



Oral evidence: [Political Islam](#),

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Members present: Crispin Blunt (Chair); Mr John Baron; Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Stephen Gethins; Daniel Kawczynski

Questions 1-40

Witnesses: **Dr Omar Ashour**, Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, **Dr Courtney Freer**, Research Officer at the Middle East Centre, London School of Economics, and **Ziya Meral**, Resident Fellow at the Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Order. Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. This is the first public session in which we are taking evidence for our inquiry into political Islam. I would like to welcome our witnesses, and I would be very grateful if you could introduce yourselves for the record.

Dr Omar Ashour: I am Dr Omar Ashour. I am a senior lecturer in security studies and Middle East politics at the University of Exeter and an associate fellow at Chatham House. I work on Islamist movements, insurgency and counter-insurgency, and terrorism studies, and I focus a bit on security sector reform and civil-military relations within the context of democratisation in the Middle East.

Dr Courtney Freer: I am Dr Courtney Freer. I am a research officer for the Kuwait Programme at the London School of Economics. I work on Islamists in the Gulf, and I also look at domestic politics in the Gulf region.

Ziya Meral: I am Ziya Meral. I am a resident fellow at the Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research, which is a civilian-military think-tank established by the British Army and based at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. I work on defence, security, Middle East issues and religion and violence issues.

Q2 Chair: Thank you. The object of this first session is to help to introduce the Committee to the issues, and to set the scene for the rest of our inquiry. I have been delighted with the scale of interest in our inquiry, which is reflected in the substantial amount of written evidence the Committee has received. I begin this oral evidence session by inviting you to comment on what makes the policies of political Islamists distinctive. Who wants to kick off with that? Only feel the need to add if you either disagree or want to add to something.

Dr Courtney Freer: I use a broad definition when we are talking about Islamists: essentially, people who use Islam in terms of political goals. It is really the idea of tawhid, or unity—the notion that nothing exists that is not influenced by Islam—that makes it impossible to separate secular and religious for Islamists. That doesn't necessarily mean that they are violent, of course. It means, however, that their policies are influenced by Islam and by certain precepts inside the religion. I think that starting with a broad-based definition is useful in that sense.

Ziya Meral: I completely agree, but I would add that their own cultural, historical and country-specific contexts shape their policies and the responses that they give. Therefore, they are often able to demonstrate flexibility and pragmatism. For example, Ayatollah Khomeini, after the Iranian revolution, said birth control was against sharia so he banned it, but that policy was obviously changed a few years down the line. They enshrined the doctrine of maslaha, which meant that if the good of society contradicts sharia, the Supreme Leader has a right to override sharia. Therefore, all of a sudden, birth control became sharia-compliant. So the political realities also shape their policies as well as their religion and tradition.

Dr Omar Ashour: I completely agree. We have to perceive Islamists within the regional context. It is a region where the manipulation of religion as a political tool is quite effective. If you look throughout the region and most of the regimes there, the idea of using arms, religion or hyper-nationalism—the three pillars—to reach power and to remain in power is critical. Other ideas, such as votes, constitutions or the Government's achievements, are usually relegated to a marginal part.

In that context, we need to understand the behaviour of Islamists in terms of their contributions or their policies. There are two distinctive ones. On the one hand, the idea or slogan that is encompassed by the text "Islam is the solution" does not say anything; all it does is mobilise the public. What does Islam say about the economy? You will find different opinions. What does Islam say about politics? You will find different opinions. What does it say about democracy? You will find different opinions. On constitutional liberalism, minorities or gender issues, there are hundreds of opinions over the last 1,400 years. So it does not say anything about a solution for a particular policy. But that flag, when it gets raised, is good in terms of mobilisation.

On the other hand, especially with the groups that we are talking—the ones that run in elections and electoral democracy—what is distinctive about them is their social services networks and how they mobilise and are able to provide healthcare facilities, educational facilities, charities and so on and so forth, and then at the end capitalise on those when there is an electoral platform that they can compete in.

Q3 Chair: To get slightly more definition on this, may I ask you to just identify four political Islamists? Who are their main opponents and who would be their partners, or potential partners?

Dr Omar Ashour: Four political?

Chair: Four political Islamists—four political Islamist parties. Obviously, it is always suggested to us that the context is important and therefore the national context is important.

Perhaps you can illustrate this by example, and perhaps by different examples in different countries.

Ziya Meral: In all countries we see different groups that are opposing them. The traditional authoritarian regimes see them as a direct political threat and therefore clamp down on them, but we also see leftist or other regular political organisations or movements that see them as a threat, and nationalists as well. All across the Middle East and North Africa nationalism is a really strong sentiment and, because the Islamist ideal ultimately undermines nationalism and brings this post-national vision, they often find themselves in opposition. Also, within Islamist cells there are different types and different groups that contradict one another and see one another as not being the true Islamists or not being the true political party. For example, in Egypt we have seen the Muslim Brotherhood versus the Salafists. Even within the Salafists we have seen different Salafists with different interpretations. In the case of Turkey, for example, we do see—

Q4 Chair: Just for illustration, you have got the Brotherhood party, the Freedom and Justice Party, which would be seen as more political than Islamist, compared with the Salafists, which would be seen as more Islamist than political.

Ziya Meral: Depending upon who is calling the benchmark there. I think some Salafists do see them as less Islamist than they are themselves, versus seeing themselves as a much more mature and thought through Islamic—

Q5 Chair: Yet, ironically, the Salafist parties appear not to have been on the receiving end of quite the same extremity of repression that the Brotherhood party has.

