



The Gulf and the Muslim Brotherhood

by Sir John Jenkins

Islamism is central to understanding the 2017 GCC diplomatic crisis

Much analysis of the current Gulf diplomatic crisis suggests it is simply a clash of egos. This is to trivialize something that arises out of the logic of five decades of Gulf development and poses fundamental questions not just about the future of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) but the region itself.

A brief history

The question of Islamism—above all the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)—is central to the current dispute. Although the movement was never allowed to organize inside Saudi Arabia, the MB's links to the Gulf go back to the organization's founding. And by the 1950s, it had embedded itself in the region. The group's support for the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and then the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 came as shocks to Gulf leaders. In some places, too, the presence

of proselytizing and Salafized Brothers and the support provided to the MB and its offshoots by religious institutions produced an ideological ferment, combining MB political activism and Qutbist *takfirism* with an intense focus on issues of doctrine and personal conduct. This diverse regional movement—known as the Islamic *sah-wa* (“awakening”)—came in the 1990s to pose a powerful ideological challenge to existing dispensations.

In the late 1990s, the then-Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz, stigmatized the MB as deviationists. In 2002, the late Prince Nayef spoke bitterly about the Saudi and Kuwaiti experience in 1990-91, and accused the MB of betraying the trust of the Gulf states.

In addition, many Gulf Arabs saw the secretive and cell-based Islamic Da'wa party as a Shia version of the MB. Da'wa in Iraq arose out of the same milieu as the MB, modeling itself on them and (like AQ and IS) adopting its key texts: Hassan al-Banna and especially Sayyid Qutb cross sectarian boundaries. Radical Shia Islamisms have undergone a similar process of globalization and deculturation. And there is simultaneous attraction and repulsion between Islamism's Sunni and Shia poles.

The events of the Arab Spring hit the Gulf region hard. Those who welcomed the ascent of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in Egypt were states that saw an opportunity to advance their own purposes. But opponents, like the Saudis and Emiratis, were appalled.

The current dispute

This complex historical experience is the background to the current crisis in the Gulf, and it has exposed fundamental differences. Some see political Islamism in its many forms as the wave of the future; others as a permanent force that needs to be accommodated; and some as the most serious challenge to the stability, prosperity and security of the region and its ruling elites since the high tide of Nasserism in the 1960s.

For the first two groups, the key is to embrace and domesticate Islamism within existing institutions. The Egyptian military may have removed

the FJP and suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood—with substantial popular support—in 2013. But, reflecting a characteristic teleological determinism, they think this will eventually be reversed. Time is on the side of the Islamists.

Those in the last group profoundly disagree, as do many on the receiving end of interventions in favor of the MB and other Islamisms. They think resistance is needed. For them, the MB's conduct from the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution, and, most egregiously once they secured power, confirmed their ultimate goal was to gain control of the Arab world's most populous and culturally resonant state, to ensure they remained in power indefinitely and to promote their ideology across a region prepared for it by 80 years of sustained effort. Events in Libya, Tunisia, Jordan and Yemen showed the MB would not have stopped at the Red Sea. Nasser had the same hegemonic ambitions—this was an Islamist reboot.

For the Saudis, the MB has come to represent a profound ideological threat to the basis of their state. For them, it is a secretive, partisan and divisive organization dedicated to a self-defined renewal of Islam and the establishment of a transnational Islamic state through incremental but ultimately revolutionary political activism, using tactical violence if necessary. The MB mimics some central features of a state in its hierarchical structure and the requirement for members to swear an exclusive oath of loyalty to the Murshid. However, it repudiates national identity and any loyalty other than that to the Murshid and God.

