Muslims in Mecca. Photo: Pixabay

# Toward a New "Solution"?
# Islamic Ideologies in the Middle East a Decade after the Uprisings

## Dov Dell and Sarah Feuer

In an area riven by a decade of war, political shockwaves, and identity crises, it appears that the dominant Islamic factions operating in the Middle East—Sunni and Shiite, moderate and extremist, establishment and revolutionary—have reached a physical and ideological nadir. This downturn is evident despite the fact that at some point or another since the upheaval of the Arab Spring, each of these strands identified an opportunity to leverage its vision and translate it into political, military, economic, and cognitive gains. This paper analyzes key developments affecting four particular streams of Islamic thought from the upheaval up to the eve of the coronavirus outbreak: Sunni political Islam (mainly the Muslim Brotherhood and its proxies), establishment Sunni Islam, Salafi-jihadism, and Shiite Islam. The paper concludes with a discussion of possible future scenarios.

*Keywords*: Islam, ideology, Iran, political Islam, Shiite Islam, Salafi-jihadi

## Introduction: Ideological Confusion among Islamic Movements a Decade after the Arab Spring

This article examines the evolution of the main streams of Islamic thought in the Middle East over the past decade: Sunni political Islam (particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and its proxies), establishment Sunni Islam, Salafi-jihadism, and Shiite Islam. The main argument is that in an area riven by a decade of civil wars, political shockwaves, and identity crises, it appears that all the Islamic factions operating in the space—Sunni and Shiite, moderate and extreme, establishment and revolutionary— have reached a physical and ideological nadir. This downturn is evident despite the fact that at some point or another since the upheaval, each of these strands identified an opportunity to leverage its vision and translate it into political, military, economic, and cognitive gains. This paper analyzes the most important changes in these four streams from the upheaval to the eve of the COVID-19 outbreak in the region.

Apart from the particular features of the respective ideological movements and the ups and downs each has weathered over the years, they have all confronted a number of common challenges, among them:

a. A widening gap between the Islamic ideological offering and public demand, partly as a result of the strengthening of individual identity at the expense of group identities (religious, national, ethnic, tribal). The groups that led the protests a decade ago were mainly youth who were exposed to Western culture and wanted to adopt at least some of its daily practices, if not all of its ideas. Most of these youth put themselves (their ego, or "the individual") rather than the collective at the center. Consequently, the gap between the problems on the ground faced by the public and the solutions offered by the religious leaders (who usually emphasize the community of believers) has grown.

b. A generational shift and the disappearance of the last "great enlightened ones." None of

the Islamic streams have so far succeeded in bringing to the fore young religious leaders who combine charisma with expertise and scholarship, and who can step into the shoes of an older generation of thinkers and religious arbiters and lead the community of believers.

> In an area riven by a decade of civil wars, political shockwaves, and identity crises, it appears that all the Islamic factions operating in the space—Sunni and Shiite, moderate and extreme, establishment and revolutionary—have reached a physical and ideological nadir.

In the circles of political Islam, for example, the Egyptian Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, considered by many to be a dominant religious arbiter in the Sunni world, has reached the age of 94 without an heir, certainly not of his stature. In the realm of establishment Islam, Sheikh Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz, who prior to his death in 1999 was the head of the Wahhabi movement and the former chief mufti of Saudi Arabia, was considered one of the greatest Sunni clerics of the previous century. In contrast, his successor Abd al-Aziz al-Sheikh (now in office) does not enjoy the personal prestige of his predecessor and has difficulty resisting pressure, from the regime and from the public, to institute reforms in the country. Among the jihadists, al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri (who is rumored to have died recently) is considered a creative and innovative thinker, but in recent years lost influence after struggling to fill the leadership and operational void left by his predecessor and longtime partner, Osama bin Laden. The killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019 weakened the ISIS brand without restoring the status of al-Qaeda. And in the Shiite world, the historical move from Khomeini, the idealist and all-powerful leader whose position was tailored to his

stature, to Khamenei, his inferior in every way (personal prestige, religious scholarship, juridical authority, and political power) is particularly striking, and when the time comes, Khamenei's heir will likely be more of a religious politician and less of a *marja taqlid* (a scholarly cleric to be followed).

c. Difficulty competing with the flood of content made possible by technology. The instant access to information and content from all over the world by a young, technologically savvy public requires the Muslim faithful (like all religious groups) to adjust and adapt, but in many respects that adaptation has not occurred. Apart from ISIS, which in large measure built itself by exploiting this technological reality (which explains much of its international resonance and the opposition it aroused), most of the Islamic factions have not yet entered the arena of the core cognitive struggle for the minds of the public in the Middle East.

d. The experience and growing sense of failure in translating vision into reality. This has been evidenced by four decades of the "revolution" in Iran, more than a decade of Hamas rule in Gaza, the destruction left by the Islamic State, and growing Western superiority in the face of the accelerating decline of the Islamic world (contrary to the ancient prophecies of a reversal of this trend). Sometimes the sense of failure is so strong that it obscures a more balanced reality. For example, in the case of the brief Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt, the political and economic damage the group caused is perceived by Egyptian public opinion, with the active encouragement of the Sisi regime, as far more dramatic than it actually was. Consequently, the chaotic period between the removal of Mubarak and the rise of el-Sisi is identified above all with the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, if and when the Muslim Brotherhood wishes to return to the political arena in Egypt, it

will have to breach the barrier of negative public opinion, one it did not face in 2012.

And yet, in spite of all the challenges—both individual and shared—that have forced Islamic movements into a crisis of thought and an ideological maelstrom, Islam still has the power to attract in the Middle East of today. The democratic-secular-civil alternative that various circles in the region entertained at the start of the previous decade has not materialized (except perhaps in the case of Tunisia, and even there the processes of change are still just beginning). The public demonstrations that returned in 2019 (in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, and to a lesser extent, Jordan) have not yet managed to offer an alternative to the more familiar centralized-sectarian-religious structures. How the various Islamic strands of thought navigate the multiple crises confronting the region in the coming years will affect the evolving role of religion in the Middle East in the longer term.

## 1. Sunni Political Islam since the Upheaval: Down but not Out

Since the defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013, the regional camp that includes the various factions of Sunni political Islam has been plagued with organizational division and a lack of ideological unity. The Egyptian movement and its proxies abroad have been embroiled in internal debates and schisms largely stemming from disagreements over the use of force, the justification for violence, and the importance of the supra-national Muslim identity relative to particular national identities and issues. The weakening of this camp has also been reflected in declining public support, although it retains a faithful base of supporters among Arab populations.

