid 2012b). The alienation of Sunni Syrians, what to speak of the minorities, was confirmed by a report carried out for NATO. It estimated that 70% of the Syrian population backed President Assad, and that much of this support came from secular Sunnis who were horrified by FSA atrocities. 'The people are sick of the war and hate the jihadists more than Assad', a Western source familiar with the data said. 'Assad is winning the war mostly because the people are cooperating with him against the rebels' (World Tribune 2013; Al Manar 2013). The entry of Lebanon's Hezbollah into the Syrian fighting to re-take the town of al-Qusayr hardly represented a sectarian turn in the fighting. Hezbollah, linked to Shiia communities around al-Qusayr, was

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fighting alongside a secular Syrian Arab Army and in defence of the secular Syrian state. Hezbollah, despite being Shia Islamist, backs multi-religious political alliances in Lebanon and Syria and rejects Salafi 'takfiri' ideas (Haidar 2013).

The Syrian experience indicates that a Political Islam which has the sectarian Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabism as its dominant currents cannot be a force for inclusive democratic development. This is a matter of history rather than theology. Conversely, the Shia Islamism represented by Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Islamic Republic in Iran has formed alliances across sectarian boundaries, rather than through sectarian politics, also for historical reasons. Shia Hezbollah, Shia Iran (along with secular Syria) have backed the Palestinians - both the secular PLO and Sunni Hamas - as part of an anti-imperialist alliance, and in face of Israeli aggression. There are very few Shia Muslims in Palestine. At home, Hezbollah maintains an alliance with the major Christian faction, thus forming part of the Lebanese Government (Mroueh 2013).

The wider lessons here have much to do with building strong, inclusive nation-states and regional alliances. At the moment Syria and Iran are the only states in the region without US military bases, and that independence attracts hostility. Washington's hegemonic project over the last decade has been directed at domination of the entire region, and at breaking down independent and strong states. Yet strong states are well recognised as being necessary for participatory human development (Sengupta 2002: 847-8, 853) as well as for effective economic development (Johnson 1982; Amsden 1989). The state remains the principal means by which longer term investment in inclusive institutions, such as in mass education and public health can build both human capacity and strategic advantage for the former colonies. This requires substantial political will, especially in a world with big power ideology which – often in the name of 'open markets' and individual freedoms – seeks to disqualify that independent political will.

The experience in Latin America, too, shows that strong states and regional alliances are vital to resisting destabilisation from foreign powers. There is barely a country in Latin America that has not been subject to destabilisation, coup or invasion, backed by Washington (Grandin 2007; Blum 2005). The building of strong regional institutions like the ALBA, UNASUR and CELAC – instigated by the late President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela – is seen as an important counter-weight to such destabilisation (Weisbrot 2013). In the Middle East a similar broad and formal alliance – stretching across Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon to Egypt – would be a nightmare for the foreign powers but could form a great pillar of stable and inclusive development for the peoples of the region.

This paper has tried to demonstrate a series of inter-related propositions. First, the main forces of Political Islam in the Middle East – Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood – have no capacity to build coherent national or regional structures, as they are mired in a sectarian and collaborationist history. Second, the foreign powers have consistently, for the last century, incited and worked with divisive and sectarian forces, specifically the Saudi Wahhabis and the Muslim Brotherhood, to help in their plans to dominate the region. Third, the main forces of Political Islam have been particularly sectarian and 'takfiri' in Syria, due to a long history of conflict with a firmly secular Ba'athist regime. Fourth, the 2011 insurrection in Syria, far from being a popular, secular revolt or a 'revolution', was the latest in a series of Islamist insurrections. The tragic violence has been prolonged by large scale foreign backing, including the import of thousands of foreign fighters. Fifth, the Salafi groups' use of civilian massacres, in attempts to incite foreign military intervention, presents a dangerous new implication of the new doctrine of a 'responsibility to protect'. It has set up an inducement for the killing of civilians, to attract partisan military support. Finally, it seems fairly plain that viable and inclusive democratic

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development in Syria, as in the region, requires secular development, in the sense of cross-community collaboration, with the prospect of forming a regional bloc capable of resisting foreign destabilisation. The recent Latin American experience suggests some valuable lessons.

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