Ziya Meral: My colleague, who is an expert on Egypt, can answer a bit more, but yes, definitely.

Dr Omar Ashour: On Islamism, this is a set of often conflicting political ideologies. It is not one political ideology; it is often conflicting political ideologies that justify their objectives and behaviour on an interpretation, or interpretation of an interpretation, of Islamic texts that the intellectuals produced. Then, after the interpretation, they try to reformulate it to become a world view, so they are very agent-intensive policies and agent-intensive processes. That is why the conclusions are usually conflicting, because the intellectual who is doing this process, and then interpreting and reformulating, usually ends up with very different conclusions.

That is why we have the Salafists, who perceive democracy as something between a necessary evil and an infidelity. We have the Muslim Brothers, who believe in the electoral process. They participated in elections in Egypt as early as 1942 under the British military presence in Egypt—there were elections in '42 and '45. But they have problems, and so do the Salafists, with the constitutional liberal component of democracy. When it comes to the rights of particular minorities in Egypt, for example, the Christians are seen as a legitimate minority in terms of the historical tradition and the religion. However, when you talk about other minorities—Baha'is, gays, atheists and so on—there is always a different approach when it comes to the Salafists and the Muslim Brothers.

We can talk about the extremists—the jihadis—later, but they also reach a different conclusion: the complete rejection of democracy and the idea that the only effective method, and in some versions the only legitimate method, for reaching political power is political violence and that any other method is not only ineffective, but Islamically illegitimate. That is a very different conclusion from what the Salafists and the Muslim Brothers would reach.

Q6 Chair: Why did they do so well in the aftermath of the Arab Spring?

Dr Omar Ashour: It is case by case—they did not all do well. In the case of Egypt, this is an organisation that, since its second revival under President Sadat in the 1970s, was bent on working in the universities, in civil society and in syndicates, and bent on mobilising youth, because all of them—when they came out of jail—were in their 50s and 60s and most of them had very problematic health, so they needed the youth. They were able to capitalise upon a margin of freedom, which, to be fair, was allowed to other political parties as well, including some of the liberals, such as the Wafdists, the nationalist liberals. They were able to capitalise on that margin to build up their own networks in upper Egypt, in Cairo, in the delta and in the north, in Alexandria.

There were basically four decades of work: building these networks; running in elections as independent MPs, using the slogan “Islam is the solution”; forming coalitions with other political parties, such as the Wafd party in 1984 and the Socialist Labour party in the 1987 elections; and then winning in 2005 about 20% in the parliamentary elections under Mubarak, under authoritarianism. So it was a building-up process. Then, once the Arab uprising happened and there were, for the first time ever in Egypt’s history, free and fair elections, they did not get an absolute majority. I need to stress that. They had the largest segment of the votes, and they ran not as the Muslim Brothers, and not as the Freedom and Justice party, but as a coalition, as a democratic alliance. Eleven parties were within that alliance. They gathered votes as well, so it was not exclusively a Muslim Brothers vote. So they were successful because of all of the aforementioned.

In the Libyan case, you find a different story. The second birth of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers was in Egypt in the 1970s. The second birth of the Libyan Muslim Brothers was in the US in the 1980s. They never had this chance to build up their networks and work in universities. When they tried to work in universities, Gaddafi basically killed them and hung them on the lampposts in Benghazi and Tripoli in 1984. So they didn’t have this chance to build these networks and therefore they did not do that well. In terms of the party lists—the 80 seats assigned for political parties—they won only 17 seats in Libya’s first ever free and fair elections, in 2012.

In Tunisia, you have a different situation, lesser than in Egypt but also quite well developed, because they had these provisions and were able to build up some of their support, until the 1990s when Ben Ali cracked down on them. But they have a history, since the 1970s, of building up social networks as well. There was a bit of a surprise—I myself was surprised—when Ghannouchi came back from the UK to Tunisia and had that much of a welcome in the airport, because I thought this was a different generation that did not participate that much in the uprising, as opposed to what happened in Egypt, where the Muslim Brothers were quite important in the uprising, but they were able to gather that much support.

It is a mix of hard work under authoritarianism on the one hand, and the manipulation of religions by religious slogans such as “Islam is the solution” on the other hand, and somewhere in the middle there is the provision of social services.

Q7 Chair: I was conscious, going to Egypt before 2010, that there was an attempt to create a sort of pharaonic identity for Egypt. The echoes of ancient Egypt appeared to be part of the presentation. In other of the dictatorships there was nationalism, obviously rather dated by then, but there had been both in Egypt and elsewhere that sense of Arab nationalism. How much do those non-Islamic identities have the effect of giving the Islamists a boost, because the regimes had or had not associated themselves particularly closely with Islam? Is the premise of my question right: that the dictatorships were perceived to be non-Islamic, either secular or nationalistic?

Dr Omar Ashour: I think no. The Muslim Brothers were critical and sometimes used this rhetoric that it was a secular regime that they were opposing, from Nasser. But Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak manipulated religion quite significantly and had a religious rhetoric that was quite strong. We seem to forget that back then basically one third of the constituent assembly of the Muslim Brothers, which is equivalent to the Shura council, was pro-Nasser in his crash with Hasan al-Hudaybi, the second general guide. The head of the special apparatus—the leader of the armed wing—Abdul Rahman al-Sanadi, became a security adviser for Nasser. He basically took half of the special apparatus with him, maybe because he was telling the grassroots of the special apparatus—the armed wing of the Brothers back in the '40s and '50s—“What do you want? Do you want a man who is a nationalist, with religion, giving speeches at al-Azhar, standing up to the former colonisers—the Brits and the French—and having this radical rhetoric? He was one of us. He was training us. What else do you want? So come with me.” He actually got a significant portion of the organisation to come with him. Sadat was always raising the flag of “I am the believer President—al-rai’s al-mu’amin”.

