

Islam: Seeking a way forwards

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Abstract

Since the mid-20th century, the spectacular population growth and social changes in Asian and African countries have comprised rising efforts in their Muslim communities to take an active and beneficial part in the ongoing or intended transformations. Without omitting negative features, our essay tries to comprehend main trends in thoughts and social activities of contemporary Muslims. Mentions are made of the role of the OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation, 57 Member States) and various international initiatives. In special chapters, most attention is paid to the present-day situation and differences in the Arab countries (in particular in Saudi Arabia and in Qatar). As more open and kind religious approaches than what the Saudis call „soft“, our essay mentions Indonesian *Nahdatul Ulama* or, in the inter-religious perspective, the dialogue between current Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyib and Pope Francis.

Keywords

Organization of Islamic conference /cooperation (OIC); Islamic-Christian relations; so-called Islamic state (*Da'ish*); Islamism; Meccan Charter; recent developments in Muslim countries in Africa and Asia; Muhammad bin Salman and Islam in Saudi Arabia; Qatar; Islam in Indonesia; reinterpretations of *shari'a*

Like other populations in our increasingly interconnected world, Muslim societies have undergone significant, often tumultuous developments since the last century. In the early phases of the interconnected globalisation of the Age of Discovery and the first missions, the curiosity and profiteering intentions of the most advanced European powers played a dominant role, resulting in empire building. Political and economic transformations were accompanied by new ideas and ideals as their consequences, concomitants and stimulus to

further progress, seeping in different directions and with varying intensity also into inherited religious institutions and doctrines¹. Several years ago I attempted to capture the most obvious transformations in the contemporary ideological and institutional world of Islam in a collection edited by the well-known scholar of civilizational transformations, the Egyptologist Miroslav Barta². In this short study, I would like to capture the current state of self-reflection and the search for a new or renewed face of Islam in the writings and efforts of its adherents who wish to restore Islam to a place of honour at the forefront of today's human world that they themselves have only heard about since childhood in their families, in schools and in all the media whenever - and this is still very common - the Prophet, his glorious era and his companions come up. But what about today, how to go on?

Growth in numbers, searching, contradictions and efforts

The number of Muslims has been steadily increasing worldwide since the last century. The English Internet gives a figure of 1.8 or 1.9 billion of our contemporaries; Islam is the world's second largest religion after Christianity (2.3 billion). The Pew Research Center and another American institution, the US CIA World Factbook, are particularly keen on more detailed calculations. Figures sometimes diverge; Muslim own sources tend to exaggerate. In fact, according to the traditional idea there, everyone is born a Muslim, only after his parents make him a Jew or a Christian. What is certain, however, is that the birth rate in Muslim families is still highly active, despite a slight general downward trend. The largest numbers of Muslims today are in Indonesia, Pakistan, India (yes: a minority of over 200,000 in a subcontinent of over a billion) and Bangladesh. Only next come the Middle Eastern countries with Arabic, Persian or Turkish-speaking populations. When, after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the secularizing leader of the Turks, whom they gratefully called their Father: Atatürk, abolished the millennia-old institution of the caliphate in March 1924, majority Sunni Islam found itself in a lukewarm modern world without a central authority, faced with the necessity of finding a dignified place in a largely alien environment. Muslims are still searching for it today.

Our following brief study will attempt to point out some of the most striking strands of these efforts. In doing so, we will concentrate on the Arab faithful and the Arabian Peninsula

¹ Christopher Alan Bayly offers a concise overview of this global process: Christopher Alan Bayly: *The birth of the modern world, 1780-1914: global connections and comparisons*. Blackwell, 2004.