### The Situation in Egypt

The current predicament of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt stems from the events of 2013, when the military revolt that brought down

the government of Mohamed Morsi prompted a severe repression of the movement. Following the dispersal of demonstrators in Cairo's Rabaa and al-Nahda squares in August 2013 (in which 800 activists were killed), some 40,000 members of the movement were imprisoned. Out of 21 members of the Guidance Office, only six remained free by the end of the year, and three of them fled the country (Ranko & Yaghi, 2019).

These events caused a split in the movement into two broad factions (both of which nonetheless continued to accept the leadership of Muhammad Badia, the General Guide). The first group was led by remnants of the pre-2013 leadership, including Acting General Guide Mahmoud Azzat (who was arrested by the Egyptian regime in August 2020), Secretary-General Mahmoud Hussein (who is now in Turkey), and international secretary Ibrahim Munair (who is in London). This group, which controls most of the organization's assets worldwide, argues that the security situation in Egypt precludes internal elections for the time being. The second group was established in 2014 under the leadership of three figures: Muhammad Taha Wahdan (imprisoned in 2015), Ali Batikh (in Turkey since 2015), and Muhammad Kamal (killed in 2016). Following internal elections in 2016, the new group set up an office in Turkey managed by Ahmed Abdulrahman, with apparent responsibility for Muslim Brotherhood affairs outside Egypt.

The split in the Egyptian movement in 2013 was expressed not only in distinctive organizational structures but also ideologically, with a division into two groups with opposing views on the use of force and violence against the regime. For the remnants of the old leadership at the helm of the first group, there is no justification for using force. This was the message of the closing statement of the international conference hosted by Turkey in September 2019, where some 500 members of the Muslim Brotherhood (mostly supporters of the original leadership) gathered in Istanbul. By contrast, the new group argues that the use of force against regime representatives

(police, judges, and so on) is justified due to the movement's oppression by an illegitimate regime.

However, contrary to the jihadi organizations that justify violence against regimes in Muslim countries through the concept of *takfir* (labeling other Muslims as "infidels"), the breakaway faction of the Muslim Brotherhood has based their arguments on a 2015 *fatwa* (religious ruling) signed by 150 prominent religious figures, some with prior links to the Muslim Brotherhood and some active in European Muslim organizations known to support the Muslim Brotherhood. The *fatwa* relies on the concept of retribution against severe repression (*qisas*), including by destroying symbols of the state. This group has established ties to other militant groups in Egypt, including terror organizations, such that today there is no meaningful distinction between the new Muslim Brotherhood faction and the jihadists in Egypt—notwithstanding doctrinal differences behind the justification of violence (Ranko & Yaghi, 2019).

### *The Situation in Turkey, Gaza, and Qatar*

Outside Egypt, the years 2013-2020 saw the emergence of two main factions within the Sunni political Islamist camp: the first and more cohesive lies in the Turkey-Qatar-Gaza axis, and a second, if less cohesive, group is reflected in the Islamist parties that survived the Arab Spring and continue to participate in the political systems of countries such as Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco. The division between the two factions derives mainly from the relative emphasis they place on the pan-Islamic identity, compared to national identities and domestic concerns. After 2013, the political leadership in Turkey, Qatar, and the Gaza Strip continued to promote traditional principles of the Muslim Brotherhood ideology, either by identifying themselves as belonging to the movement (in the case of Erdogan in Turkey and Hamas in Gaza) or through open support of movements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood across the region (as with Qatar).

In Turkey, the President's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has over the years spearheaded a process of Islamization of society, mainly by weakening the secular-Kemalist establishment, led by the army, and through reforms in education. Since the fall of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, the Turkish government has become a leading supporter of Sunni Islamist groups in the Middle East, from Hamas in Gaza to the International Union of Muslim Scholars—the Islamist organization with its base in Qatar, which until 2018 was led by Yusuf al-Qaradawi—to the Government of National Accord and its Islamist supporters in Libya, where Turkey dramatically increased its military involvement in early 2020. Turkish support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its proxies was also on display at the international conference that Erdogan hosted in September 2019. Indeed, the slogan of the conference was "The Muslim Brotherhood: Distinguishing the Idea and Continuing the Project," and the closing statement stressed a commitment to the global Muslim community above any national interest.

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The same commitment can be identified in the Hamas charter that the organization tried to supplement with a new policy paper in 2017, which maintained the close link between Palestinian identity and the broader Islamic identity (and the Arab-Muslim world in general). Thus, the movement is defined in the policy paper as first and foremost an Islamic movement, and only then a Palestinian national movement, prioritizing the pan-Islamic aspect of the ideology. The new document eliminates the previous reference to the struggle against Israel as a struggle against Judaism, and states instead that "Hamas has no conflict

with Jews as Jews, [but] the movement sees the fight as one with the Zionist project and not with the Jews because of their religion." This formulation is identical to al-Qaradawi's rhetoric in an interview he gave to al-Jazeera in 2014, in which he argued, "We are not fighting them because they are Semites. We are also Semites…They have made the conflict between us into a religious matter, so we fight religion with religion" (al-Jazeera Mubasher, 2014).

In the same interview (which took place during Operation Protective Edge), al-Qaradawi called for a new intifada in the Palestinian territories and condemned the Arab regimes for their apathy over the Palestinian issue—familiar topics in Islamist discourse for decades. The fact that al-Qaradawi continues to broadcast such interviews from Doha reflects Qatar's ongoing patronage of Sunni Islamist movements since the upheaval—patronage that partly explains Qatari support for Hamas in recent years (although the Muslim Brotherhood is forbidden to operate within Qatar). In 2018, at the age of 92, al-Qaradawi resigned as head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, and was replaced by Dr. Ahmad Raysuni, a religious leader of Moroccan origin. Raysuni was head of the leading Muslim Brotherhood movement in Morocco, the Movement for Unity and Reform, from 1996 to 2003, when he was forced to resign due to his public opposition to the decision by King Mohammed VI to centralize the process of issuing *fatwas* in the kingdom. As recently as 2019, when Raysuni was appointed to the Faculty of Sharia and Islamic Studies at Qatar University, he was promoting the idea that expressing doubt about the Holocaust is not only the right of Muslims but their duty. Both Raysuni and al-Qaradawi continue to find platforms to disseminate their claims on Qatari television and radio.