Q8 Chair: So your answer, then, is “Not really”?

Dr Omar Ashour: Not really.

Q9 Chair: Do you agree with that?

Ziya Meral: I think that when we look at the message, at the appeal they have in society and at people’s reactions to the totalitarian regime, the demand for fairness in the system—a fairer distribution, an improvement of the welfare system—often takes the form of a religious message. So when people demand sharia and criticise regimes or states through the lens of, “They are not religious. They are not dedicated. Islam is the solution” etc., we actually see a strong desire for fairness in the system. That is why, even though it is true that Sadat was able to put out a message that he was a believing President, at the same time he was chosen as the best-dressed world leader by *GQ*—he was on the cover of it, actually, shortly before he was assassinated.

So people did see this dichotomy. Their leaders were playing this religious game—Sadat changed the Egyptian constitution to bring sharia back to a more prominent position—but at the same time people said, “Society is not fair. The Government is not delivering. Nationalism is not saving us. Whether it is Turkish nationalism or Arab nationalism, what we

need is a much fairer system.” I think that becomes the main tension, rather than nationalism failing people, because all the countries in the region are deeply nationalistic. If you listen to Tunisian Islamists, they don’t want to be seen as under the control of Egyptian Islamists, again because of the same nationalism. The fault lines of the region shape them too.

Dr Courtney Freer: I agree with everything that has been said. I also think that, in a region where corruption is quite prevalent, the Brotherhood have done well to position themselves as the moral leaders and as people who are above the political fray, to a certain extent. I think you see that in Kuwait a lot. You also see that, when democratic freedoms are considered to be more under threat, the Brotherhood tend, more often than not, to form coalitions with secular organisations. That shows that there is flexibility, so the tension between secular and Islamist isn’t 100% accurate.

In addition to that, and with regard to your earlier question, I think the Brotherhood also benefit from their use of the social sphere. The Brotherhood want to use the grassroots and use society to change the political. I think that gives them an angle that other political groups don’t necessarily have; they can mobilise their mosques through schools, etc.

Q10 Daniel Kawczynski: How do Islamist parties understand democracy? Is it just a means of winning power?

Ziya Meral: I think in its rawest form it is; it is seen as a system that enables them to come into power. Some of them have traditionally been against even participation in this “corrupt political system.” For example, there are Salafists who refuse any engagement whatsoever within the political sphere. In fact, even among Shi’ites, the clerics have traditionally refused to engage with the political system. Some have seen the modern political missionary as the way to establish an Islamic nation. In fact, if you read a lot of Islamist literature across the 20th century, you see them adapting, into modern nation state regimes, even Marxist readings of the economic systems and regulations. They are impacted by contemporary governance structures, and they see them as an opportunity to push through their vision of establishing an Islamic system.

Dr Courtney Freer: If they believe in the need for democratic processes, in terms of elections, that doesn’t necessarily mean that they believe in the civil rights and the personal freedoms that we associate with democracy. You can call it the ideal type, in some senses, of an illiberal democracy. The Brotherhood are liberal in the sense that they believe in elections—I think a lot of Brotherhood parties do believe in elections and in working with the grassroots—but, equally, their views on social policies are not what we would call liberal.

Dr Omar Ashour: It depends on what kind of Islamist we are talking about. For example, if we are talking about the Ikhwanism trend of the Muslim Brothers, as a general ideology as opposed to an organisation. Some of the trends are classified. We can classify Salafism into five strands. There are the political Salafis—or the electoral Salafis, as I like to call them—the ones who run in elections. Aside from the negative views that I will get to in a second, democracy for them is number one a way to power, and number two a method to guarantee that the repression of the past does not come back.

There is a safety net in democracy. The crackdowns of the days of Nasser or perhaps Assad or Gaddafi—in democracies there is none of that. It guarantees the survival of the

organisation in some way, in some form, as political or otherwise. In the elections they have a good capacity at either winning or having significant numbers—20% or 30%—that provide them with a veto in some of the policies.

In my opinion, the main issue that contradicts democracy as we understand it in the West is the constitutional liberal component. I was involved in security sector reform in Egypt and Libya and was involved a little in some of the constitutional debates and witnessed that at first hand. The issue is where are the stances on the rest of the minorities that I just mentioned: the atheists, the gays, the Baha'is in Egypt and so on. That is when you do not get a clear answer, of course.

To be fair, other political parties would also be wishy-washy about those issues, because most of these societies are quite conservative. On the issue of constitutional liberalism, I think that is where the problem is. They have very mixed views on that. I asked one of the Salafi MPs in Egypt about gays; I don't have an estimate but there are from thousands to tens of thousands who are gay in Egypt. His answer was that we do not have them; he denied that they exist. When you ask them about the Shi'ites in Egypt, the Salafis will basically say that that is a complete heresy and is unacceptable. The Muslim Brothers will tell you that, as Ziya said, it does not conform with the Egyptian brand of religiosity—basically, using nationalism to delegitimise them, but they are of course Egyptian citizens.