² Luboš Kropáček: Collapse and Continuity in the Islamic World, in: Miroslav Barta and Martin Kovář (eds.): *Civilisations: Collapse and Regeneration*, Academia, Praha, 2019, p. 459-483.

in particular, while mentioning others – albeit more numerous – in a rather general or complementary way. It is not easy to organize the topic into a clearly differentiating overview. The same Qur'an is also invoked by completely contradictory religio-political currents, selecting from the revealed book and from accepted traditions statements and interpretations which often diverge very much or partly from the views held in their social milieu. The common but not always equally perceived ideological background of Islam is both enriched and disrupted by the differences brought about by the diversity of older indigenous traditions and by the directions of political dynamics that the new, modern way of life brings to the multi-ethnic ummah community. Just how different the lives of Muslims can be, even in such far-flung regions as Morocco and Indonesia, was shown in a now classic 1968 anthropological work comparing Islam from different margins of the same religion³. Today, the differences have qualitatively changed in many ways, sometimes diminished, sometimes magnified.

Then, more than half a century ago, along with the Asian and then African wave of anti-colonial emancipation, efforts to revive Islamic thought were emerging from their lethargy. The spread of modern media and the general growth of education, which gradually included and involved a distinctly wider social strata than was usual in Muslim countries, contributed significantly to this, even in the field of politically and religiously formulated values. The pattern of Catholic revival by the Second Vatican Council was also impressive⁴. Muslims were then led to transnational faith-based association by the bitter experience of the Arab defeats in the Six-Day War with Israel (1967) and Pakistan's war with India (1972). As an expression of their common values and aspirations, the majority Muslim countries established the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1970. The generalising name, with its reminiscences of failed initiatives from the inter-war years, was replaced in 2011 by the more apt Organisation of Islamic Cooperation; the abbreviation OIC, however, has not changed. It brings together 57 Muslim-majority states. The influence of Saudi Arabia, where the organisation has its permanent secretariat and where much of the necessary funding comes from, remains as a permanent feature and has increased.

The OIC conceives of Islam in its entirety, encompassing both the Sunni majority and the minority Shi'a. A nominal list of the recognized trends (madhhabs) of both major branches

³ Clifford Geertz: *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, 1968.

⁴ The interconnections between developments in Christianity and Islam since the Second World War. Vatican II to the present day is dealt with in detail in my study – L. Kropáček: *Making Fraternity an Essential Link in Christian-Muslim Relations*, in: *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Theologica*, Vol. 11, No. 1. 2021, p. 11-38.

was produced by the 2004 Amman Message (Risālat 'Amman), endorsed by leading Islamic scholars from over 50 countries. Contrary to earlier reluctance, in this spirit, both Sunnis and Shias should be treated amicably as co-religionists. The centuries-old rift, however, continues to be fed by the shift to political competition between strictly Sunni Saudi Arabia and flamboyantly Shiite post-revolutionary Iran and other variants. The rift has been fed in various ways from both sides, and only today are there attempts at rapprochement. Especially the so-called Islamic State (ISIS, Da'ish) in northern Iraq and Syria has pursued a fiercely anti-Shia policy; after a power surge in 2014, its unrecognised statehood was crushed by military interventions after 2-3 years, and reports of the survival of its terrorist offspring are still coming in various forms on the internet.

A special sensitive chapter of contemporary Islam is its relationship to Judaism and Christianity. In the first respect, it is determined by political attitudes towards Israel, which have shifted considerably in the last year with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Jewish state and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. We will note relations with Christianity in more detail. The hostile actions of Islamist radicals have weakened the nearly two-thousand-year-old presence of Christian communities in Egypt, in civil war-torn Syria, and in Iraq, disrupted by the ill-conceived consequences of the Bush invasion, and in Lebanon, which has gone from being a model of broad inter-religious coexistence to being the cradle of all Middle Eastern ambitions and clashes. Less conspicuous though it may be, the unkind policies in Turkey are having a similar effect on Christians. In the opposite direction, Pope Francis's benign Christianity is today trying to work, offering Muslims a friendly hand in the living realisation of the vision expressed half a century ago in the *Nostra Aetate* declaration.