### The Situation in Other Countries
In countries where parties with historical roots in the Muslim Brotherhood (for example Morocco, Tunisia, and Jordan) survived the wave of

suppression of the movement from 2013, these parties have limited their ideological emphasis on the pan-Islamic identity, increased their engagement with local issues, and taken steps to separate their political activity from their religious activity. In Morocco, for example, the Justice and Development Party, whose roots are in the Muslim Brotherhood, decided to distance itself officially from the Egyptian movement in 2013. In 2016, Rached Ghannouchi, head of the al-Nahda party in Tunisia, announced that henceforth his party would identify as "a party of Muslim democracy," relinquish the moniker of "political Islam," and ask its members who were active in religious circles to give up their political roles.

The splits in 2012-2015 in the Islamic Action Front, the leading Muslim Brotherhood party in Jordan, arose to a large extent from the desire of some parties to put an end to the Muslim Brotherhood's monopoly on Islamist discourse in the kingdom, and from their wish to prioritize internal political and economic reforms over external matters such as the Palestinian issue. The original Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood movement, which lost official government recognition in 2015, has continued to promise that one day Jordan will become a country within the broader "Islamic caliphate." In spite of the difficulties that the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan has faced since 2013, there have recently been signs that the government is softening its stance toward the Islamists, in order to divert public anger over unpopular steps (such as the gas deal with Israel), and in an effort to maintain channels of communication with Hamas. Against the background of President Trump's "deal of the century" and the possibility that Hamas could emerge in a stronger position, the Jordanian regime saw value in setting up a back door channel to the Palestinian Islamist movement. The steps that the regime was forced to take in order to manage the coronavirus crisis led to further tensions with the Muslim Brotherhood, which for many years has dominated the

Teachers' Association and other sectors that were adversely affected by the economic decline due to the pandemic.

The current landscape is thus marked by a central paradox facing the Islamist parties that survived the last decade: the more these organizations renounce their Islamist identity and principles, the more successful they are in capturing positions on the political map of their countries. But whereas the price they paid protected these organizations from government oppression, it has also cost them public support, as growing segments of the populations have either come to associate them with more extremist movements such as ISIS or found it hard to point to what was left of these parties' original Islamism.

### Sunni Political Islam in Public Opinion

The decline in public support for political Islam in the region in recent years is charted in opinion polls, although these same surveys indicate divergences (sometimes very significant) between countries. A sample of surveys conducted by the Washington Institute from 2014 to early 2020 (before the coronavirus outbreak) reveals that groups linked to political Islam did indeed lose support over that period (Tables 1-3). In some cases, the decrease was minimal, as in Lebanese, Emirati, and Palestinian support for the Muslim Brotherhood, and Emirati support for Hamas. Notably, support for Hamas in Lebanon has increased dramatically over the years, contrary to all the other countries surveyed (Pollock, 2019). The Lebanese may perhaps perceive Hamas as a partner in the fight against Israel, with this perception reinforced by Operation Protective Edge between Hamas and Israel in 2014.

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### Table 1. Positive and negative attitudes toward the Muslim Brotherhood in the region, 2014/2019

| Country | Positive | | | Negative | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2014 | 2019 | Trend | 2014 | 2019 | Trend |
| Egypt | 35% | 28% | -7 | 60% | 69% | +9 |
| Jordan | 24% | 19% | -5 | 72% | 77% | +5 |
| Kuwait | 34% | 26% | -8 | 63% | 70% | +7 |
| Saudi Arabia | 31% | 21% | -10 | 65% | 76% | +11 |
| Lebanon | 12% | 11% | -1 | 87% | 90% | +3 |
| UAE | 29% | 28% | -1 | 67% | 67% | — |

### Table 2. Positive and negative attitudes toward the Muslim Brotherhood in the Palestinian Authority and Gaza, 2018/2020

| | Positive | | | Negative | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2018 | 2020* | Trend | 2018 | 2020 | Trend |
| | 38% | 37% | -1 | 62% | 56% | -6 |

*The survey was conducted before the coronavirus outbreak

### Table 3. Positive and negative attitudes toward Hamas in countries of the region, 2014/2019

| Country | Positive | | | Negative | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2014 | 2019 | Trend | 2014 | 2019 | Trend |
| Egypt | 33% | 25% | -8 | 64% | 71% | +7 |
| Jordan | 72% | 54% | -18 | 25% | 43% | +18 |
| Kuwait | 53% | 34% | -19 | 46% | 65% | +19 |
| Saudi Arabia | 52% | 22% | -30 | 44% | 75% | +31 |
| Lebanon | 35% | 59% | +24 | 65% | 41% | -24 |
| UAE | 44% | 43% | -1 | 53% | 53% | — |

the Arab population in the region support the Muslim Brotherhood. Support for Hamas hovers around 40 percent on average, likely due to the organization's image as a leader in the fight against Israel on behalf of the Palestinians, and less because of its Islamist agenda. The most dramatic change occurred in Saudi Arabia, following the regime's efforts to label the Muslim Brotherhood and associated movements as

terror organizations operating contrary to the religion of Islam. These figures suggest that in spite of the difficulties faced by Sunni political Islam in recent years, the stream of thought still enjoys a measure of consistent support. And as the Egyptian case suggests, in spite of the severe repression of the Muslim Brotherhood there, the experience of 2012-2013 will remain in the collective memory of some population groups as an aborted experiment, rather than a failed one. To the extent the coronavirus pandemic has emerged as a critical test for regimes in the region, it seems quite possible that the surviving Sunni Islamist organizations will be among those attempting to exploit the perceived failures of regional leaders to manage the crisis.

## 2. Establishment Sunni Islam: Attempts at Reform alongside Structural Challenges

Since the start of the regional upheaval in 2011—and particularly in light of the rise (and fall) of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and of ISIS—official, or establishment, Sunni Islam (that is, Islamic institutions belonging to state bodies) has sought to reinforce its legitimacy in the eyes of the public, as part of the regimes' broader strategies of survival. Several mild but noteworthy shifts emerged in the rhetoric of these institutions over the last decade, including a clear opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, an emphasis on (and preference for) national identity over trans-national religious identity, and a promotion of the rights of religious minorities as well as inter-faith initiatives. Certain countries also sought to export a more moderate religious discourse beyond their borders. Case studies from Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia point to efforts by the relevant institutions to present a convincing alternative to Islamic radicalism, but they also reveal the limitations of those efforts.