Q11 Daniel Kawczynski: I have a brief supplementary question. Are there any differences in the way they operate and participate in the democratic process under a constitutional monarchy or a republic?

Dr Omar Ashour: Do you mean in Egypt?

Daniel Kawczynski: I mean in the Arab monarchies versus the republics. Are there any differences?

Dr Omar Ashour: There are quite a few differences. The crackdown and the clashes in the republics were much harsher on the Muslim Brothers. We are talking about Nasser versus King Faisal in Saudi Arabia, for example; co-operation and acceptance there versus crackdown and executions under Nasser. With Gaddafi and Assad it was the same thing, with the Hama massacre of 1982.

Even under Saddam, although he supported the Syrian Muslim Brothers brand with arms and camps and so on, he was cracking down on the Iraqi Muslim Brothers activists at the same time. Under republics the level of repression was quite high. Most of the Gulf monarchies at one point or another accepted the Brothers as advisers or some of them became citizens and were more or less part and parcel of the system, either as professors at university, or doctors or other professionals. The crackdown was quite different.

Sudan is a different story, because since the '50s the Muslim Brothers were more or less a mainstream political party and some of the intellectuals became Ministers, until one of the offshoots collaborated with the military in the coup of 1989.

Q12 Daniel Kawczynski: Once they have come to power, are there any examples that you can share with the Committee about them making specific constitutional changes to prevent their opponents gaining power thereafter?

Ziya Meral: I think that shortly after the Arab Spring they did not have that much time. With the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt we saw a year or so in governance and some changes and so on. In the case of Tunisia, we have seen how the Islamist Government stepping down to enable this new constitutional process is a compromise, so they took a much more long-term trajectory. In the case of Turkey, we have increasingly seen how the Government are not necessarily traditional Islamist, but they reflect a brand of political Islam. They are increasing the clampdown on freedom of expression and following the policies of bringing in their own networks within the judiciary and through Executive powers and so on, and therefore side-lining all other opposition groups. I think that pattern is more about the reality of the politics across the region. Whoever seems to be getting hold of the power at once has full power with no checks and balances. The same kind of varying patterns are seen in secular politics as well as in Islamist politics.

Q13 Mr Baron: Can I just press you a little bit on the objectives of the Islamic parties that took power? Moving away, to a certain extent, from their wish to share power or not, did they go about robustly enough to pursue reform in your view, or was it simply a case of replacing individuals with their own kind and keeping the system essentially intact? One is not being critical, but one is suggesting that after, in some cases, years of persecution, changing personnel might be seen to be enough, and that might influence the bigger question of whether they were willing to share power. I would like short answers from each of you, please.

Ziya Meral: I think that in Turkey we have seen how the Government pursued a lot of reforms from 2002 to 2008, economically and politically, which were genuinely applauded as EU standard direction. When they assumed full power they minimised the opposition in front of them. We have seen a much more authoritarian streak that placed their kind of people in key posts, and therefore became more about consolidating the power of the Government than actually continuing the reform processes.

In the case of Egypt, one of the criticisms that Tunisian Islamists made to the Muslim Brotherhood was how quickly they were committed to changing the constitution and waving their fingers at the army. In fact, some of the Turkish policy makers told me they were advising the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to calm down, focus on the economy and improve services, and then there might come a time for change. Depending upon the country and the network, I think that some of them tend to have a much more long-term vision.

There is also an ultimate difference. Some of them want a more traditional theocracy. Some of them want a much more, if you like, northern European Calvinist/American evangelical vision in which public morality and symbolic causes—abortion, gun control, alcohol and so on—become the main battle, but at the same time they are able to accommodate a contemporary economy, contemporary governance, a liberal market economy and globalisation as a possibility.

Dr Courtney Freer: The countries I look at have not had Islamists come to power, but one interesting dynamic that you see in Kuwait, for example, is that often when the Brotherhood gains a great deal of seats in Parliament with a coalition of secular parties, on a platform of reform, pro-democracy and all of that, once it is in power there is a falling back to the Islamist platform, looking more at social policies once they have gotten in on a platform of political reform. That is one common complaint that you have among secular parties in Kuwait, for example.

Throughout the region in general, I would say that the Brotherhood has a somewhat majoritarian rule of democracy. Once it has won power it sees itself as having a mandate to implement its reforms. It takes that as having the right from society to implement its political vision.

Mr Baron: No need to consult, just crack on.

Dr Courtney Freer: Exactly.

Dr Omar Ashour: In terms of reforms, again it depends on which country you are talking about. In the case of Turkey, as Ziya mentioned, it is quite clear what they did between 2002 and 2010 in terms of economic growth, in terms of civil-military relations, in terms of various attempts to join the EU. That is an Islamist-leaning party that came to Egypt in 2012 and said that secularism is the way to go. Erdoğan publicly told the Muslim Brotherhood that what they are trying to achieve is an impossible state. If you want to have a system that maintains the right of everybody, it is secularism.

In Tunisia the approach was quite different, mainly focused on the economy with gradual reformists, but when things escalated to a certain level the retreat was quite quick, in terms of abandoning office and allowing new elections and so on.

