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## The Brotherhood, Erdogan and ISIS

**Political Islam has nothing to offer the region except bad choices and worse**

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It is an old strategy to present two grim alternatives and force people to choose the lesser of two evils. This was how the Muslim Brotherhood presented itself in Egypt, regionally and internationally through their international organization. They were the model of moderate, tolerant Islam, capable of restraining the hardliners. In assuming power, they would be in a position to serve regional and international interests by keeping the rank and file of extremist groups in check because with them in the limelight they would put paid to the extremists' claims and pretexts that Islamic rule had to prevail in countries that had majority Muslim populations. The Muslim Brothers have succeeded in marketing this notion in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world even among some liberal and leftist leaders who advocate accommodating the Muslim Brotherhood as a means to halt the violence and end terrorism, and who argue that to fight the Muslim Brothers, in spite of the fact that they have taken up arms against the state, aggravates tensions, violence and bloodshed. In other words, once again we are to choose between the lesser of two evils: by embracing the Muslim Brothers we avert the dangers of Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis and ISIS.

The line of argument ignores the well-known fact that the Muslim Brotherhood has always been the official sponsor of takfiri thought. The ideas of Hassan Al-Banna, Sayed Qotb and other Brotherhood ideologues are brimming with intolerance, discrimination, hatred of the other (among fellow Muslims if they are Shia) and vilification of all who disagree with their thinking. The Muslim Brotherhood version of Islam is a far cry in form and substance from moderate Islam as epitomised by the outlook and attitudes of Al-Azhar and by the ideas of famous Islamic scholars such as the illustrious reformist the Imam Mohamed Abdu.

This brings us to another pair to compare and contrast: Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, self-proclaimed caliph over the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, newly elected president of Turkey seen by an Islamist current in Egypt and elsewhere in the region as the Muslim who most merits the caliphate. So argues that Muslim Brotherhood spiritual leader, the Egyptian/ Qatari Sheikh Youssef Al-Qaradawi who points out that Turkey was the seat of the caliphate. The rise of the Muslim Brothers in most countries of the Arab region following the Arab Spring revolutions was to be the step that preceded Erdogan's rise to that throne. Erdogan and his clique couched this in different terms to his friends in Washington and other Western capitals. By means of the Muslim Brotherhood regimes in the Arab region he would be able to keep this region under control, curb the reach of the Iranian ogre, promote democratic transformation in a way that would not harm Western interests and that would draw Islamist extremists back from European countries.

When confronted with the Baghdadi image next to the Erdogan one, the observer abroad and the citizen at home is certain to leap for the latter as the lesser of two evils if not as the model for spearheading development, the fight against corruption and the drive for economic growth. When faced with a choice like that, how easy it becomes to turn a blind eye to Erdogan's dictatorial tendencies, to his repression of civic freedoms and suppression of all opposing voices, to the corruption of his family and political party, to his designs to craft the law and the constitution in ways to augment his personal powers and promote his neo-Ottoman imperial project.

It is difficult to find any difference between the logic of the pro-Erdogan camp and the argument espoused by some Egyptian elites in favour of embracing the Muslim Brotherhood as a way of checking Islamist extremists in spite of the fact that the Muslim Brothers have proven their incompetence in political office and have demonstrated how their way of thought and behaviour is inappropriate for those at the helm of a society that has long been plagued by corruption and repression under many glorious sounding banners and emblems and that must now free itself of subjugation to all authorities, even to authorities that fly the pennants of religion, the imam, the supreme guide or the guardian of the faith.

With regard to Erdogan's neo-Ottoman imperial project, no major Turkish obstacles stand in its way theoretically due to the nature of the radical changes brought by the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) during its decade in government. Economically, the per capita income tripled and the Turkish economy soared to the 15th strongest in the world and Erdogan has pledged to bring it up to tenth before another decade is out. Politically, the JDP has succeeded in eliminating the army from politics and breaking long established taboos with regard to the Kurdish and Armenian problems (without having gone so far as to offer viable solutions to

either). Along with such inroads, the Erdogan-led governments have decimated all opposition and ruthlessly repressed protest demonstrations, an approach consistent with his thinking that he made explicit when he was mayor of Istanbul to which he was elected in 1994. At the time, Erdogan was a member of the Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party headed by Necmettin Erbakan. In December 1997, during a rally in Siirt, he chose to recite a poem that included verses by an Islamist and pan-Turkish nationalist poet that have been translated as: “The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets...” He was arraigned and found guilty on charges of incitement to criminal offences and incitement to religious or racial hatred, and stripped of his mayoral position. After serving a 10-month prison sentence he was released and soon became head of the Refah Party’s successor, the JDP, and then prime minister.

Like his policies towards the Armenians and the Kurds, Erdogan’s expressed desire to push his country’s EU accession bid is something of a smokescreen. Realising how slim his chances have become, he is set on what may have been his original grand design, which is to re-establish Turkey (under his leadership) at the head of the Arab and Islamic world under the banner of a resurrected caliphate or any other sign that ensures Turkey’s place as the uncontested commercial, economic and political gateway to the Middle East.

If parties of whatever ideological trend in this region support or feel they can live with Erdogan’s mighty political ambitions they are fooling themselves, for they are overlooking four centuries of history during which Arab capitals such as Cairo, Baghdad and Damascus steadily declined from being beacons of civilisation, prosperity and enlightenment to rural wastelands and cultural backwaters by the end of Ottoman hegemony.

Political and intellectual elites in the Arab region should also bear in mind that the most important weapon in the propaganda and military arsenal of the countries that are targeting this region is the Islamist trend. In large measure, the danger of this weapon resides in the considerable amount of wool that blinds large segments of the intelligentsia and the general public to the true nature of this trend that continually reproduces its ideas and roles. It is sufficient here to conclude with the words of the eminent thinker, geographer and historian Gamal Hamdan: “Extremist Islamist groups are a recurrent plague that periodically infests the Islamic world... Political Islam is a manifestation of a psychological and mental illness...”

We do not approve the harsher judgement of this man who was one of the most vehement opponents to the Egyptian peace accord with Israel: “The condition for the progress of Egypt, the Arabs and the Islamic world is to hang every member of every last Islamist group by the intestines of every last Israeli.” However, to all who are running after the Erdogan sultanate or the Al-Baghdadi caliphate we will echo the cruel truth that Gamal Hamdan reached in his research: “The Islamic world is a geographic fact but it is a political myth.”