The image of Islam in the outside world has been badly tarnished by the atrocities committed by the so-called 'Islamic State' and the Islamist terrorists who have claimed, and sometimes still claim, allegiance to it in many places - rather individually in Europe, in larger groups in Africa and in places in Asia. Such actions force Muslim leaders to react, however difficult it may be for them to condemn in strong terms hardliners arguing from purposely selected verses from the Qur'an. Some clearly divisive positions to protect the rights of religious minorities in Muslim countries were arrived at by Muslim clerics and intellectuals in the Marrakesh Declaration of January 2016⁵. Then in May 2019, Muslim leaders from 139

⁵ Since this declaration (mentioned in Czech Republic in Jiří Gebelt et al.: *Ve stínu islámu*, Prague: Vyšehrad, 2016, pp. 16-17), it is necessary to distinguish another Marrakesh Declaration of 2 May 2018, which dealt with

countries, supported by 1,200 prominent Muslim figures, adopted a document called the Meccan Charter at the conclusion of a conference convened by the Muslim World League. It proclaims in 30 clearly articulated points the principles shared by Muslims together of equality of all people before God, religious and cultural tolerance, and building relationships with each other and with the faiths of others.⁶

In our study we will try to trace some selected steps taken on the marked good path. These are among the brighter aspects of what is happening in countries and societies plagued by both unresolved conflicts and, no less than elsewhere in the world, the covid pandemic. For two years now, the latter has restricted the Hajj, previously unheard of, to smaller groups of domestic pilgrims. But there is more going on without precedent.

Moderates from the Arabian Peninsula?

Our intertitle is strange and not everyone may agree with it. It expresses the political course that the regimes of the United Arab Emirates and of Crown Prince Muhammad bin 'Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia like to pursue today. In the case of the UAE, the international conference in Abu Dhabi on 3-5 February 2019, at which Pope Francis also spoke, attracted Western and global attention. For the first time in history, a Pope set foot on the Arabian Peninsula! And he held talks there with, among others, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyib, considered in Egypt and sometimes elsewhere as the leading figure of Sunni Islam.⁷ The meeting and its outcome were richly commented upon, and the Emirate Post Office issued stamps with portraits of the two religious leaders and the legend in Arabic and English “Meeting of Human Brotherhood”. The document they signed together is entitled “Document of Human Brotherhood for World Peace and Coexistence”. It opens and develops a reflection on faith leading to an understanding of others as brothers and sisters to whom believers owe support and love.

The reformist policy proclaimed today in Saudi Arabia towards a moderate conception of the social role of Islam in a kingdom whose oil wealth and the management of Islamic holy

migration issues with the participation of European (Czech Minister L. Metnar) and West African representatives. In the Czech media, Tomio Okamura commented on it with his characteristic ignorance.

⁶ Mecca Charter or Makkah Declaration of 28 May 2019; the full English text and many commentaries can be found online.

⁷ The results of the meetings and friendly negotiations between the Pope and the Grand Imam are discussed in detail by Lukáš de la Vega Nosek: Představení dokumentu „O lidském bratrství“ [Introduction of the document "On Human Brotherhood"] and its revised translation - Dokument o lidském bratrství - I [Document on Human Brotherhood – I], in *Theologická revue* 92 (2021), No. 2, pp. 169-188 and continuation Analýza a zhodnocení dokumentu „O lidském bratrství“ Dokument o lidském bratrství – II [Analysis and evaluation of the document "On Human Brotherhood" Document on Human Brotherhood – II], in *Theologická revue* 92, No. 3.

sites both guarantee its supranational prestige is attracting great global attention. The outlines of moderation began to emerge during the reign of King 'Abdallah (reigned 2005-2015); its further, more emphasised, progressively more concrete forms and perspectives are now associated with the de facto rule of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman.⁸ Indeed, the ailing King Salman (b. 1935; 25th son of the successful creator of the present-day extent of the third Saudi state and the acknowledged modern face of the kingdom, 'Abdal'aziz, 1876-1953) entrusted extensive powers to his son Muhammad. He has consistently filled the media with his activity; the English sometimes abbreviate his name MBS. His reforms have a set framework labelled "Vision 2030", spreading from above as a manifestation of a new political will that slowly shifts the former values, non-violently and subtly, only sometimes with explicitness. The scale of values is shifting, Wahhabism is being marginalised rather than formally shelved, and the family of 'Abdalwahhab's descendants, called Āl Sheikhs, still have a dignified place, but, as MBS noted, along with many others.⁹ Saudi reforms that have attracted global attention include greater scope for women's social participation, including driving cars and playing sports. In general: for more hope.