In the Egyptian case, I think the economy is just too complex to resolve. I don't see that there was a confrontation with the military. If you look at the 2012 constitution, it basically granted the military significant concessions—there are no talks about its economic empire and no talks about oversight of any sort—and that was in collaboration with the Muslim Brothers. In terms of reforms, yes, there were approaches to reforms. There were approaches to limit freedom of speech, partly from the Muslim Brothers but mostly from the Salafi MPs, who were trying to put clauses into the constitution to limit criticism of historical figures—for example, messengers or prophets—more or less to give this idea that we need to limit the interpretation of sharia to Sunni schools of jurisprudence. All of these were put in the constitution to try to limit freedom of speech.

Q14 Mr Baron: One accepts that no two countries or situations are the same, but to what extent has the approach taken by the various Islamic parties been dictated by the fact that they have more often than not come from a totalitarian state, as opposed to their wish to actually reform? If it is dominated by the first, they are more likely just to say, "Let's have a change of personnel," and continue with the system. I am asking about the extent to which reform has been a package, and how much that has had to be sacrificed in order to do what they perceive needs to be done—that is, to retain power.

Ziya Meral: I think that once you are the victim of an authoritarian system, you do want a revolution. Once you come into power, you all of a sudden realise that it is actually a really powerful mechanism to have. Often we see an adaptation and a hotch-potch of policies, even from sharia laws, for example, after the Iranian revolution. Sharia laws were not adapted 100% back into the system; the system brings in sharia laws in certain areas, to be able to demonstrate that now a new uniqueness is emerging, new moralities are upheld and certainly key facilities are changed.

For example, in the case of Turkey, even though the state previously used religion—all of the imams were civil servants employed by the state and all the messaging came from this really strong secular state—now the same Government is using the same structure and the same mechanisms to put out a different message. I think some of that is genuine—economic reform is genuinely an agenda that we see for a lot of them—because their credibility depends upon the grievances of the outcasts and socially excluded. If they can deal with welfare and with economic improvement, they can get away with a lot more on their political agendas, because at the end of the day that is what matters for people, and they are the voters. I think they are genuine in those areas, but questions on democratic reform and good governance are always much more elusive for that reason.

Q15 Mr Baron: Before my final question, does anybody else want to answer?

Dr Omar Ashour: Sometimes the knowledge for reform is not there, which is what I witnessed in the specific niche of reform of the security sector—especially the police sector—in Egypt. You have to start from the basics with MPs and members of the national security committees. Some were generals and some were from the Muslim Brothers. They need to start with security sector reform 101—I have no idea what that is, but there was a lot of talk about it in the media. Part of the difficulty is that you end up in an outbidding situation because of the political polarisation. So let us say that in Tunisia you want to reform the intervention force, which is part of the Ministry of the Interior. You then get accused of trying to Islamise the police force as opposed to reforming it. When you do similar things to do with balancing civil and military relations in the constitution, you will be accused of something similar. It becomes polar again. Limited knowledge and spoiler tactics were quite common.

Q16 Mr Baron: Very briefly before my final question, I want to come back on your point, Dr Ashour. Do you think there is merit in the West offering more when it comes to capability in these areas, not in a forceful manner but in a gesture of friendship?

Dr Omar Ashour: Absolutely, in terms of the technical issues that are niche and need specialisations, and in terms of how transitions happen. What happened in the uprising was a surprise for everybody, so there was not enough preparation on how transition goes and how gradual and problematic it is. Also in terms of the constitutional issue, especially constitutional liberalism, and how to institutionalise politics, such as always having a safety net for a non-violent conflict-resolution mechanism.

Usually the conflict is resolved by violent means, either through military intervention or by mobilising your supporters on the streets and throwing stones at someone. That method was not very helpful and in the end took the transition away. Those issues need to be tackled and they, of course, need expertise.

Q17 Mr Baron: Finally, on the issue of sharing power, the Muslim Brotherhood got hounded out in 2013 because it appeared that it managed to alienate so many across Egyptian society. What are the lessons here? Do you think parties are proving to be more willing to share powers with others? How do you see that evolving, particularly as the political leaders age?

Ziya Meral: We see a lot of debates within the Muslim Brotherhood now, particularly on developments organisationally. Some groups are asking for certain leaders to step aside and new generational leaders to come and new restructuring within the system. I do not see much reflection on what went wrong. Was it possible that their politics was great as an opposition force, but maybe not effective in governance? I do not see much robust reflection on that front.

I think Tunisia stands out as a great example. Ghannouchi and the Ennahda party had the political maturity not to insist on holding on to power and were able to step aside, which proved to be a long-term political calculation. Therefore, some of that is about realistic education levels, political maturity and organisational hierarchies as well. Some of those organisations are truly hierarchical in their decision making, so if the supreme guide and certain committees decide on something, depending on the formation of those bodies, the ladders between the middle and the junior management have no chance of raising concerns or providing new policies.

That is why we see the risk of radicalisation at some levels because they are not happy with the policies that are coming down from the top and they often get attracted to other groups or splinter factions emerge and so on. Again, I am not seeing a much deeper kind of reflection by Muslim Brothers on what went exactly wrong, notwithstanding what they suffered. They suffered a lot and it needs to be condemned, in terms of what has happened and is happening to them. It is more the organisational strategies that they are debating at this stage.

Dr Courtney Freer: I agree. You mentioned the Tunisian example as one case where the Brotherhood did show some political maturity and stepped aside. If you look at the Moroccan example, the PJD, the Brotherhood affiliate there, has been quite gradualist in its pursuit of its aims, especially post 2011. There have been some restrictions on their ability to use mosques for political purposes and things like that, and they have accepted those. There is a tendency to think that this is a period of reflection and retrenchment to a certain extent, rather than one of gunning for power, largely because they are unable to in some of these states.