### Establishment Islam in Egypt
Since 2013, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has advocated a process of religious

reform through the official religious institutions, including al-Azhar (the supreme institution of Islamic studies in the Sunni world), the Ministry of Endowments, and Dar al-Iftaa. Following the revolt that brought down the Morsi regime, Sisi sought to extend his control of the religious sphere. In this framework, the regime closed hundreds of unofficial mosques, allowed sermons only by imams who were approved by al-Azhar and the Ministry of Endowments, and tried to standardize the content of Friday sermons. In December 2014, a few months after the rise of ISIS, Sisi gave a speech at al-Azhar in which he called on the clerics in the audience to lead a "religious revolution," with the aim of opposing Islamic extremism.

To a large extent the al-Azhar scholars balked at the demand, and very little has changed since then. Toward the international community the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayeb, has tried to present the institution as responsible and tolerant—as shown, for example, by his shared declaration with Pope Francis in 2019. But within Egypt there is no evidence that these initiatives have had much effect: conservative clerics (including Muslim Brotherhood supporters and Salafists) still occupy senior academic positions, textbooks and syllabi have not undergone meaningful reforms, and the institution has exploited the laws on blasphemy to prosecute anyone who calls for a review of the extreme interpretations of the tradition. Al-Azhar has also not shrunk from conflict with Sisi around issues such as the call to put an end to verbal divorce. After a number of failed attempts by the President to extend his control of the institution, in 2020 the Parliament temporarily approved a law that would remove Dar al-Iftaa (the main body responsible for disseminating religious rulings) from al-Azhar's control and place it under cabinet supervision (Feuer, 2020). Ultimately the law did not pass, and thus a proposal that could have led to a dramatic reduction in the power of al-Azhar was rejected, at least for now.

Unlike al-Azhar, the Ministry of Endowments—and in particular, Minister Mohammed Mokhtar Gom'a, who is close to Sisi—called for a review of the Sunna using modern analytical tools, and also called on religious leaders to interpret the classical texts with reference to contemporary social norms, emphasizing the difference between a "sacred principle" and "human thought that is written about the sacred text." In his efforts to promote these ideas, Gom'a encountered strong opposition from the al-Azhar leadership, and competition between the institutions has constituted an additional barrier to any significant reform of Egyptian establishment Islam (Yehoshua, 2020).

## Establishment Islam in Morocco

A similar form of institutional competition can be seen in Morocco, although there the religious legitimacy of the King, together with his role as the state's chief religious authority, has accounted for the relative success of the kingdom's efforts to reform the religious discourse using the official institutions of Moroccan Islam. In 2015 the King established a new institution in Rabat, whose declared main purpose is to train imams so that they will be able to counteract extremist strains of the religion. The institution's students are not only from the kingdom but also from countries in West Africa and even Europe—reflecting the regime's drive to export its own brand of "moderate Islam." The courses at the academy are divided into groups: Islamic law, humanities (including courses on history, Western philosophy, Islamic philosophy, and comparative religion), and vocational training. The last group reflects the expectation that most of the students will return to their countries and work as imams in addition to their main professions. As for the courses on religious subjects, the syllabi emphasize the reformist orientation that the country has promoted for over a decade, in particular the state's preference for the Maliki school of Islamic law, the Ash'ari theological school, and Sufism. The courses on Islamic law focus on sayings and

actions attributed to the Prophet, and include lessons that delegitimize the practice of *takfir*.

The underlying assumption of the imam training academy is that extremism derives from ignorance and lack of knowledge of the classical texts, rather than from controversies over the interpretation of these texts. Therefore, the students do not return to their countries with particularly sophisticated knowledge, but the goal is more modest: the academy seeks to inoculate these students against extremist teachings so they can, in turn, instruct citizens of their own countries who have little knowledge of the religious tradition. The imams graduating from the academy will likely not be able to persuade someone who has been radicalized on the internet to renounce his jihadist ideology, but the academy's leaders have a different target audience in mind: those who have not been exposed to significant religious messages, either online or elsewhere. In this sense, in Morocco, establishment Islam is seen as a barrier to extremism, but not necessarily a cure.

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### Establishment Islam in Saudi Arabia

Throughout 2016 and 2017, a number of official statements in Riyadh hinted that Saudi Arabia was planning to fundamentally alter the place of religion in the public sphere and revise the way in which it promotes Salafi doctrine all over the world, as part of broader changes in its religious policy. Indeed, since the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the kingdom has taken steps designed to limit the authority of certain religious institutions (for example, by allowing women to drive, opening cinemas, and opening performance venues); integrate more progressive voices into other religious institutions (as shown by the appointment of relatively liberal thinkers to

the Council of Senior Scholars—the supreme religious body in the kingdom); and silence independent clerics who were identified with the political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood.

As for the export of Saudi Islam worldwide, which for decades was accused of spreading Islamic extremism and encouraging terror organizations, the rise of MBS led to significant (and largely positive) rhetorical changes in the activities of the Muslim World League, the main body responsible for the export of Saudi Salafism. These changes were reflected in four principal shifts: greater preference for the national identity of Muslims over their religious identity; a stronger condemnation of Islamist ideologies that encourage terror; an expansion of inter-faith activity (including openness to Christian worship in the kingdom); and a series of condemnations of the Holocaust. At the same time, concrete changes on the ground in countries where the League has operated have been limited, partly due to the nature of the ties between the headquarters of the League in Mecca and its branches all over the world, and partly due to relations between the organization and other religious institutions within Saudi Arabia. These limitations reflect internal limitations in the kingdom, where social reforms have not yet extended to deeper changes in the education system (Feuer, 2019).

### The Question of Legitimacy

The foregoing survey prompts the question whether changes in the rhetoric of establishment Islam have influenced Sunni populations in the region, and whether the public in general perceives establishment Islam as legitimate. The answer is complex: on the one hand, over the years a conceptual dichotomy has developed between establishment Islam and what is deemed "authentic" Islam. There are a number of reasons for the distinction, including the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and other non-state Islamist movements that have challenged the religious control of regimes, the lack of independence for religious leaders linked to

government institutions, and the growing public mistrust of rulers in the Arab world in general.

In many cases there is mutual dependence between the regimes and the official religious institutions. The picture of the Imam of al-Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb standing next to Sisi (together with the Coptic Pope) at Sisi's announcement on his replacement of Morsi was a good illustration of the complex relations between the rulers and establishment Islam. This picture shows both the regime's need to garner legitimacy from establishment Islam and the desire of Islamic institutions to receive regime support. In some cases, the efforts to promote a "moderate" religious discourse have been interpreted as a submission to Western pressure, and to a certain extent, Arab countries indeed use terms such as "tolerant Islam" to draw closer to Western countries. In other cases, there is no doubt that rulers are implementing religious reforms in order to weaken competing centers of strength and authority. These considerations appear to undermine the credibility of establishment Islam.

On the other hand, it is too early to eulogize establishment Islam in the Sunni world, and we should be wary of claims that the relevant institutions have lost all legitimacy. In 2017, a YouGov poll in Jordan found that Jordanians trusted the mufti, who is appointed by the King, more than any other Islamic personality (that is, non-state figures) (Williamson, 2019, p. 7). A 2019 study in Saudi Arabia indicated higher levels of trust for religious leaders the closer they were to state institutions (Freer, 2019, p. 1). As for young people in the region, who according to some polls have recently displayed tendencies of growing opposition to religion, a Zogby survey in 2015 nevertheless found that most young people in Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE agreed that the state should regulate Friday sermons in the mosques, religious programs on television, and public religious lectures. This survey also found that 89 percent of Moroccans and 90 percent of

Egyptians want the state to ensure that religious discourse does not promote incitement, hatred, and violence (Tabah Foundation, 2016, p. 16). Such findings suggest that establishment Islam still has meaning and a potentially important role to play for populations in Sunni countries. Whether governments can exploit this potential in an effective way remains an open question.

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## 3. Salafi-Jihadism: After the Dream of the Caliphate

The debate surrounding the Salafi-jihadism theoretical maelstrom requires a few preliminary clarifications. ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their respective proxies and allies continue to operate as multi-branched, networked terror organizations. They take on and then abandon names, brands, and leaders, fight for their survival against international and regional coalitions, and make structural and tactical adjustments according to the security and political situation in their various arenas of operation. The fact that in recent years they have joined campaigns that were already very bloody or have engaged in failed Third World countries, and have drastically limited the quantity and quality of their attacks on Western countries, can fuel a mistaken sense, particularly in Western public opinion, that Salafi-jihadism is on the wane as an international threat, but this is not the case.

On a deeper social level, the Salafi-jihadi idea has existed in one form or another since the birth of Islam. Although the percentage of Muslims who take an active part in the implementation of the Salafi-jihadi idea in its modern form is very small, even negligible, the ideology has created a duality, a kind of ambivalence of attraction-rejection in broader Muslim society. On the one hand, Salafi-jihadism paints the whole of Islam (in the eyes of many in the Muslim

world itself, and certainly even more so outside that world) as a murderous religion, mired in medieval norms and unable to adapt to the rules of modern life. ISIS even "upgraded" this negative image by several degrees.

> **The gamble of implementing jihad "to the end" was revealed as a mistake, not only because it mobilized the international community against the Islamic State, but also because of the cognitive fear it left in the Middle East.**

On the other hand, this ideology exploits an internal conflict present among some Muslims to the extent that it offers them a solution to a troubling recognition that the Islamic world has for centuries lagged behind the West. The jihadi solution—active promotion of changing this reality and bringing Islam back to "the right side of history"—enjoys significant attraction and draws passive support even from broad sections of the public that do not participate actively in combat and terror. At least "in spirit" they are partaking of the obligation for jihad, and from the standpoint of the organizations they constitute a reservoir for potential future generations of activists.

The long evolution of the Salafi-jihadi ideology occurred in the shadow of failures, persecution, and a general feeling of pessimism. These experiences are a material part of the identity of the followers of fundamentalist Islam and so far have not discouraged them, but rather spurred them to ideological development and new forms of the fight against "heresy." The jihadi discourse abounds with apologetic texts explaining "why victory is delayed." The faithful find explanations for themselves, and examine their actions to see where they must improve in order to overcome this "delay." In that respect, the non-realization of the vision creates periods of confusion and heated internal debate, leading to ideological renewal and a fresh evolutionary stage in the practical expression of the struggle.

Why, therefore, is Salafi-jihadism experiencing deep ideological confusion? The current decline—revolving around the collapse of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq—occurred after years of success, when it seemed that the momentum would continue, against a backdrop of regional and international circumstances that were ideal for zealous Muslim circles to create the "perfect storm." That is why the fall to the ground of reality was so intense. Islamist zealots are finding it far more difficult to explain that once again this is just a temporary setback on the way to redemption.

The theoretical and practical solution that Salafi-jihadism offers is etched into the broader Muslim consciousness as another failed model, like other ideas that have circulated in the Middle East over the past decade. Moreover, the "victory" of the ISIS model over more moderate versions of Salafi-jihadism solidified the unequivocal identification of this ideological school with total and exceptional brutality, even compared to figures such as Bashar al-Assad and Saddam Hussein. Therefore, the gamble of implementing jihad "to the end" was revealed as a mistake, not only because it mobilized the international community against the Islamic State, but also because of the cognitive fear it left in the Middle East. A tactical withdrawal back to a "softer jihad"—in sermons, education, personal example, withdrawal from permissive society, and so on—at present appears to be impossible and without purpose, something that nobody is buying, at least until the fresh memories begin to fade.

The jihadi discourse is built on long internal negotiations and fierce debate between opposing schools of thought inside and outside Islam. They inspired jihadi ideas even at the price of splitting into sub-factions around marginal nuances, and forced the movement to continually re-examine concepts and define its positions on a range of questions, for example about priorities in the struggle (Sunni heretics, Shiite heretics, the capitalist West, the communist East, Israel, and the

Jews) and the legitimacy of violence. Jihadi thinkers returned to ancient Islamic sources and commentaries from the Middle Ages to establish arguments and present references. On the other hand, the current reality reflects an ideological void, for there have been no innovations and no renewals; the internal rifts look like a competition between stocks whose shares are falling but no longer sport essential ideological differences between them; and there is no longer any real ideological competition with other streams of thought, whether secular or Islamic, because they have all failed or died away.

Similarly, the "generational chain" of thinkers and leaders, men of the book and men of the sword, who have inspired and enriched the Salafi-jihadi discourse—in part by the many years of friction between them—is now in decline. These arguments between "teachers" and "pupils" or "pupil-friends," reflecting the natural tension between the formulators of strategy and the commanders and operators who dealt with the tactical situation on the ground, gave rise inter alia to the jihadi underground movements in Egypt from the 1960s to the 1990s; al-Qaeda in Afghanistan—"the mother of jihad arenas"; and ISIS in its various incarnations, from Zarqawi to Baghdadi. The dialectics among all of these groups created extensive, living, and dynamic jihadi literature, which connected and divided figures from different periods, geographical sectors, and languages—each with its own innovations, emphases, and instructions, based on time and space. Today, although some of these (persecuted) figures are still working and writing, it is hard to point to new ideas or fresh concepts.

The messianic dimension of the Salafi-jihadi idea—dealing with the day after the establishment of the caliphate—has been forced to deal with a reality that does not match its promises. The ISIS caliphate was presented as "the start of redemption" on the way to the "great war," Armageddon, which would

finally decide the struggle between faith and heresy some time before the Day of Judgment. This theological idea was a strong motivation for the migration of young believers from the West and all over the Arab world to the combat arenas in Iraq and Syria. Moreover, the apocalyptic narrative of ISIS gave details, including defined timetables, for the stages after the establishment of the caliphate, but the meeting between ISIS theology and messianic expectations widespread in Muslim society did not occur.

Where does the ideological confusion of Salafi-jihadism lead? In historical terms, Islamic awakening occurred in waves. Drastic changes in the lives of Muslims led to intellectual developments as a response, and in some cases to a practical translation of the ideas by a new generation of fanatics. From the start of the 20th century to the present, there have been four such waves:

*The first wave* occurred in the first half of the 20th century, when for the first time since the appearance of Islam there was no longer a caliphate, and it was replaced by nationalism, foreign occupation, or colonialism, alongside fundamental changes in social, cultural, and economic life—the outcome of the encounter with the West and modernization. The ideological competition in the international system (capitalism-communism, liberalism-fascism, religion-secularism) carried strong implications for Middle East society. Within this ideological struggle, the innovative and revolutionary faction identified with the faithful described this new reality as a "disease" that was affecting Islam, and suggested a "remedy" comprising a purification of the faith and revival of the model of the Islamic patriarchs (*salaf*); a new interpretation of the tradition (*ijtihad*); cultivation of the public by education, preaching, and aid (*dawah*); and political activism. The main threat was perceived as external (Western colonialism), and the response was moderate.

*The second wave* emerged in the era of military regimes, which effectively eliminated

the space for civil society (in which the Muslim faithful operated) and promoted a modernist, nationalist-Arab, and socialist ideology as a kind of alternative religion, leaving very limited room for Islam. In this new reality, the faithful became a persecuted enemy, and were forced to redefine the problem (apparently homegrown Muslims rather than foreign conquerors) and the solution (jihad against the "infidel" regimes). The result was a new system of concepts: instead of a "sick" Islam that could be cured came the "new *jahiliyyah*" requiring thorough historical change; instead of moderate and gradual *dawah* was *takfir* (the rejection of infidels by the believers, no longer only by Allah); instead of *fitna*, the fundamentally unacceptable anarchy and civil war, was jihad against the destruction decreed by the rulers on the faithful.

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**The coronavirus crisis has created the potential for significant changes in the reality of life worldwide and in the Middle East, and may signal new directions for Salafi-jihadism.**

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*The third wave* was evident from the 1980s to the start of the new millennium: a gradual return to the struggle against the external enemy, but this time not only in the West but also in the East (Soviet Union), and not only in the Middle East and the Muslim world (dar el-Islam) but also in enemy territory (dar el-Harb). This is the reality that saw the birth in Afghanistan of the idea of global jihad as a model for liberating other conquered Muslim lands (Kashmir, Chechnya, Bosnia, Iraq, Palestine), and then as a concept that sought to undermine the West's sense of security and economic stability, a bastion for the infidel regimes in the Middle East. This wave peaked with the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, "smashing the idols" or bringing about the "collapse of the Tower of Babel" in Salafi-jihadi terminology.

*The fourth wave* can be dated from the announcement of the ISIS caliphate until its fall. Whereas the collapse of "infidel" regimes

did not happen because of Salafi-jihadism, "the work of the righteous is done by others," and the new chaotic reality created an opportunity to bring the struggle back to the heart of the Middle East, against regimes that were still grasping for survival, against the Shiites who were trying to exploit the situation to gain strength, and against the external forces (American and Russian) who were stirring the pot. The problem is that the establishment of the caliphate was also the peak of this wave, which largely ended with its collapse.

Is a fifth wave of Salafi-jihadi revival in a new format taking shape below the surface? This is an open question. The coronavirus crisis has created the potential for significant changes in the reality of life worldwide and in the Middle East, and may signal new directions for Salafi-jihadism. At this stage it appears that the followers of this concept, like all players in the global and regional system, are still defining the problem. Identifying the solution will take longer—for Salafi-jihadism itself and for those studying it.

## 4.  Shiite Islam: From Revolutionary Unrest to Ideological Decline

Shiism is fundamentally based on a story of tyrannical exploitation and injustice, to be rectified at the end of days, and on the practice of *taqiya*—hiding one's real religious identity during hard times and waiting for the storm to pass. In this way the Shia are presumed to be more ideologically equipped to deal with crises and dramatic changes in life, compared to the hegemonic Sunni community. To this strength should be added the economic independence of senior Shiite clerics and their status as role models, whom the faithful are required to venerate as the source of answers to all their life questions, not least questions that arise due to the changing times.

But in recent decades there have been a number of processes within the Shia world and in the dynamics between the Shia and the Sunna that have now brought the Shia, in

ideological terms, to one of their lowest points in the modern era. The clerical seizure of power (*wilayat al-faqih*) by Khomeini transformed a minority approach into the dominant conceptual element in terms of religion and state relations in the Shiite discourse. The result was the institutionalization, stagnation, and decay of religious thought in the madrassahs of Qom and Mashhad. Senior clerics who held different views from those of Khomeini and his heirs and still supported, in one way or another, the separation of religion and state disappeared or were silenced. Their place was gradually taken by minor clerics who were clearly identified with the establishment. The gap between the terminology of revolution and the institutionalized reality and stagnation grew ever wider.

At the tip of the pyramid of the Iranian religious-political establishment—the Supreme Leader's throne—the balance between the chief's two hats was upset, i.e., the hats worn by the person who is supposed to be a role model at the religious-spiritual level and above politics in practical-concrete terms. Khomeini tailored the position of leader to his wishes. His heir Khamenei is his inferior in every way—personal prestige, religious scholarship, authority of rulings, and political strength. He has amassed great political experience, but is perceived to be mired in dirty politics and internal struggles within the religious establishment, instead of maintaining the status of statesman. It seems likely that Khamenei's eventual heir will be a religious politician rather than a *marja taqlid*.

The political link between the Shia and Iran has also grown tighter. Direct contact between the Iranian regime and Shiite Muslims in the Arab world (and the Muslim world in general), which was formerly limited due to differences of language and technology, has increased the tensions between Sunnis and Shia and blurred the attempts (on both sides) to highlight shared aspects. The deep ideological differences between the two factions in areas of messianism, political thought, and historical

myth have been sharpened, at the expense of the relatively minor differences in aspects of religious rulings, law, and daily practice.

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The Shiite discourse outside Iran—both ideological and political—has become a reaction to the dictates of the Iranian religious establishment. The ranks of senior Arab-Shiite clerical role models are shrinking. Those who remain are generally classified, both within the Shiite communities and in the eyes of the Sunni regimes, by their attitudes to the Iranian regime and their concept of *wilayat al-faqih*—for or against. The opposing voices—of which the most prominent thus far has been that of Grand Ayatollah (the highest rank in the Shiite religious hierarchy) Ali Sistani from Najaf in Iraq, who is close to 90—do enjoy personal prestige and broad influence in the Shiite world outside Iran, but they find it difficult to dictate a competing, relevant, and tangible ideological-political agenda. The political and social chaos in Iraq, which has been controlled for about fifteen years by the Shiite majority, is a good illustration of this difficulty.

*The Shiite Faction and the Arab Upheaval*
The foregoing description of processes shows how the Shiite approach to the upheavals in the Middle East resulting from the Arab Spring is fully embodied in what is offered by the Iranian regime, which is theoretically revolutionary but actually institutionalized and decaying. Its theoretical concept for the region can be summed up by the old, familiar vision of exporting the revolution, which was revived in the chaos created by the upheaval. The

Iranian regime perceived the Arab Spring as a rare opportunity to upset the historic balance of power between the Sunnis and the Shia, to weaken the pro-Western Sunni regimes, to tighten its patronage of the Shiite communities in the area, and to reinforce the members of the so-called Shiite axis.

The political and military trends in the Middle East before the Arab Spring and in the first years thereafter did indeed play into the hands of the Iranian effort. At first the Islamic regime managed to separate itself from the immediate danger facing other regimes in the region, and to survive the public upheaval on its home territory (the riots in the summer of 2009), while many of its Sunni rivals crumbled in the face of a similar challenge in the two following years. In the established religious discourse in Iran, this distinction was identified with the correctness of the revolutionary path, compared to the decay of the heretical Sunni regimes, even though the regime actually survived thanks to the massive use of force.

During the years of upheaval—which saw the nuclear treaty with the international community, the threat to the Assad regime, the collapse of the Islamic State, the political dominance of Iran's supporters in Lebanon and Iraq, the Saudi entanglement in Yemen, intra-Sunni struggles between Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates on the one hand, and Turkey and Qatar on the other, and the (complex) Iranian cooperation with Russia—developments gave the Iranian regime a sense that the pendulum was swinging in the Shiite direction, and that the dream of exporting the revolution would be realized. Once again political practice dictated the ideological line: the sacrifices Iran was required to make for the nuclear treaty were presented by Khamenei as "heroic flexibility, the approach that is necessary in certain situations, as long as we stick to our principles." This discourse evoked the notion of "drinking the poisoned chalice," which was how Khomeini described his coerced consent in 1988 to end the war with Iraq.

The defeat of ISIS and the collapse of the caliphate—another event requiring "heroic flexibility" from Iran in its indirect cooperation with the "Great Satan," the United States—was ideologically also perceived as a victory in the local derby between two religious concepts that developed in parallel during the 20th century and were striving for the same objective. While Khomeini's disciples have held onto power for over four decades, the state of the disciples of Sayyid Qutb broke up within three years.

However, the initial soaring of Iranian stock was followed by several years of a sharp plunge that affected all the interests of the Shiite axis. The withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear treaty, the biting sanctions, the US "maximum pressure" campaign against the Iranian regime and its allies, the ongoing military friction with Israel in the "campaign between wars," the semi-covert competition with Russia and with the Assad regime over the limits of Iranian influence in Syria, and above all, the public awakening (for many reasons) among the Shiites against the regimes in Iran itself, in Iraq, and in Lebanon all offset the achievements, and brought the Shia back to their natural place as a weak minority.

Public unrest in Iraq was also a reminder that Shiite Islam is not homogenous, and again highlighted the voices objecting to the Gordian knot tied by Khomeini between the religious establishment and the political system, and to the Iranian effort to claim ownership of Arab land in the name of "Shiite brotherhood," which is not accepted by many of the madrassahs of Najaf and Karbala, or by the Shiite political system in Iraq. The killing of Qasem Soleimani not only disrupted the strategic and tactical plans of the Shiite axis, but also symbolized severe damage to the export of the revolution as a vision and an idea. The soft Iranian response to his killing illustrates the confusion and limits of Iran's power and that of its partners at the present time.

The coronavirus pandemic has added its own dramatic dimension to the instability in

Iran and the Shiite system in general, with the long-term effects still difficult to assess. In the short term, Iran's identification as the focus of the largest outbreak of the virus in the Middle East has already aroused tensions beyond its borders, for example, between Hezbollah and its opponents in Lebanon regarding the demand to stop flights between Iran and Lebanon. At least in this respect, export of the revolution morphed into export of the virus.

### The Ramifications of the Ideological Crisis

This multi-dimensional crisis has highlighted the ideological and conceptual stagnation of the Iranian religious-political system. It continues to offer the public "a resistance economy," "a strong stand," and other hollow slogans that have not changed since the 1979 revolution. Meanwhile the pandemic has exposed something of the confusion in the current Shiite discourse, the political cynicism it involves, and, occasionally, something of the dangers inherent in the solutions that it proposes to current problems. For example, under cover of the ongoing dispute between the Iranian religious establishment and its medical system, which has both religious dimensions (Islamic limits on the ability of man and modernity to intervene in the actions of God) and political aspects, various clerics have promoted a range of would-be folk cures for COVID-19—all kinds of oils and creams under the brand name of alternative "Islamic medicine." This unorthodox phenomenon has been criticized by the public, but it emerged that obedience to the laws of Islam could also have saved lives: Iranian media reported that hundreds of people died and thousands were hospitalized with methanol poisoning (industrial alcohol) following fake news claiming that it provides protection against the virus.

Indeed, even the Israeli angle is not absent from the Shiite discourse around COVID-19: Ayatollah Makharm Shirazi, a senior and well-known cleric, denied reports in the Iranian

media that he had permitted the use of an Israeli vaccine, if and when one is developed, assuming there are no alternatives. While this is a case of fake news (or a fake denial) within an entirely theoretical debate, it does illustrate how at a time of confusion, Shiite discourse takes refuge in familiar topics, i.e., loathing of all aspects of Israel. The basic rule of navigation applies here: "Are you lost? Go back to the last place where you knew your location."

In other words, Shiite ideological discourse is bogged down in deep, multifaceted confusion. Looking forward and assuming that public protests in Shiite theaters—in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon—continue and gather new intensity in a post-COVID world, the religious discourse could turn to new directions that could rouse it from stagnation and connect with the civilian discourse. Is it possible to build a link between economic-social-civil protest, which also has anti-religious features, and a new religious ideological awakening, or will the clash between the establishments and "those on the ground" become harder to overcome?

## Conclusion: The New Crisis as an Opportunity—Is Islam also the Solution in the post-COVID World?

The strategic discourse in Israel and Western countries tends to see the coronavirus pandemic, and particularly the day after, as another wave of crisis, perhaps worse than previous ones, in the chain of upheavals in the Middle East since the end of 2010. Having learned from the experience that events were initially and optimistically hailed as the Arab Spring, students of the Middle East see in the current crisis potential for exacerbating the fundamental problems of the region: the collapse of other economies and regimes, loss of governance, lack of basic resources, renewed vigor for wars and violent conflicts, and more severe public unrest. All this presents alongside the persistent question over what now remains of the world order and the future of globalization.

This pessimistic discourse invites the question of whether the COVID-19 crisis makes the formation of a new regional order—which we have arguably been witnessing since 2010—even more elusive, or could actually accelerate it. Even if we are still far from this new order, there is now at least a potential to re-awaken the theoretical political-social-economic debate in the Middle East, after a long period of void. One of the most prominent ideas that could compete for the heart of the agenda is the concept that "Islam is the solution," as interpreted by the various factions described in this article. It is certainly not the only idea in the emerging conceptual market, but it bears considering whether the COVID crisis—which could disrupt all plans for a new global and regional (dis)order—could actually inject new blood into the ideas and concepts of the "Islam is the solution" family. Is the new crisis, which in traditional communities would presumably reinforce the link between the believer and his creator, an opportunity to resolve the old and ongoing crisis of believers in Islam? Put differently, for the confused factions reviewed here, could it be that "COVID is the solution?"

As part of the conceptual discussion, several potential scenarios bear mention:

*Recovery of the centralized-authoritarian order*, and rehabilitation of the traditional Middle East Muslim concept that "a dictator is better than anarchy": In this scenario the religious establishments would play a central role in shaping the foundations of legitimacy for existing nationalist-secular regimes, and movements of political Islam would continue to vacillate between integration in the existing order and separation (willing or imposed) from it.

*Collapse of the remnants of the old order* (collapse of additional regimes, renewal of public unrest): In this scenario, groups identified with the old order—the Sunni religious establishment in the Arab world and the Shiite religious establishment in Iran—would be swept away and lose public influence. On the other hand, actors clearly identified as the opposition (Salafi-jihadism) or as the provisional opposition (Muslim Brotherhood) would remain to shape a new political order, and each group would bring the lessons it has learned from its failures in previous rounds of the regional upheaval, perhaps in a new guise. In this scenario, it is also possible for new religious groups to emerge with their own version of "Islam is the solution."

In the scenario where the current crisis continues from the point at which the previous crisis was stopped—in other words, *broad public unrest particularly in the Shiite space* (Iran, Iraq, Lebanon) and *stagnation in the Sunni space* (the status quo in places like Syria, Libya, and Yemen)—an ideological-religious-political struggle could develop that would encourage the Sunni factions (as a whole) at the expense of today's main Shiite faction. This would unfold in a way that adds another dimension to the struggles between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and perhaps deepen the rifts between the radical axis and the pragmatic Sunni states.

Any discussion of the ideological, religious, and political trajectories of the Islamic factions following the COVID-19 crisis naturally involves a long-term outlook. But at this stage it is possible to highlight several key questions that will likely affect those trajectories: will they manage to connect the economic-social-civic protests, which until now have also had anti-religious features, to a religious ideological reawakening, or is the path between the establishments and those on the ground harder to negotiate? What will the next wave of the cyclical revival of Islamism look like, and when will it occur? How far will it be possible to link it to the coronavirus as the direct trigger? How far will ideological discourse in the Middle East be affected by Western ideas that could gain momentum after the pandemic? Is it possible, for example, to imagine a new form of "Arab socialism" that will challenge the conservative religious space as it challenged it sixty years ago? And finally, will other secular-civic models fertilize the

religious ideological discourse and force it to make adjustments and changes?

Lt. Col. (res.) Dov Dell served in a range of roles and arenas in the Research Division of Military Intelligence in the IDF, including head of the Middle East Branch. He is currently a civilian employee of the IDF.

Dr. Sarah Feuer is a research fellow at INSS and the Rosenbloom Family Fellow at the Washington Institute, specializing in Middle East politics and security with an emphasis on North Africa. She is the author of *Regulating Islam: Religion and the State in Contemporary Morocco and Tunisia* (Cambridge, 2018), as well as numerous policy papers and monographs.

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