The Saudis believe this outlook represents a dangerously radical misreading of Islamic history in the service of “anarchy” (their term). Their Islam needs no *tajdeed*—the kingdom is a legitimate Islamic state, with a religiously legitimate ruler, and all Saudis owe absolute loyalty to him as *wali al amr*. Any advice to him from the *ulama* should therefore be discreet. Anyone who acknowledges fealty to another is considered disloyal to the king by definition. This is also their view of the heterodox doctrine of *wilayat al faqih* (or indeed the Shirazi doctrine of *shura al fuqaha*). For the Saudis, it is above all a question of territorial allegiance and loyalty to a sovereign individual. That is why they have been engaged now for at least a decade in the task of constructing a national

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identity based precisely on loyalty to the ruling dynasty, its reading of Islam, and a set of territorial and historical characteristics. They are now bent on modernizing the kingdom—and political Islamism threatens this project.

There is, of course, a significant apologetic element to these claims given the kingdom's past support for the MB (including Qutbists) from the late 1920s to the 1980s, as well as its encouragement of pan-Islamism and the resulting role that variants of Saudi-based Salafism played across the region since the 1970s. The Saudis are concerned about the shape-shifting nature of radical Islamist thought in general and the threat this poses to national cohesion and identity. They do not want their guardianship of the two holy cities, Mecca and Medina, to be politicized by others. This, like any internationalization of control or diversion to other places of pilgrimage, notably Najaf, would undermine the kingdom's authority. The struggle is no longer an external one against the forces of godless nationalism—it is domestic and within Islam itself.

In contrast, the Emiratis, who acknowledge a more diverse jurisprudential tradition, see political Islamism not just as subversive but opposed to everything they stand for in terms of a neo-patrimonial Arab and Islamic, highly securitized but also socially permissive modernity. It is not an irresistibly rising tide but a threat to the prosperity and cohesion of the UAE, a place where cultures can meet, tolerate difference, prosper and still remain intact within the framework of conservative social traditions and the country's major global ambitions.

The Emiratis are angered by the public license given to Qaradawi and others to question their Islamic credentials and therefore legitimacy. They feel the challenge—in a way larger states might not—of maintaining harmony among large and diverse expatriate populations as well as soli-

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darity among nationals. They think the MB instrumentalize the Gulf, and they want to avoid disharmony—domestically with the more conservative Qawasim emirates, where *Islah* has strong roots, and with some powerful neighbors.

Both the UAE's and Saudi's immediate focus then is on Egypt. Its capture by the MB alongside the spread of Iranian power; the emergence of a new, battle-hardened and transnational Shia gendarmerie in the Levant; and the rise of ISIS would have been the worst challenge the Gulf as a whole had ever faced. That is why both countries now attach so much importance to binding Egypt into any serious new security dispensation in the region.

Some claim Saudi pressure on the MB has eased since January 2015. But the issue was never about the existence of political Islamism but its instrumentalization. Saudi and Emirati hostility to MB activism after 2011 was not new, and their proscription of the MB was always selective. We have seen this most markedly in Yemen, Bahrain and Jordan.

As long as Islamists, including the MB, serve the interests of their host state and its allies, everything is fine. When they become perceived agents of *fitna* ("sedition") under external direction or independently, then they are no longer tolerated. This is the real quarrel the Saudis and the UAE has with Qatar—and indeed with Turkey.

A rational response?

Some may say these fears of the MB are exaggerated. But we should at least make an effort to understand how the key regional actors see the situation, what drives their actions and where their real interests lie. We should recall that a plurality of young Arabs in annual surveys say the UAE is the place they most admire, and that the current Saudi reform program is precisely the sort of plan western governments and economists have consistently called for. The current crisis may have been managed sub-optimally, but when we reflect on the context, we might conclude that it is far from being personality-driven. We might also conclude that it was the engagement with Islamists in the first place—constructed as it was on interlocking personal relationships that the MB

were adept at manipulating—that was personalized and unreflective, and that the reaction to them has been structural and rational. In this view, it is at least in part a reaction to the MB's instrumentalization of those who had thought they were doing the instrumentalization.

Nor is the current crisis a simple clash between democracy and authoritarianism. It is a question of the nature of the state, national security, who gets to determine social and political normativity, and who uses whom—all in an age where the real threats are not to political systems but to the existence of states themselves.

Sir John Jenkins is the Executive Director of The International Institute for Strategic Studies – Middle East and a former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia.