

## SECURING A DYNAMIC AND OPEN ECONOMY: THE UAE'S QUEST FOR STABILITY

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An estimated 50,000 American and 250,000 British expatriates currently reside in the UAE; around a quarter of them choose to make it their home for periods of five or more years. More than a third of the UAE population is non-Muslim; Christians and Hindus each account for around 15 percent. All faiths can congregate and worship without interference, and interfaith dialogue is encouraged and supported.<sup>1</sup> With Dubai at the forefront and Abu Dhabi having recently instituted a “visitors welcome” campaign, the UAE has become a hugely popular tourist destination, changing the longstanding notion that travel to the Arabian Gulf is only appropriate for the purposes of business and work.<sup>2</sup> Men and women serving in the U.S. Marines and UK Royal Air Force are regularly stationed at the Jebel Ali Port and the Al Minhad Air Base, respectively. The UAE has also participated in virtually every U.S.-led coalition campaign since 1991, making it the most dependable Arab partner of the United States.<sup>3</sup> In fact, by a number of international metrics, it constitutes one of the

most secular and “modern” nation states in the Greater Middle East.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the UAE’s international profile and stature have grown significantly in recent years. Both CNN and Rupert Murdoch’s Sky News broadcast from Abu Dhabi, and the BBC’s regional hub is located in Dubai. Two famous English Premier League football clubs, Arsenal and Manchester City, play their home games at the “Emirates” and “Etihad” stadiums, respectively. Along with the world’s tallest tower and largest shopping mall, Dubai is home to Emirates, currently the fourth-largest global airline, operating from the world’s busiest airport in terms of international passenger traffic. In 2014, Dubai won the bid to host the 2020 World Expo and, for a number of years, has convened the world’s richest horse race. The final race of the Formula One season now takes place in Abu Dhabi, and the Louvre will soon open its first satellite venue there, as will the Guggenheim Museum. Since 2007, Abu Dhabi has partnered with MIT and Siemens in the field of renewable energy at the Norman Foster-designed,

carbon-neutral Masdar City. It can now be accessed via the iconic, Zaha Hadid-designed, Sheikh Zayed causeway. In 2017, the UAE will be the first in the region to generate electricity by nuclear technology as part of a multi-billion-dollar partnership with South Korea.

There are, however, a number of opportunity costs resulting from this enhanced prominence on the global stage. This overt modernity is construed by reactionary Islamists as the antithesis to the mode of society they prefer and agitate for. Another is more reputational in nature: today, UAE government actions and policies are subjected to far greater levels of international scrutiny and critique, informed and otherwise, than at any point in its short, 43-year history. No longer can it be typified as an unobtrusive Middle Eastern backwater remote from international affairs. This has been particularly apparent since the “Arab Spring” and the UAE’s resultant stance toward the Muslim Brotherhood (Al Ikhwan al Muslimeen; henceforth MB). Despite some commentary to the contrary, this does not portend a Huntington-style clash. Neither is it necessarily indicative of a confused national identity or a confessional contradiction. Islam as a faith and a set of values is not in any way comparable to political Islam (“Islamism”), which, although ideologically grounded, is, in various respects, fundamentally at odds with modernity in the Western sense.<sup>5</sup>

The adoption of such a confrontational stance may nevertheless affect the UAE’s continued transition towards a knowledge-based economy — the reforms now underway that are designed to overcome the deleterious socioeconomic consequences that are typically said to afflict rentier state/resource curse (RS/RC)

economies.<sup>6</sup> Security and stability (actual and perceived) are vital to achieving a dynamic and open economy and to attracting conventional non-oil Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and the more fickle and fluid human capital such as highly skilled expatriate labor. The UAE is seeking to develop an employment-rich service sector, to attract more tourists and conference delegates, and to become a regional hub for a number of industries, including logistics and financial services. It follows that at no previous juncture has the UAE’s ability to effectively use statecraft been more important.

A key question is, why exactly does the UAE consider political Islam to be such a threat to its security and stability? The catalyst of its more vociferous opposition to Islamist movements can partially be traced to the tumultuous events in Tunisia and Egypt. Yet, in both instances, the Islamists who filled the political vacuums — which, it should be recalled, were created by progressive “LinkedIn liberals” — have since been popularly ousted, in Tunisia by way of the ballot box and, in Egypt, by military action that was observed the world over to have been widely supported. In a subsequent poll, almost two-thirds of the public supported the Egyptian military’s decision, and many of them had actually voted for the MB.<sup>7</sup> The UAE may not be concerned that Islamist governments are seen as a viable alternative by the vast majority in the unstable regional environment — the received view being that they performed poorly in both Tunisia and Egypt.<sup>8</sup> However, the political ambitions harbored by Islamists, along with their message that “Islam is the solution,” may encourage a minority to consider their doctrine to be the region’s panacea and one worth fighting for.

The move toward modernity, many analysts have argued, is in certain respects diametrically at odds with the societal construct envisaged by most Islamist groups.<sup>9</sup> In no small part, this is because of the sensitivities surrounding globalization. Not only does a deeper integration expose a culture to ever-changing global ones; it also necessitates systemic educational and labor-market

reform: (1) a greater emphasis on the vocational skills of science

and technology at the expense of religious studies; (2) pedagogies centred on critical thinking as opposed to rote methods; and (3) a greater use of English as the medium of instruction, which for a transitional period requires hiring a large number of teachers from the West.

In the past, some oil-rich transitional economies could afford to hang back from actively combating international terrorism, as oil installations are capital-intensive and few in number, thus relatively easy to secure and restore. However, this does not hold for knowledge-based economic structures in which acts of terrorism would have a far more significant impact; reinstating safety and stability, including perceptions of it, takes considerably longer to achieve. Other factors are the U.S. pivot to East Asia, which by definition means a strategic shift away from the Middle East, and the lack of clarity regarding the degree of security assurance the UK's nascent "East of Suez" initiative might afford as an alternative.<sup>10</sup> This feeling of insecurity has arguably resulted in the UAE's now aligning itself, geopolitically speaking, more

closely with Saudi Arabia than it might otherwise have chosen.

The question is also of particular contemporary relevance in light of the recently released list of 83 organisations that the UAE has classified as "terrorist."<sup>11</sup> Its publication in November 2014 — which, according to the official Emirates News Agency, along with partial fulfilment of a

federal law on combating terrorist crimes, was for "transparency" and "awareness-

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raising" purposes — raised a fair number of eyebrows. It happens to be the case, moreover, that defining terrorism is as vexatious for academics and policy makers as it self-evidently is for media commentators; it invariably leads to normative points and counterpoints.<sup>12</sup> The "shock" and heated debate that ensued should not really have been as surprising as it seemingly was from some UAE commentators. All published lists are subjected to scrutiny, not least with regard to notable inclusions and omissions. The United States, for instance, has been criticised for including Hamas and Hezbollah among the 54 international organizations it currently designates as terrorist groups, while the UK has been condemned for not including them on its list of 63 groups.<sup>13</sup> Their respective inclusions and omissions are attributable to realpolitik. Neither Hamas nor Hezbollah features on the UAE list, more likely than not due to pragmatism rather than principle.

The inclusion on the UAE list of organizations such as the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Muslim Association of

Britain (MAB) along with other MB affiliated entities, all currently operating legally in the West, was, at first glance, the more surprising and attracted the lion's share of attention.<sup>14</sup> Incidentally, UAE officials have pointed out that such groups can appeal through the courts to have their names removed from the list, so long as they can demonstrate that they have "changed their approach." The extent to which the list focused on the MB was, on the one hand, said to illustrate "partisanship" and "excessive alarmism"; on the other, it was said to demonstrate that the fight against militant Islamism is as much "an ideological war" as a conventional one.<sup>15</sup> It also aligns the UAE more overtly with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, both of whom outlawed the MB earlier in the year and contend that it is a radicalizing force that encourages the spread of reactionary Islamist ideology, leading some to gravitate toward more militant forms of Islamism.<sup>16</sup> The MB focus is also said to be reflective of the extent to which, via its proxies, it operates with impunity in the West; hence its considerable influence in shaping American and European policy on the Middle East.<sup>17</sup> Overall, though, the consensus seems to be that, while the UAE faces no direct or imminent threat from political Islam, it does have legitimate concerns resulting from the seemingly intractable and increasingly internecine conflicts in its immediate neighbourhood — large parts of Iraq/Syria, Libya and Yemen — all of which have the capacity to embolden and motivate Islamists of all degrees of militancy.

### A SECURE SECURITY PARTNER?

The Arab Spring clearly posed a policy dilemma for decision makers in Washington and London. Both were observed to be largely powerless to shape events in

either Tunisia or Egypt and, as a consequence, seemingly opted for a policy of wait and see. Saudi Arabia in particular, was disappointed that the United States did not do more to support their long-time ally Hosni Mubarak.<sup>18</sup> It was this ambivalence and perceived lack of appreciation of the security concerns acutely felt within the Arabian Gulf that, more likely than not, resulted in the forging and financing by the UAE and Saudi Arabia of a proactive strategic alliance with Egypt. The UAE itself has also become more assertive and independent in its own foreign policy.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, the longstanding, once "rock solid and unwavering," U.S.-Arabian Gulf security partnership is now complicated further by the divergence of interests among the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Aside from Oman's hosting of secret U.S.-Iranian nuclear talks, much to the reported disquiet of Saudi Arabia, it has been Qatar's support for the MB that has caused most disunity. Not only has it long been home to a number of the more militant MB leaders, including the radical and influential Yusuf al-Qaradawi; many contend that, during the past decade, Al Jazeera (Arabic) has too often become a mouthpiece for the MB.<sup>20</sup> (The degree to which the MB has gained a foothold in Qatar since its independence is set out in a recent article for this journal by David Roberts.<sup>21</sup>) While this was tolerated for a considerable number of years, it was no longer tenable in the post-Arab Spring era.