Q18 Mike Gapes: Can I take you to what I think is the nub of the problem? If you look at Turkey, Turkey was the golden child and Erdoğan was a great democrat. Western and Christian democrats were saying that they are just like us. Now Erdoğan is a dictator and a terrible authoritarian and so on. Was that always his position?

Are Islamist parties when in government and in power inevitably going to behave in that way? Is Turkey an exception or the generality, and Tunisia the exception? I am interested to know how they govern inclusively and reflect positions in society that are different from their own. Is it simply that when they are in a minority that is the case and when they have the power they just go for it?

Ziya Meral: It is a genuine question. From 2002 to 2008 or even to 2010, the party itself had a lot of leading figures who, with President Erdoğan, were much more accommodating and much more inclusive concerning religion and politics, in the sense that they were happy to be dedicated religious Muslims, but also to develop an inclusive society and play a global standard sort of identity.

The party transformed into having one strong leader who holds on to power, and even the elections were not about the old vision of neo-Islamism emerging, but about President Erdoğan. He was the main shift, so even now what he is pushing aggressively is not an Islamist vision, but an enhanced presidency, which means he would be able to exercise more power. In a sense, there is no ideological component to what he does besides his very raw ambition to maintain power as a politician in power.

The party has evolved a lot while in office and some members have been genuinely dedicated to that inclusive religious agenda in the sense that they are happy to be Muslims and happy to govern, but for everyone. They were genuine in that reform. Some were always much more ideological in the sense that Islam will finally be actualised and Turkey will be more religious. Demands for sharia in Turkey were around 27% or 29% at the end of 1999. The same studies have shown that at the moment it is round 10%. So if you look at the demography of Turkish society over the last 10-plus years, demands for sharia are not increasing, but declining.

Islam in Turkey, the politics that follow, and the reason why our party¹ has been so successful is not because of the traditional Muslim Brotherhood kind of agenda that they are dedicated to enforcing—that is, a constitution based on Islam and a structure based on Islam—but a modern version of piety in the public space. The weakness of that has been the strong state tradition in place in Turkey, which is being maximised by another Government in power that is desperate to keep that power because without it they will face persecution and many real-life issues.

Q19 Mike Gapes: What about the difference in other parties? We have touched on Tunisia, but are there other examples of people from an Islamist party voluntarily giving up political power?

Dr Omar Ashour: I don't think there are any in the region, to be fair. There are no examples from the region, apart from one in 1985 involving General Swar al-Dahab in Sudan after a coup. He then handed over to an elected Government, but that is the only exception in the whole region. In that sense, Ghannouchi was an exception.

Q20 Mike Gapes: Ghannouchi learned his politics in London. His whole family lived here in Britain for many years and saw our system. Perhaps that helped.

Dr Omar Ashour: That possibly helped, and I think Swar al-Dahab also lived in London at some point. The problem is that you need a partner. Ghannouchi did not leave power without knowing that he would not end up in jail, be killed or have to come back to London in exile.

¹ Correction by Witness: 'why our party' should say 'why the ruling party'.

In the Egyptian case, I don't think that was feasible. The main problem was survivability and what would happen. There had already been public and media claims that, when they were out, they would be hunted. There were two approaches. Morsi, as we know, tried to get Ayman Nour from the liberal third party as Prime Minister to form a new Government and somehow to compromise on constitutional matters and call for early parliamentary elections, which probably the Muslim Brothers would have lost, but at least they would have 20% or 10% to maintain its status as a legitimate party. That attempt failed and because of that failure and the removal, I think the last stance was to mobilise its supporters and stay in Rabaa which ended up, as you know, with 1,000 people being killed in less than 10 hours and so on. I think it needs two partners to compromise and if one is willing to eradicate and the other is willing to compromise, the other will think it is stupid to compromise.

Q21 Ann Clwyd: On the back of Mike's question about Turkey, what do you think accounts for the demise of Davutoğlu in the past few days or weeks? Given that he was previously an adviser to the President, before he became Prime Minister, I would have expected him to have a different sort of influence. What do you think has gone wrong there?

Ziya Meral: I think that clearly, particularly for the last year, both Davutoğlu and President Erdoğan have been clashing quite strongly within the party. The party does a great job, which is the envy of a lot of other parties, in not leaking its inner tensions to the public and holding serious party discipline. That was not public, but it was quite known that Davutoğlu had completely different policies towards the EU, wanted to pick up on peace talks again with the PKK and was the one who wanted to pursue this refugee deal with the European Union. Erdoğan has been seeing his post as a transition into this presidential, new system, which Davutoğlu, being a really strong politician himself, has clearly been slowing down, and raising issues and concerns.

Davutoğlu's speech that he gave within his party building for his leaving was very emotional. He spent an hour demonstrating why he thought he did a great job as a Prime Minister and what his achievements were, but then in a few sentences said that he realised he did not have the support within the party leadership. I think the group that represented Davutoğlu within the AK party were pretty much marginalised by the group that still pledged allegiance to President Erdoğan, who sees himself of the natural leader of the party. It is not really out of an ideological difference, as such, but comes down to the differences in the policies of both men. Ultimately, the AK party is now geared towards heading to a referendum possibly, if not an early election, to be able to shift the system into a presidential one.

Q22 Ann Clwyd: To what extent do you think that political Islamists accept, or promote respect for, values such as gender equality, freedom of expression, minority rights or others? Do they accept that there is such a thing as universal values?

Dr Omar Ashour: It depends on which political Islamist organisation—not even ideology—we are talking about. I can give you an example with the Muslim Brothers. In the year 2000, the Egyptian Muslim Brothers were fielding female candidates for parliamentary elections. The Kuwaiti Muslim Brothers—allegedly their allegiance is to the Egyptian Brothers as the leaders of the organisation—were opposing women's suffrage in Kuwait in the same year: in 2000. You have the same organisation having very opposing stances on

women's participation in elections and so on. So it depends on which particular branch you are talking about in the same organisation.

When it comes to strands or ideological trends, if you wish—the Ikhwanism versus Salafism—one is much less restrictive on the rights of minorities and on the rights of women. The Salafis—you had the Nour party, in the Egyptian case—when they fielded female candidates they would put a flower instead of the picture of the lady; they did not want to show the picture, so they put a flower instead. This was something nice of them—it was supposed to be taken that way. On these issues it differs, depending on which organisation you are talking about.

Dr Courtney Freer: It also depends on the timing. For example in Kuwait, as Omar mentioned, the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood did oppose women's suffrage in 2005. Then, once that was granted by the Emir, the Brotherhood actually did very well in mobilising support among women and reaching out to them and trying to appeal to them with their message. If it is seen as politically useful to embrace gender equality, at least to a certain extent, that is something that they are willing to negotiate on. That kind of pragmatism is actually exactly what the Salafis criticise them for.

Ziya Meral: Ultimately we have some intrinsic unresolvable issues, for example around religious freedom. Even though certain religious minorities, if they are Christians or Jews, are given some sort of status because there is a tradition of that, it is still extremely restrictive by today's human rights standards. When it comes to freedom of conscience, if you choose to leave Islam or change your religion, you face serious problems; even though the death penalty is not promoted by all Islamists, you pay a huge price for that. Minorities that do not fit into the traditionally defined minorities like Jews and Christians—for example, Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses—do face serious problems all across. Therefore, religious freedom often becomes the acid test of any political party's commitment to individual rights and freedoms, defined not in abstract cultural terms, but within the human rights laws that all countries have ratified under UN structures.

Q23 Chair: Is that an appropriate test to apply?

Ziya Meral: I think it boils down to that. If you are an Islamist, your vision promotes, one way or another, a strong place for religion within the new system. If you are claiming that that system is going to be inclusive, what ultimately cuts across is not necessarily tolerance for freedom of expression or other political issues, but tolerance for people who do not share those religious beliefs. Will you be able, for example, to protect atheists who are writing books about why they do not believe in God? We have seen the persecution of atheists all across the Middle East and North Africa since the Arab Spring and particularly under Islamists. Even now we are seeing that in, for example, Bangladesh and other places.

Religious freedom and the question of giving people the freedom to believe or not to believe, or to come from a religious minority, often tend to be the main raw nerve that you can press. They are able to accommodate all other rights one way or another, no matter how imperfect. On gender issues there is a lot of progress, even though it is still dramatically short of contemporary standards. When it comes to religious freedom, we are still talking of a very basic level of denial of it.

Q24 Chair: Would that apply beyond religious freedom and to minority rights?

Ziya Meral: Of course. When I say religious freedom, I mean freedom of religion and belief that crosses over with the rights of minorities, individuals believing or not believing and so on.

Q25 Chair: Sexuality?

Ziya Meral: Definitely. Again, gender issues have been raised, and the treatment of LGBTI groups and so on, because they often take the form of public morality. We see strong responses to them. In Egypt, for example, after General el-Sisi took over there has been a clampdown on LGBTI and so on. Gender issues and sexuality definitely become another acid test that they are not able to accommodate.

Q26 Chair: Apologies. Before Ann Clwyd comes back to her line of questioning—this is an area I have tried to explore privately with political Islamists. In the political Islamist context in Saudi Arabia, there is a clear societal understanding, as I understand it, that your home is your castle, and the state, in that sense, has no business poking its nose behind your door. Is there a way of applying that test as to what is legitimate for a political Islamist party to seek to legislate for in the public sphere, and what would be retained in the private sphere, which would be, in that sense, the universal freedoms that are off limits? Has there been a development of this anywhere that we could examine to work towards what the ground rules might be for political Islamists to be full players on a democratic playing field that recognises universal rights?

Ziya Meral: Under international law, we separate the forum internum versus forum externum, in the sense that there are certain rights that are you may exercise in private, and they have outward expressions, too. Sometimes under international law, states have permission, for example, to stop religious gatherings or public demonstrations of certain rights, given it is proportional, it is for a time period, and there are implications for national security. States still cannot dictate your inner space: “This is who I am; this is what I believe; this is my ethnic and cultural identity.” Those cannot be denied, even at a time of war, but their expression can be contained at such emergency moments.

The problem that we see in the Middle East, in the case of Saudi Arabia, for example, is that the theo-political vision that forms the narrative of the country means that allowing, for example, religious freedom in churches or others, and Saudis having full freedom to convert or not to believe, and to publicly say, “I am not a Muslim any more”, or, “Now I am a Christian”, becomes impossible. The whole national narrative goes back to that vision that it is the house of Islam; it is the holy land. In fact, when one Saudi prince was challenged about why they were not allowing any churches and others to be opened up publicly, which would be a great symbol of tolerance to the rest of the world, he answered by saying that, just as there are no mosques in the Vatican, there will never be a church in Saudi Arabia.