However, an overly and/or insufficiently moderate course has also been met with criticism from all interested parties. In the eyes of the Western world and many Muslim spokespeople, M. bin Salman was and often remains associated with the shameful murder of liberal Saudi journalist Khashoggi at the consulate general in Istanbul (2018). Biden views the compromised monarch less favourably than Trump previously did. Contemporary Saudi and Emirati moderation exhibits a number of weaknesses in domestic and foreign policy. While Saudi Arabia has removed derogatory references to Jews, Christians and Shiites from textbooks in use, non-Islamic shrines, places of worship and symbols are still not allowed in the country. It is only possible to talk about Christmas or - as the Anglo-American press does not forget to mention - Valentine's Day in a distinctly non-participatory tone. Saudi officials and the media have consistently paid close attention to Islamic issues around the world, not failing to criticise, for example, the excesses of extremists in Nigeria and the oppression of the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar, or relevant Islam anywhere in the world. Evidence of the opposite manifestations of hard or downright cruel fundamentalism is not lacking. The story

⁸ The most thorough analysis is provided by Yasmine Farouk, Nathan J. Brown: *Saudi Arabia's Reforms Are Touching Nothing and Changing Everything*, a voluminous study from Frederic Wehrey (ed.): *Islamic Institutions in Arab States*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, online 7 June 2021.

⁹ Noted in an April 2018 interview with MBS in the *Atlantic* magazine by its editor-in-chief Jeffrey Goldberg. Sheikh Abdalwahhab, whose strict Saudi conception of Islam has been called "Wahhabism" by his critics, made a political-religious agreement with the tribal leader Ibn Saud in 1744 that led to the creation of Saudi Arabia.

of the Vienna-based interfaith centre KAICIID (King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue), which was founded in 2012 with the participation of guest Austria, Spain and the Holy See as observer, in addition to the initiator and funder Saudi Arabia, deserves considerable attention. In addition to a trio of Muslims and Christians, the Steering Board included representatives of Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. However, the interfaith openness suffered from the excesses of Saudi domestic politics, criticism of which was not spared especially by the Austrian Greens, and it became untenable to keep KAICIID on Austrian soil.¹⁰ At the end of October 2021, the Saudi foreign minister agreed with his Portuguese counterpart to move the Centre to Lisbon.

For 7 years now, Saudi Arabia, along with other Arab monarchies, has been waging a war against the regime established by the Houthis in Yemen, the poorest Arab country. This tribe subscribes to a version of Shiite Islam and enjoys the support of Iran. The death toll from the war is already close to 400 000, and the victims of famine, disease, disorder and migration must be added to those killed. The UN has described the situation in Yemen as 'the world's worst humanitarian crisis', but the world, including us, has become used to it. Mediation efforts have stalled, with the press occasionally reporting on new hostilities. In January 2022, the Houthis attacked Abu Dhabi airport with drones; the Saudi-led coalition responded by bombing the Yemeni capital and destroying the Sa'd detention centre in Yemen's north with dozens of casualties. The hostilities are seen as part of the strained relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, sometimes referred to as the 'Middle East Cold War'. The leading countries of Sunni and Shiite Islam cut diplomatic ties in 2017 after the Saudi judiciary had Shiite leader Sheikh Nimr executed. In 2021, several rounds of Saudi-Iranian talks were held aimed at restoring and improving relations.¹¹ Today, mediation is being significantly sought in Iraq, where a Shiite majority has been evident in the composition of the government since the overthrow of Saddam's regime. Riyadh only reopened its embassy in Baghdad in 2019.¹²

The preconditions for inter-faith tensions are sometimes given by the situation in Bahrain, where the majority of the population is Shia, while the ruling dynasty is Sunni. During the “Arab Spring” of 2011, swift military intervention from the Gulf monarchies, led

¹⁰ Of the numerous pieces of information on the Internet, Tom Heneghan, Religious News Service, March 10, 2021, provides the most information.