Indeed, the dispute culminated in a high-profile diplomatic falling-out in 2014, with Qatar on one side and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other — the United States has a substantial military presence in both Bahrain and Qatar. Tensions are now easing somewhat.

In essence, Qatar has given way, toning down its support for the MB; the pro-MB satellite channel "Al Jazeera Live Egypt" ceased broadcasting in December.<sup>22</sup> Another factor compounding the West's dilemma is the growing divergence within the Gulf in terms of the extent to which reactionary Islam is shaping (or, more accurately, constraining) moves toward modernity and socioeconomic reform. In this regard, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are arguably poles apart.

While the United States may well want to pivot away from the Middle East, a number of factors are considered likely to prevent this desire from becoming a reality. The global economy continues to be dependent on Middle Eastern oil, and the seemingly intractable issue of Palestine still persists. Despite there being no immediate threat to Israel from any of its neighbors, the region is, after all, characterized by instability, and in order to effectively forestall a potential future threat, the United States has little choice but to remain engaged. This holds even if, as reported, it has given up any short- to medium-term plans for regime shaping, whether in Afghanistan, Iraq or Syria.<sup>23</sup>

Despite these reality checks, many Gulf-based commentators remain convinced that the U.S. pivot is qualitatively different from previous strategic realignment plans. And, given the precarious current state of affairs, Gulf leaders are said to remain "anxious" and to be seeking additional "reliable friends and allies." There has been much talk recently of the UK, or perhaps even the EU, taking on a more substantive role if indeed the United States were to reduce its presence. Moves in this general direction include the nascent UK "East of Suez" initiative, the first ("small") concrete step of which may be

considered its decision to build a military base in Bahrain capable of supporting the long-term deployment of Royal Navy frigates and destroyers.<sup>24</sup> The UK and/or the EU, by giving the GCC a clear security commitment that shares risks as well as opportunities, will undoubtedly open commercial doors; the Eurofighter Typhoon jet is a case in point.<sup>25</sup> Defense, diplomacy and international relations are noted for their interdependence, and the UAE has taken considerable risk in terms of potential "blowback" by providing the West, on numerous occasions, with an Arab/Islamic cover of legitimacy by participating in the majority of its coalition campaigns since 1991. This, in addition to its stability and tolerance, put it in good stead for entering into more formal UK/EU security pacts going forward.

Progressive leaders in the Gulf face their own dilemma with regard to the U.S.-Gulf relationship; concepts of "modernity" (rightly or wrongly) are indelibly linked with the socioeconomic construct of the industrialized Western world. This presents a difficulty when confronting political Islamists, who amplify and thus attract support from the widely held belief that America and Britain, in particular, treat the Middle East in a hegemonic way. Such sentiment resonates among all segments of society, from liberal Muslim reformers to apolitical Muslim literalists.<sup>26</sup> It is thus important to underscore that the "conflict" between the West and Islam is not a consequence of an endemic and intrinsic culture clash between Christians and Muslims. It is rather because many in the Arab world are convinced that Western governments are primarily interested in securing a steady flow of oil exports and supporting Israel irrespective of whether it contravenes international law.<sup>27</sup>



While Islamism is sometimes viewed in the West as a backlash to modernization and globalization, "a binary construction of contradictory trends," it is argued that a considerable fraction of the support it attracts arises from lack of economic opportunity. It is the high rates of unemployment and social dislocation in some Middle Eastern countries that give appeal to Islamists.<sup>28</sup>

Islam is a faith and a set of values, not an identity ready-made

for political mobilization.<sup>29</sup> In counterpoint to Huntington (however reflective he was of the post-Cold War zeitgeist in searching for a new "them"), the "clash," to the extent that it exists, is cultural in nature, not civilizational or theocratic.

The stated aim of the most radical Islamist groups is to restore a caliphate in some form; the MB itself seeks the establishment of a pan-Islamic government. The goal is similar, although the means for realising it are not.<sup>30</sup> Islamists of all shades are also similar in that they draw upon the same sets of grievances to attract support. These, whether real (pejorative attitudes regarding "oil-rent" and a lack of support for Palestine at the UN) or imagined (that the majority of Western citizens subscribe unquestioningly to Huntington's thesis) are for many Islamists primarily "window dressing" to mask "their ideological totalitarianism."<sup>31</sup>

A longstanding subject of discord stems from the West's continued dependence on the Middle Eastern oil that it once had unfettered access to and control over. Indeed, certain Western powers, in their voracious quest for raw resources during the first decades of the twentieth

century, helped create a number of the contemporary Middle Eastern nation states. They also had a vested interest in creating an economic infrastructure centered upon the extraction and export of raw resources. As a consequence, it is not entirely surprising that some lacked the institutional and diversified economic structures (in sharp contrast to Norway) to effectively deploy

and invest the oil rent during the booms of the 1970s and 1980s and thus have

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at times been prone to RS/RC outcomes.

It has been pointed out that when a price-determining form of absolute rent started to emerge in the world oil industry in the mid-1960s, it was not viewed as a legitimate form of "ground rent," but demonized as an excessive and unearned form of "differential rent."<sup>32</sup> The way the West responded gave rise to the widely held sentiment in the Middle East that it is more interested in the region's oil than the wellbeing of its people. This sharp increase in oil rent was not viewed in terms of newly independent nations seeking a better return on their depletable raw resource assets, but as the machinations of a "monopolistic cartel." In his memoirs, Henry Kissinger claims that the United States had no higher priority than to "bring about a reduction in oil prices by breaking the power of OPEC," and that this strategy reflected not only economic analysis but, even more, "political and, indeed, moral conviction."<sup>33</sup>

The question of Palestine is as complex as it is intractable. To deny that the issue did not come about as a consequence of historical "Western" actions (the Balfour Declaration of 1917) is not only ahis-

torical; in terms of contemporary policy formulation, it is myopic. The Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 is another case in point. It makes the task of socioeconomic reform for Middle Eastern governments that much more contentious. The process invariably entails partnering with Western governments (whether in terms of knowledge transfer or trade agreements) that are concomitantly subjugating Palestinian rights at the United Nations. Despite this and in diametric opposition to the MB, the UAE prime minister puts it simply: “If Israel signs the peace process, we will do business and welcome them.”<sup>34</sup>

### THE WEST AND POLITICAL ISLAM

The engagement and mixed sentiments of the West towards political Islam date back to colonial times, when they proved to be a useful counterweight at certain junctures, be it to Arab nationalists or Arab leftists. U.S. support for Islamists in its fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan is well documented, as are the unintended consequences. In Saudi Arabia, extreme conservatism was entrenched further with the return to the kingdom of young, “ideologically driven” and battle-hardened Saudi mujahedeen, many of whom today hold administrative and bureaucratic positions in, among other places, universities and government entities.<sup>35</sup> In the past decade, much of the analysis and many of the policies on how best to interact with the MB tend to be either accommodationist or confrontational in nature.<sup>36</sup>

Although some have sought to delineate a difference in the American and British approaches, both seem unsure of how best to approach political Islam; neither want to engage with extreme or violent groups, but both seem unsure where to draw the line. The key controversy re-

volves around the ideological influence of (“nonviolent”) reactionary Islamists upon the more overtly extremist groups. The influence is hard to deny, yet, as the multitude of Islamist advocacy groups (not least those affiliated in some way to the MB) operating in the West cannot wholly be excluded from the picture, so long as they themselves do not actively commit acts of terrorism.<sup>37</sup> Some Middle Eastern states, however, feel, with some justification, that the West is harboring and engaging with entities that constitute a direct and credible threat to their security and stability.

The basic thesis of the accommodationists is that government repression (whether Western or Middle Eastern) of Islamist organisations will inevitably radicalise them. While confrontationists do not entirely disagree, they contend that it by no means follows that accommodating and engaging with them will result in their de-radicalization. At this juncture, on both sides of the Atlantic, the MB is said to constitute a well-funded, multidimensional organisation whose affiliated entities vie to represent American and European Muslim communities to the respective governments, media outlets and indeed non-Muslim polities. Some analysts consider this to be a positive force for its potential to encourage integration and moderation. Others view the MB as a Trojan horse, whose intentions are twofold: to radicalise Muslim citizens of the West, including those of non-Arab origin, and to shape Western foreign policy on the Middle East in favor of political Islam.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, the policy of engaging and entering into dialogue with nonviolent, but radical, Islamists in order to frustrate incipient individual terrorist plots, is said to focus on the symptoms while neglecting the cause, their underlying ideologies.<sup>39</sup>

Accommodationists contend that dealing with the MB and other Islamists organizations is pragmatic; it has the capacity to "help in the ideological transformation of Islamist groups" and thus makes sense on (Western) national-security grounds. It is pointed out, furthermore, that the MB plays a far greater role than do any of the more liberal Muslim groups in the Arab Middle East. According to some, in the often fruitless search for Muslim moderates, policy makers should "recognise that the MB presents a notable opportunity."<sup>40</sup> Confrontationists argue that the "ideology" driving political Islam should be tackled (or at least openly acknowledged and factored in by the Western government agencies) because the ultimate goal of the MB is not in reality very different from that of militant Islamists. The existence of such polarized views demonstrates that, at the very least, the UAE's concerns in relation to the MB are not as "alarmist" or "excessive" as some have portrayed them to be and are indeed informed by the concerns of experienced academics, policy makers and security analysts in both America and Europe.<sup>41</sup>

