Political Islam in the Middle East

Can ideology and pragmatism walk hand in hand, as was at one time claimed by the Muslim Brotherhood, or would this inevitably result in a conflict of interest that could lead to an eruption the likes of which we witnessed in Egypt? Everything that is currently taking place in Egypt is not only reshaping the internal disposition of this country, but it also changes the very architecture of mutual relations between the main political forces and nations in the region.

One need only look at the Islamist circles themselves, which are usually divided by analysts into three groups. The first, as was previously thought, are the “moderates”, focused on adopting democratic norms, electoral democracy, patience, respect for minority rights, of which they were trying to convince the international community and in which they were relatively successful. It was possible to include Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood in particular into this grouping. We know that the United States have long worked very closely with the Muslim Brotherhood, seeing them as a force that would be able to ascertain the “democratic transformation” of a country like Egypt. The second sphere are the Salafists, a more conservative force, more orthodox, dragging, as is believed, the governments of this region into the past towards the Sharia Law and the Islamic way of government. The third force are the jihadists – groups fighting against the system – who do not recognize the electoral paradigm as such and are acting against the existing systems.

Today, everything is once again turning upside down. Egypt has declared the Muslim Brotherhood to be an illegal organization. The Salafists, which were considered radical in our understanding, are supporting the new Egyptian administration and they are ready to participate both in the building of a new nation and in the electoral process, which was not so until just recently. Saudi Arabia, who is seen by the layman as the main proponent of the interests of all Islamic forces, supported the military and practically acted against the main force that was carrying out a Muslim transformation in Egypt. Whereas Turkey, who is presently staring across the Syrian front lines directly at Iran, is presently strongly condemning the new administration in Egypt together with that same Iran. They are essentially opposing Saudi Arabia. As for Qatar, it still remains in an alliance with Turkey, yet at the same time it is forced to show solidarity towards the decisions of the Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Gulf.

This turn of events, this alignment of the regional forces and of the regional balance of power is the consequence of the conflict between ideology and pragmatism. We were witness to how keenly representatives of various Islamic organisations argue with each other. Russia has previously received representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists and many other organizations, including representatives from Hezbollah and Hamas, which is currently in a dire situation. Recently, to the surprise of many analysts, the new Egyptian administration accused representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood in plotting a conspiracy with Hamas. It was not too long ago that Fatah and Hamas almost finished negotiating the creation of the Government of National Unity. What will the future hold for Egypt? Will the present story continue in Tunisia, how will it affect the Middle Eastern conflict, what will be the consequences for the population in Gaza, and, finally, for the global powers, primarily for the United States, who has fallen into this trap numerous times before. At first, they were rather quick to surrender Mubarak, and now they have surrendered
the Muslim Brotherhood, whom they have indulged for quite some time. However, one does not want to gloat over this turn of events, since they have invested enormous resources into this region, into searching for allies and into ensuring the safety of their regional allies and, above all, Israel. Today, this system puts the Americans in a fairly tight spot because the anti-American sentiment is only growing, regardless of who comes to power in any given Middle Eastern nation. How will this situation influence what is happening in Syria, where Russia is expending huge resources to solve the present conflict peacefully?

Today, Russian politics in the region are especially sound, as they are based on restraint, on a certain level of scepticism with regards to those transformational shifts in the region that have been quickly lauded by our western partners, who are possessed with the democratization of the region. Furthermore, this stance appears rather attractive, which is why many western observers emphasize that Russian positions in the Middle East are presently only expanding.

One should not forget that Qatar is the main sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood. After all, it was precisely Qatar who was actively pursuing a policy of supporting and promoting this group to the positions which they currently hold. It just so happened that Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported two opposing forces in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood is one of the oldest movements in the Middle East, having been created in 1928, and this movement has amassed many long-standing traditions. With an aura of prosecuted “martyrs”, through their kindred party of Ennahda they were able to win during the revolution in Tunisia, while also appearing on the wave of those rebellious sentiments in Egypt that are now being called the revolution of January 25. The Muslim Brotherhood was able to win with a slight lead. However, they were expected to completely change things for the better, which they were unable to accomplish and thus failed to live up to the expectations of the people. Another question is which other force could have fundamentally changed something in that situation?

No matter what the fate of the Muslim Brotherhood will be in Egypt, political Islam as a force continues to exist in the Middle East. This is why it is necessary to maintain contacts with representatives of this movement; otherwise it would be impossible to lead the region towards any kind of a peaceful solution. The Arab society of today is severely fragmented, which is why a balanced and moderate stance is necessary, as is a dialogue with all participant sides.

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