¹¹ The documentation on the English internet captures articles from the Qatari newspaper *Al-Jazeera*, while J. Borrell is following the important topic in the EU leadership. The Saudi-Iranian negotiations themselves are conducted in private and the reports published after the fact. Other major Islamic actors are also interested in rapprochement: Turkey, Pakistan; Iraq in particular is playing an active role.

¹² Saudi-Iraqi relations are detailed in Katherine Harvey: *A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: The Saudi Struggle for Iraq*, Oxford University Press, 2022.

by the Saudis, prevented potential unrest. In Kuwait, Shi'ites make up 35-40% of the citizens, often of Iranian origin. The dominant Sunni majority manages to maintain peaceful relations both with them and with their Shia neighbours in Iraq's south. During the Iraqi aggression and occupation of 1990-91, Kuwaiti Shi'ites constituted a significant component of the resistance against Saddam's usurpers, but they were motivated primarily by patriotism. The Emirate of Qatar, whose population composition - as in Kuwait - continues to be strongly influenced by workers and new settlers from South Asia, maintains a similarly largely peaceful relationship with its Shia minority (about 10%). However, the developments of the past years and the current significant shift in the international status and relations of the State of Qatar deserve our attention.

Its wealth is based on oil and liquefied natural gas exports. The country has been ruled since 2013 by Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. He rules absolutistically, with the gradual introduction of elements of elected Consultative Assembly (*Shūrā*). He himself was educated at Sandhurst in the UK and took over from his father, among other things, the relatively liberal al-Jazeera television station (since 1996, also in English since 2006), whose critical information and opinions often offend conservatives in many Arab countries. Saudi efforts to push it back with its own rival project, TV Al Arabiya, broadcasting from Dubai since 2003, have not had the expected success. Today, the large conglomerate broadcasts daily news in Arabic, English, Farsi and Urdu, but even in Saudi Arabia it has no more listeners than Al Jazeera. Wealthy Qatar has manifested its own ideological and political line within the Muslim world as not a vassal but a rival of Saudi Arabia. It provides support to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups, illegal in other Arab countries. In June 2017, Saudi Arabia accused Qatar of “supporting various terrorist and sectarian groups destabilising the region” and, along with Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt, cut all ties with it. The four states have closed Qatar's land borders as well as their airspace and territorial waters. Qatar has been forced to look for alternatives, finding them in strengthening trade ties with Turkey and Iran, as well as Kuwait and Oman. Undeterred, it lived to see the resumption of contacts and the opening of its borders in January and February 2021. As a sign of reassurance and reconciliation (?), Muhammad bin Salman arrived in Doha in December 2021 for an official visit.

Let us complete the sketch of the historical changes in the region in recent years by mentioning the gradual adjustments to the local school curriculum and textbooks. UNESCO is dealing with the subject, and the Israeli organisation IMPACT-se is paying particular

attention to the situation in the Arab countries.¹³ In the data and analyses of textbooks from the Emirates, praise prevails for the apparent tendency to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims and to eliminate any hatred; the tendency to preach uncritical obedience to the authorities, described as patriotism, is cited as a negative. The tendency to purge textbooks of demonization of Jews or other non-believers is also found in textbooks from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In the comparisons, it is interesting to note the growing emphasis on Islam in textbooks in Turkey.

From the wider horizons of the Islamic world

We do not have the space here to deal in detail with the situation of the whole vast world of contemporary Islam as reflected - beyond the more media-attractive topics of jihadism - in discussions in OIC member countries and Muslim immigrant or minority communities outside them. For the Arab countries this year, the Czech reader is given a detailed account of their contemporary history by a leading French expert.¹⁴ Kepel's translated text, however, only goes back to the summer of 2018; reading it, one inevitably realizes how vast and internally differentiated the world of Islam is and how rapidly it is changing today. We can map it, but predicting it is extremely difficult. We are very likely to be wrong at some point.