Some in the accommodationist school do have worthy intentions, not least that engagement with the Western-based MB organizations can promote greater tolerance and prevent discrimination against innocent Muslims. Others, for a mixture of reasons, hope to win Muslim hearts and minds, both overseas and at home (for electoral purposes rather than altruism). However, it is said that the notion of engaging with the MB as a vaccine to ward off violent extremism is misguided. Still, engagement continues apace, due to the "disproportionate amount of the limelight" the MB is granted in the West, in part because of its own European-based newspa-

pers and television stations.<sup>42</sup>

As has been pointed out, Islamist jihadi groups, predating by several decades al-Qaeda, were inspired by the writings of Sayyid Qutb, a radical MB ideologue who advocated jihad as a means to overthrow secular governments articulated in his 1964 book, *Milestones (Maalim fi al-Tariq)*. His sentiments, it is observed, have influenced both extremist and mainstream Islamist ideology ever since.<sup>43</sup> One way of countering this, it has been suggested, would be to encourage Islamic scholars to undermine Islamist doctrines by demonstrating that most of its core features are typical of other forms of totalitarianism — based on "human ideas," ideology, and thus not compatible with or sanctioned by scripture.<sup>44</sup> Anthony Lake, national security adviser to former U.S. President Bill Clinton, argued back in 1994 that Islamic extremists used "religion" to cover their real intentions: "the naked pursuit of political power."<sup>45</sup>

It has been argued that, from the 1990s onwards, a number of mainstream Islamist movements, most of which are offshoots of the MB, started to see Western-style democracy as a way to elicit liberal sympathies and a convenient means to an end.<sup>46</sup> In recalling that Bernard Lewis once characterised Muslim fundamentalism's vision of democracy as "one man, one vote, one time," confrontationists seek to underscore the danger of seeing the MB as a moderate organization.<sup>47</sup> It is said to be fundamentally undemocratic in nature, recently stating that installing Islamist governments in the Middle East would be a stepping stone to a global Islamic state.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the MB is said to treat democracy as if it essentially constitutes a dictatorship of the majority, rather than a multifaceted process that seeks to find middle ground and aspires



to consensus; Egypt, arguably, is a recent case in point.<sup>49</sup>

The West, it is alleged, post-9/11 has adopted an Islamist-apologist stance. A more accurate start date, in our view, was the period following the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the growing acceptance that the imposition of democracy was having unforeseen and destabilizing consequences. Either way, it is argued that both the Bush and Obama administrations, and those of both Labour and the Conservatives in Britain, have allowed Islamist organizations based in the West to exert undue influence on the development of Western security and military policies. Indeed, MB affiliates have increasingly been allowed to “vet the instructional materials” being used to train Western intelligence and military personnel with regard to the Middle East.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Western governments and their respective intelligence agencies turn to such MB affiliates when they want to get the “Muslim view” on a given topic relating to the Middle East.<sup>51</sup>

Focusing now more specifically on the UK relationship with the MB, in April 2014 the government announced it would be undertaking a review of the MB’s activities both in Britain and the Middle East. The unreleased report, while stopping short of proscribing the MB as a terrorist organisation, did express a number of serious concerns.<sup>52</sup> The head of the review, Sir John Jenkins, is reported to have concluded that the MB has both an “ambiguous relationship with violence” and a “questionable impact on social cohesion” in the UK. Going forward, the UK government will pay closer attention to a number of advocacy groups and registered charities that are said to have close ties with the MB and will be more proactive in banning the organizations’ spiritual leaders from visit-

ing the UK. While this outcome may have disappointed a number of governments in the Middle East, it is not indicative of a lack of understanding regarding their serious concerns.

In addition, not only does the UK have different assessment rubrics for proscribing groups; it must also give way to pragmatic realpolitik.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, it does harbor a number of serious concerns with regard to the MB and has been wrestling with itself for the past decade over the sort of relationship it should have with the MB. Indeed, a great many UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office communications and internal reports — accessed by Freedom of Information requests — highlight the conflicting views and general discomfort with respect to the MB and its UK-based affiliates.<sup>54</sup> As is now widely quoted, Sir Richard Dearlove, the former head of MI6 (the British foreign-intelligence agency), is said to consider the MB at heart “a terrorist organisation.”<sup>55</sup>

As Bassam Tibi has articulated, “Islamic civilisation” does not constitute a “threat” to the West; in contrast, “political Islam” does. Moreover, the latter constitutes a far more pronounced “threat” to the Muslim world. He argues at length that Islamists who espouse violence and those who denounce it “only differ over the means to be employed, not the goal itself.”<sup>56</sup> As a consequence, Tibi believes the line of thinking that views a distinction in the ultimate ambitions of Islamists such as the MB and more militant jihadi variants should be discouraged. It is clear that former U.S. presidential candidate Mitt Romney did not distinguish between the two, arguing forcefully that U.S. foreign policy should target the Muslim Brotherhood: “I don’t want to buy into the notion that this is all about one person (Osama bin