We briefly discussed the situation in the Arabian Peninsula, the former cradle of Islam. Many of its problems today have their own distinctive faces in other Arab countries. The conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ites, revived by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, has marked the social scene in confessionally divided Iraq, in Syria - where opposition to the regime is coloured by Assad's affiliation to the Shi'ite Alawites, which in turn plays into his alliance with Iran - and, of course, in Lebanon, with its 18 recognised religious communities (*tawá'if*). The situation is more stable in Jordan, where the Hashemite king enjoys respect as a descendant of the ancient family of the Prophet Muhammad. In the far west of the Arab world, a similar venerable kinship also contributes to the prestige of Morocco's kings (*shurafā'* by descent).

Egypt, the most populous Arab state, has undergone a post-Arab Spring reversal from the rule of its Muslim brother Mursī to the more or less military regime of Marshal al-Sisi. The Muslim Brotherhood has been banned and its supporters are being prosecuted with harsh

¹³ Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education - see <https://www.impact-se-org>
See also J. M. Dorsey: UAE schoolbooks earn high marks for cultural tolerance 21.1.2022

¹⁴ Gilles Kepel: *Away from chaos: The Middle East and the challenge to the West*. Columbia University Press, 2020.

penalties. Among Egyptian intellectuals, the concept of Islam shows a wide range of views, from radical Islamism to atheism. Strong expressions of this nature, however, are carefully muted by Muslim apostates at home, and are more likely to be voiced fully from Europe, such as Hamed Abdel-Samed, now based in Munich.¹⁵ As-Sisi's regime controls all the provinces militarily, giving way to vigilance and outward ostentation towards the faithful. It is strikingly documented by the majestic buildings of the Masjid al-Fattah al-'Ali mosque¹⁶ and the Coptic cathedral of the Nativity in the newly built metropolis to the south-east of Cairo. Both sacred buildings were opened by as-Sisi on the same day in early January 2019. The role of the current Grand Imam of al-Azhar Mosque, Ahmad Al-Tayyib, whose understanding with Pope Francis has already been discussed, is a significant positive in the public domain.

In all Muslim communities in Africa we encounter tensions and insecurities, sometimes the country is dominated by an emphasis on national, tribal or clan ties, sometimes a particular political conception of Islam, variously abused, comes to the fore: *Alshebaab* in Somalia, variant offshoots of *IS* in Libya, northern Nigeria and elsewhere, *GIA* or *Qaeda* in the Islamic Maghreb *AQIM* and its subsequent formations in Algeria, business and terrorist operations in the Sahara and then in the Sahel, etc. At present, the jihadists have forced the regime in Mali, which is hostile to the French (who prefer to move their troops and some allied troops with them to Niger or elsewhere), to seek support from Russian mercenaries of the so-called Wagner army. They have already applied or are still applying themselves as warriors, who, like their Islamist opponents, do not heed the Geneva Conventions, on the battlefields of Syria, Libya (on Haftar's side), Chad and the Central African Republic (against quasi-Muslim militants). At the end of 2021, Czech television commented on the situation in Mali that "jihad is devouring another Sahel country".

The political and initially liberalising twists and turns of the 2011 'Arab Spring' have been echoed in Africa in Sudan and Algeria. In Sudan, after the overthrow of the autocratic regime of Umar Bashir in April 2019, a military-civilian government took power with a promise to complete democratisation through elections in 2023. Some things have been achieved, such as banning the mutilating practice of female circumcision. However, broader popular aspirations were suppressed, including by firing on demonstrations, and a military

¹⁵ Egyptian Abdel-Samed, born in 1972 as the son of an imam, has undergone a transformation from a radical Islamist to a critic of today's Islam during his stay in Germany. Among his critical books on Islam let's mention at least *Der Untergang der islamischen Welt. Eine Prognose* (Munich, 2011).