Laden) because after we get him, there's going to be another and another.... This is about Hezbollah and al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood,... a worldwide jihadist effort to try and cause the collapse of all moderate Islamic governments and replace them with a caliphate."<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, deciding where to place a given entity on a line ranging from (a) perpetrating violent acts through (b) facilitating such acts to (c) being an apologist for such acts is no easy task. The same can be said with respect to whether or not a given Islamist creed or doctrine can be considered Islamist in a political sense. There is a surfeit of Islamist groupings and, while arguably they share a similar goal, use very different tactics in the present. Political Islam is by no means the exclusive domain of the MB. Many analysts have articulated how certain strands of the Salafi and Wahhabi doctrines constitute forms of political Islam.<sup>58</sup>

### SAUDI ARABIA'S "STRUGGLE" WITH POLITICAL ISLAM

The subtext of President Obama's September 2014 speech to the United Nations was that America would no longer turn a blind eye to the financial and ideological sponsors of madrasas and mosques around the world that propagate radical Islamist doctrines.<sup>59</sup> Yet, the existence of Saudi-inspired radical Islamist groups is, in part, a legacy of U.S. political decisions in previous eras to address different sets of strategic concerns.<sup>60</sup> Somewhat ironically, Saudi Arabia's religiosity, which Washington once considered an asset (by motivating funding and even supplying fighters to counter the Soviets in Afghanistan), has become a political liability for the kingdom, the United States and the wider Middle East.<sup>61</sup>

Arguably, history may now be repeating itself with the conflict underway in Syria and large parts of Iraq. The West has prevaricated repeatedly with respect to Saudi Arabia's involvement since 2011. (One can understand why Saudi Arabian authorities were displeased that despite the Syrian regime's crossing an American "red line" on chemical weapons, no action was taken. This was not least because they themselves had been given a green light to finance and train anti-Assad Islamist forces). Some commentators point out that Saudi Arabia is fighting what is tantamount to a civil war: several hundred or more Saudi citizens are said to be fighting with ISIS, which is now subjected to aerial bombardment by the Royal Saudi Air Force.

In Saudi Arabia, the so-called "Awakening Clerics," who voiced their disquiet most audibly in the years immediately after the Saudi authorities called upon the United States to act as a guarantor against the advancing Saddam Hussain in 1990, are said to retain popular appeal.<sup>62</sup> The movement, or "Islamic awakening" (*al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya*) they are said to have spawned, is noted for its strong anti-Western sentiments, opposition to U.S. foreign policy and distaste for many cultural aspects of modernity; they along with those that are sympathetic to their views are considered by many to represent a variant of political Islam: a fusion of MB political Islam and Saudi Salafi discourse — i.e., Saudi Islamism.<sup>63</sup>

For Saudi authorities, it is said to have been much easier to encourage imams in the battle against communism during the 1980s than it is now to engage them against radical Islamism.<sup>64</sup> It is observed also that, within the kingdom, conservative religious figures are frequently granted more leeway to shape discourse than are

liberal reform-focused technocrats, nationalists and moderate Islamist reformists.<sup>65</sup> A decade after Okruhlik's "Islamism and Reform," in which she touched upon a range of structural reforms Saudi technocrats considered imperative, Hammond, in "The Islamic Utopia: The Illusion of Reform," contends that most of the reforms that Saudi Arabia announced during the 2000s have been illusive and that the kingdom exists in an "idealized state of stagnation."<sup>66</sup> In short, the difficulties faced by reformers in Saudi Arabia are pronounced especially with the regional instability, be it sectarian or political in nature. This fundamental strategic struggle Saudi Arabia is now facing is, of course, highly relevant to its immediate neighbors and closest allies, Egypt and the UAE.

It has been argued that militant jihadi groups, by adopting and advocating an extreme reductionist interpretation of Wahhabism, are intentionally seeking to light a fuse that has a "very real possibility of being ignited," in order to bring about systemic change — not just to parts of Syria and Iraq, but also in parts of the Arabian Gulf. The logic of this argument is that by adopting the language and sentiments of Wahhabism, they may be able to garner support among some sectors of Saudi society. This is not necessarily as fanciful as it seems. Saudi authorities face a number of inherent contradictions: puritan morality versus capital and realpolitik; accommodating the "modernity" that statehood requires versus accommodating the views of conservative preachers. These contradictions, it is said, have resulted in Islamists becoming more, rather than less, active within the kingdom.<sup>67</sup> It has also been argued that the limitations of the nation state in parts of the Middle East, a region said to have no tradition of nation-

alism, are becoming increasingly apparent. In many instances, it has become "well-nigh impossible to create a truly national spirit," whether in Iraq post-2003, or in Syria, Libya or Yemen in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.<sup>68</sup>

### MODERNITY: REMEDY

According to Karl, more than any other group of countries, those dependent on oil demonstrate "perverse linkages between economic performance, poverty, bad governance, injustice and conflict" and that the causal relationship is so persistent that it represents a "constant motif" of economic history.<sup>69</sup> It has, however, been argued that such "internal factors" are the ones RS/RC protagonists seem to focus on most closely while seemingly discounting the "key external factor," the West's desire to control the price of oil, the level of "oil rent." It arguably follows, then, that the periods of economic difficulty within the Arabian Gulf during much of the 1990s have less to do with the "internal" factors put forward by some RS/RC theorists — lack of entrepreneurial spirit due to excessive oil wealth; underinvestment in non-oil sectors versus overinvestment in white-elephant projects — and more to do with the West's self-interest: a reliable and reasonably-priced flow of Arabian Gulf oil.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, nothing else combines oil's value and centrality to globalization and the international system and, thus, the strategic geopolitical attention it has received in the past half century.

The West's political response to the emergence of price-determining ground rent in the 1970s was to mount a concerted ideological and political attack on the governments of these newly enriched, recently independent transitional economies. The West, by way of advocating Washington

consensus-style policy prescriptions — President Reagan's government set out to aggressively implement the policies of the U.S. National Petroleum Council, whose 1982 report called for reopening the oil resources of developing countries to the international oil companies — ultimately orchestrated a process of profit maximization within the developing world's oil industries that led to overproduction and culminated in a period of low oil prices.<sup>71</sup> This helps explain the reasons for the continued interest in Middle Eastern oil flows by both the United States and UK and the ingrained view in the industrialized world that, when the appropriation of the wealth of others is illegal it is called "theft" but, when it is legal, it is called "rent-seeking" or rentierism. By diverting effort and talent away from wealth creation, this leads to the "paradoxical resource curse."<sup>72</sup> It also explains how and why Islamists can use this fact ("grievance") to garner support and stoke anti-Western sentiment.

Nevertheless, the concept of "economic diversification" is clearly in vogue within the region. In many instances, especially during the recent oil boom in both demand and price, it is hard to deny that at least some of the oil rent is being used in ways other than simple short-term largesse.<sup>73</sup> Despite the argument that there is surprising uniformity in the assessment of the challenges facing the Gulf as well as the recommended remedies, the implication is that it is unlikely to work if all follow the same RS/RC escape route (it amounts also to an implicit criticism of the role played by the international consultancy firms behind some of the region's strategic plans and transformational visions).<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, systemic reform is considered an imperative. Moreover, all Arabian Gulf countries are reasonably similar in terms of

their comparative advantages, labor-market structures and limited economies of scale in non-oil manufacturing industries (and are likely to have a similar range of remedies available to them). Additionally, the competition that would result from similar diversification strategies has the potential to foster greater levels of efficiency and encourage more innovation. The latter though will be almost entirely contingent on enhancing indigenous human capital; that necessitates a fundamentally different approach to education.

## EDUCATION

Whichever path a given economic-diversification strategy takes, one thing is key: adequate and appropriate investment in indigenous human capital. Not only is the UAE having to undertake a wide range of systemic reforms towards its goal of a dynamic and open economy in light of being a resource-rich economy that was not industrialized prior to the large-scale extraction and exportation of oil, it must also do so in light of political Islam's conservatism. All too often, Islamists equate modernity (especially educational reform) with the decline of Islamic and even Arab identity. It should be recalled that the MB was established in no small part to counter such reforms. Hassan al-Banna, its founder, was primarily disturbed by what he perceived to be the influence of Western secularism on Muslims.

It is Sayyid Qutb, rather than Hassan al-Banna, who can be considered the MB's most influential ideologue. As alluded to above, in "*Milestones*," jihad (in addition to a range of violent acts including terrorism) is a means to a political goal (a pan-national Islamic State) that has inspired militant Islamists since 1964. A fair degree of, but by no means all, subsequent MB

literature has sought to construct a vision of an Islamic state by demonizing secular governance as “Godless” and immoral. “Modernity,” it is argued, legitimizes and sanctions “the whims and fancies of the masses,” especially those with “capricious preferences emanating from the promiscuous culture of the West.”<sup>75</sup> It has been noted that the government of Ben Ali in Tunisia disseminated a pluralistic vision of Islam through the autocratic state’s public schools.<sup>76</sup> A key MB *modus operandi* is a focus on preaching and education. Gulf rulers have long been concerned about the extent to which MB members and sympathisers and offshoot Islamist organizations influence education (as teachers and administrators) and “continue to lionize Qutb.”<sup>77</sup> This may give some context to the backlash against a greater usage of English as a medium of instruction and the resistance to Western-style teaching techniques in a number of Arabian Gulf countries at present. The profound influence MB “educators” have had on Qatar in the decades since its independence cannot be understated; a similar though less pronounced version of this story holds for the UAE as well.<sup>78</sup>

Such subjects are, of course, highly emotional and easily politicized. Bassam Tibi considers the dilemma of Islamism versus cultural modernity to be the elephant in the room that few in the social sciences are willing to acknowledge, let alone discuss in an open manner, for reasons of “naïve political correctness.”<sup>79</sup> Nonetheless, it is argued persuasively that the adoption of the instrumentalities of modernity has to be supported wholeheartedly by the adoption of universal reason. This is based on the belief that humankind can shape its own destiny and determine its own social and natural environment, all

of which is predicated upon the concept that secular knowledge results from science and technology.<sup>80</sup> This does not mean a loss of, or compromise with, an Islamic culture (or indeed a loss of the Arabic language). To support this, Tibi cites Japan as an example, for it underwent systemic socioeconomic changes and economic development by way of rational and secular knowledge and adopted science and technology in harmony with its distinctive Japanese cultural preserves and traditions.