¹⁶ The mosque for up to 15,000 people is the largest in Egypt. It is named in honour of Allah by two of his 99 "beautiful names"; their translation will never reach the fullness of meaning glorifying God as the Opener of the path to success and knowledge.

regime took power. Algeria also remains more or less at a crossroads, after the Hiraq¹⁷ popular protest movement forced the resignation of the ailing President Bouteflika in the spring of 2019. Only 23% of eligible voters turned out for elections held in the autumn of that year, and despite some reforms, the new government failed to win the confidence of the Hiraq.

Tunisia is largely regarded as the country where the “Arab Spring” not only began, but also as the only one to bring about a successful democracy. Since the summer of 2021, this positive view has been seriously challenged by the actions of President Kais Saied, who has gradually withdrawn all power, including judicial power, into his own hands. In February 2022, popular revolts rose in Tunisia against his actions, which were criticised by domestic and international bodies. It should be added that the moderate Islamist party an-Nahda has not been spared criticism.

Libya certainly deserves a few words. At its height, the Qaddafi regime (1969-2011) presented a revolutionary version of Islam with a number of peculiarities: a shifted chronology, a model of social history culminating in a ‘people's state’ (the new word of *the Jamahiriya*), the relegation of traditions (*hadiths*) to the deep shadows behind a new interpretation of the Qur'an and behind Qaddafi's slim, widely translated three-volume Green Book. The peculiar doctrine that shone from Libya's screens as a model for the world in its creator's glory days died with his cruel downfall. Libya has fallen into tribal and clan clashes, linked to motley international interests and alliances, and is finding it hard to find its way out of the 'global mess' to a peaceful life enjoying reasonably large oil wealth.¹⁸

Erdogan's Turkey today is very actively intervening in many Arab and wider Muslim affairs, almost to the point of resembling the former Ottomans criticised by Atatürk. It has gained influence in Libya's Tripoli, claims it in Palestinian Islam, has secured commercial and military positions on the Red Sea coast in Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia, and has successfully cooperated with Qatar. It has granted asylum to the Uyghurs, the Turkic Muslim refugees (over 50,000 in Istanbul alone) whose emancipatory efforts it originally supported. Now, with tactical caution towards China, it is, like Pakistan, rather muting this support, and the Uyghurs even fear possible extradition. In contrast to its friendliness towards its post-Soviet Turkic

¹⁷ Popular political groups in Algeria and Morocco were formed under the same name of *the al-Hiraq* "movement".

¹⁸ Among the rich literature on post-Qaddafi Libya, I would draw particular attention to Frederic Wehrey: *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya*, Ferrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2018; and most recently Jason Pack: *Libya and the Global Enduring Disorder*, Oxford UP, 2021.

cousins (including direct military cooperation with the Shi'ite Azeris against the Armenians), the Erdogan regime views the political aspirations of the Kurds very unkindly.

We do not have the space here to deal in detail with the multimillion-strong populations of Muslims of various Asian nationalities, who vastly outnumber the Arabs. In their politics, Islam is usually manifested in distinctive features, sometimes in ways that are highly contradictory to each other. The Shi'ite bastion of Iran is very much in the news; the negotiations on the renewal of its nuclear programme, held in Vienna since autumn 2021 (after Trump cancelled them during his presidency), could, if they turn out favourably, also contribute to a calming of relations with the Saudis.¹⁹ Afghanistan has been an equally hot topic for many years. The Taliban movement, which quickly took over the country after the ill-conceived evacuation of the Americans and their allies in the summer of 2021, is now facing deepening all-round material shortages. It may be acting somewhat more moderately than in the past, even in restricting women's freedoms, but no state recognises it. In addition to limited support from Pakistan, the Taliban finds an open hand in China and Russia. Pakistan itself struggles with numerous problems, the human rights or moral aspects of which are often discussed in the world press. In fact, since its inception, it has been constrained in its international relations by tensions with India. Today, however, the regime of the Hindu radical Narendra Modi is blatantly targeting the indigenous Muslim minority; think of the administrative reform in Kashmir or the blatant restriction on Muslims applying for Indian citizenship. In Muslim Bangladesh, for its part, the population suffers constant misery, compounded by natural disasters. It is into these difficult conditions that the military regime of Myanmar is now driving the Muslim Rohingya from its eastern neighbourhood. By contrast, the majority Malays in southern Malaysia and, of course, the citizens of oil-rich Brunei, whose sultan rhetorically proclaims the strict enforcement of Sharia law, or at least only for the Muslim majority, are doing relatively well.