Muslims, like other non-Western people, acknowledge the pivotal need for science and technology for their own development, but the Islamists among them fail to grasp that science and technology are socially constructed. This point is critical. Only rationality determines the substance of scientific research: scientific knowledge is perpetually changing, critiqued and subjected to relentless questioning.<sup>81</sup> Education is a social construction and, although radical Islamists do not advocate a renunciation of “Western” technology such as BlackBerry smartphones, satellite navigation systems or Toyota Land Cruisers, they do renounce “Western-style” education systems. However, to innovate means to accept as a precondition pedagogical styles that promote critical thinking and the freedom to question.

## CONCLUSION

It has been argued that the West should primarily encourage and empower secularists, liberal Muslim reformers and other anti-Islamist Muslims, yet in reality this is easier said than done. However palatable the “LinkedIn liberals” may be, they do not as yet represent a significant proportion of the region’s population and are up against a well-organized Islamist opposition that will be quick to cast any such



modernists as part of a “Western project dressed in thin Islamic garb.”<sup>82</sup> It is interesting to note in this regard the findings of a recent survey of Arab youth. When asked which country in the world they would most like their own country to emulate, the UAE is the most highly ranked.<sup>83</sup> This has been true for the third year in a row and may be correlated with the significant increase in preference among the region's youth for modern values and beliefs as opposed to conservative ones (from 17 per cent in 2011 to 46 per cent in 2014).

As we have previously pointed out in this journal, the majority of UAE nationals are said to be satisfied with the incumbent “majlis-style” political system. Since 2006, it has been accompanied by the vibrant Federal National Council, elected members of which, in sessions open to the public, regularly hold ministers to account on a wide range of contemporary issues.<sup>84</sup> The UAE has consistently been named the country in which most young Arabs would like to live, as well as the country they would most like their own country to emulate. Nonetheless, it is the danger of internal ossification rather than external threats that is the ultimate challenge in the Arabian Gulf. This is why the UAE's diversification strategy centers on indigenous human capital; it may be why the MB (and more generally political Islam) see it as such a threat.

That some elements of the international media were critical of a number of the organizations included on the UAE's recently published list is to be expected. The issue of the MB is emotional and inevitably divides opinion: in the West, for instance, there are both accommodationist and confrontationist schools. For countries in the Middle East that are seeking to undertake the necessary reforms to modernize and integrate into the international system, political Islam — with its underlying totalitarian ideology and reactionary outlook — constitutes a credible threat to both security and stability, not least by complicating the path to a dynamic and open economy. As Bassam Tibi has articulated in his seminal work *Islam's Predicament with Modernity*, Islamists ultimately represent a greater threat to moderate Muslims and liberals in the Middle East than to Western society. Nevertheless, what may garner greater appreciation with regard to much of the Arabian Gulf's concern over the MB and its Western-based proxies will be to explain the reason the “ideology” of the MB and other manifestations of political Islam constitute a credible threat to the current systemic reforms, designed to achieve progress and modernity. The process of carrying out these reforms, as difficult and sensitive as it already was, is all the more challenging now in the post-Arab Spring.

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<sup>9</sup> Rachel Bronson, "Rethinking Religion: The Legacy of the U.S.-Saudi Relationship," *Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2005): 119-37; Daniel Brumberg, "Islam Is Not the Solution (or the Problem)," *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2005): 97-116; Andrew Hammond, *The Islamic Utopia: The Illusion of Reform in Saudi Arabia* (London: Pluto, 2012); Gwenn Okruhlik, "The Irony of Islah (Reform)," *Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2005): 153-70; Gwenn Okruhlik, "Networks of Dissent: Islamism and Reform in Saudi Arabia," *Current History* 101, no. 651 (2002): 22-28; and James Piscatori, "The Turmoil Within," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 3 (2002): 145-50.

<sup>10</sup> Doug Stokes and Paul Newton, "Bridging the Gulf?" *RUSI Journal* 159, no. 2 (2014): 16-22.

<sup>11</sup> "List of Groups Designated Terrorist Organisations by the UAE," *National*, November 16, 2014.

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2013," Department of State, 2014; and UK Home Office, "Proscribed Terror Groups or Organisations," London: UK Home Office, 2014.

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