In Indonesia, on the other hand, the country with the world's largest Muslim population, the state is generally secular and there is freedom for recognised religions.²⁰ Of course, there have been and are Islamist extremists, offshoots of al-Qaeda and other militant groups, and there have been attacks on Christians in the Moluccas and on non-believers in

¹⁹ From the rich literature on contemporary Iran, I particularly recommend Břetislav Tureček's book *Labyrintem Íránu*, Knižní klub 2013.

²⁰ Zorica Dubovská (1926-2021) developed Indonesian studies in Czech Republic. Today, modern issues of Malaysia and Indonesia are dealt with mainly by her pupil Tomáš Petrů at the Oriental Institute. I also draw your attention to the comments on Indonesian Islam in my book *Po cestách kamenitých [Along Stony Roads]*, pp. 226-228.

Bali, but the vast majority of Indonesians subscribe to a moderate notion of faith, inter-religious tolerance and dialogue, and coexistence in a spirit of pluralist democracy. In popular Islam, this concept is applied in *Nahdatul Ulama*. The world's largest Islamic organisation has been in existence since 1926, and its membership has been quoted as ranging from 60 to 90 million. Indonesians of its ilk often view their faith with a particular national colour, consider some Shari'a concepts (*kafir*, *dhimmi*, slave) obsolete, firmly reject violence and 'Islamic State' type formations, and welcome frank discussions with Christians and liberal modernists.

How and which way to go

Our brief overview shows how badly a world shaped by Islam would need to realistically fulfil Keppel's imaginary “way out of chaos”. So far, we see mostly only various variants of state-orchestrated moderation (known as *soft power*) as opposed to the shameful abuse of religious sensibilities by Islamist terrorists. We have seen some aspects of this in examples from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Turkey and Indonesia. We will encounter them in practical illustrations in the events that await us even in small ways, such as the World Cup in November-December in Qatar. And even earlier, as the Russian incursion into Ukraine disrupts established grain supplies to Arab countries. Its effects on Muslim sentiment have so far been largely undefined: on the second day of the aggression, just after Friday prayers, Chechen boss Ramzan Kadyrov sent several thousand of his hardened fighters to support Putin against the Ukrainians, but the vast majority of Muslim states and communities tend to stay away or perceive the criminal nature of Russia's “special operation”.

There is no doubt that religious thought is not isolated from wider political and social developments. Muslims are increasingly aware of the need to secure and develop a dignified place in a rapidly changing modern world, and to revive their own self-concept and goals in this regard. They need to deal consistently with the ideologies and practices of Islamist violence, finding a relationship of pure faith to the secular world and to good human multicultural coexistence. The very notion of 'moderate Islam' today has very different faces, as a comparison of the Saudi cautious relaxation with the broadly humanitarian positions of the Indonesian Nahdatul Ulama will show.²¹ Of particular importance to the way forward are the Christian-Muslim relations that Pope Francis is trying to build with the Imam of al-Azhar. In his video messages on February 4, which he marks as the 2019 International Day of

²¹ An eloquent comparison of these two distinctly different "moderates" is provided by J. Dorsey in his 3.3.2022 article *Saudi Arabia and Indonesia: Clashing visions of "moderate Islam"*. He comments on speeches by Ben Salman and newly elected NU President Yahya Cholil Staquf published coincidentally on the same day.

Human Brotherhood as a reminder of his actions, the Azhar imam personally pledged to “remove all incitement to hatred, conflict and war”. The developments of the following weeks then strongly confirmed Francis' words that there is no time for indifference. And we could see how much falsehood and insatiable ambition threaten our dizzyingly fast interconnected world.

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