The perception that it is the holy land automatically means those kind of issues become a problem, even though they should not be. You cannot stop someone from believing in another religion or demonstrating their sexuality, because who they are automatically comes out. We cannot simply allow Saudi Arabia to say, “Well, as long as they keep it in their house we won’t touch them.” We have to accept the fact that, if you hold a certain

sexual or religious orientation as your identity, you will demonstrate it, and that would mean persecution, which is not acceptable.

Dr Courtney Freer: This battle over the public sphere is something that we see in places in the Gulf where there is no political battleground. For example, in Qatar and Saudi Arabia the battle over social policies in the public sphere is the primary policy that the Brotherhood groups look at. They are not needed to provide social welfare because, by and large, they are wealthy states, and they are also not allowed to participate in any type of meaningful legislative elections in, for example, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, so in these types of states you see the public sphere as the main battleground. The debate is over the degree to which such places can be westernised or Islamised. For example, what kind of restrictions can be placed on dress code? Certain dress codes are seen as inappropriate. What kind of restrictions on alcohol? And so on. That is one dynamic that we see that is unique. The public sphere has become very prominent in debates among the Islamists in the Gulf.

Q27 Ann Clwyd: I am reminded of when the Muslim Brotherhood came to power. The Committee visited Egypt and spoke to some of the people who were then newly elected MPs. I always had the impression that, under Mubarak, Mrs Mubarak in particular had very strong ideas about how women's rights should be progressed. I remember asking that question and being told afterwards by one of the new MPs, "Don't mention her name again." She was equated with those very enlightened policies, and maybe the people who have now taken power are not going to share those values. Is that the right perception?

Dr Omar Ashour: There are some nuances here. Authoritarian regimes, including currently the wife of Bashar al-Assad, would basically do what the Islamists do in terms of religion, so internationally they would champion women's rights to get some more legitimacy and support. The Islamists do that at local level via religion. Under Mubarak, the human rights violations of women who opposed Mubarak were quite significant and quite well known. The most famous case was in front of the journalists' syndicate when they basically tore the clothes off women who were protesting against Mubarak. There were all kinds of violations in terms of torture and imprisonment, and the situation is the same now in Egypt. It is about giving rights to a particular type of woman, who are mostly urban upper middle class and, very importantly, supporters of the regime.

Briefly, religious freedom is a region-wide problem; it is not just an Islamist problem. The same applies to sexuality. Most of the crackdowns on gays and, more recently, the idea of using social media networks to attract gays, then arrest them and put them in jail was mainly done by the non-Islamist regimes—the authoritarian regimes of the region were doing that. There is the symbolism of getting others to become part of it. The Muslim Brotherhood will always tell you that the head of the Freedom and Justice party, the Islamist party, is an Anglican Christian from Egypt, Rafiq Habib, but when it comes to constitutional liberalism for others—non-Christians and non-Jews—there is a problem with freedom of speech and expression. You will find some support for the idea of limiting tolerance towards the Baha'i, the atheists and others.

Q28 Ann Clwyd: Who actually dictates the policies? Who leads the political Islamist parties? Do they dictate policies?

Dr Omar Ashour: Which Islamist parties?

Ann Clwyd: The lot.

Dr Omar Ashour: It depends on which party you are talking about. Sometimes the leadership is centralised; during times of crisis, it is not centralised. Currently, if you took the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, there are currently four main factions and they are very different in their views. So you have a faction that wants to keep everything as it is, so the leadership now stays as it is, the curriculum stays as it is, the tactics—in terms of demonstrations and civil resistance—stay as they are, and the idea of keeping the objectives of the organisation, in the sense that Morsi has to come back and so on, remains as it is.

At the very other end, you have a faction that wants to change everything: the leadership has to go, as they were a failure; tactics need to change; the curriculum of the organisation needs to change; and the objectives also need to change. In the middle, there are two other factions that want to change one thing or the other. So, in times of crisis the organisation usually gets decentralised.

When you have a charismatic figure like Anushi, for example, in the Nada case, who was kind of the Mandela of the Nada organisation, that is when things become much easier, not just with groups like the Muslim Brothers but even with jihadist groups or former jihadist groups like “the Islamic Group”, because they had a leadership that was quite charismatic and in control. They were able to go from supporting al-Qaeda at one point to running in elections in 2012 and 2013, and forming rallies with the Orthodox Christian church of Assiut, and keeping control over the grassroots without the grassroots rebelling.

So it is very different depending on which organisation we are talking about.

Q29 Mike Gapes: Can I get back to a point you made earlier, which was about the difference between people’s real agenda and what they tell visitors? Is there a general view among Islamists that you can spin a narrative towards westerners and liberals, but actually your real agenda is less liberal and more conservative, and less compromising in practice?

Dr Omar Ashour: Of course; they do this all the time. All politicians—many politicians, I’d say—

Q30 Mike Gapes: I know many politicians do, but normally politicians have a spectrum of telling the whole truth, or part of the truth; they don’t have a kind of ideological position that is here, but public statements that are somewhere completely different.

Dr Omar Ashour: The two-level game is played by all the Islamists. It is the idea that for the external—depending on who is external, by the way. With the Saudi Government, for example, the talk would be very different from the talk with the UK Government. So, on the external level, you will see that they have a tolerance and a liberal component, if you wish, and they will give a general acceptance of human rights values, democracy, liberalism and so on.

There is an internal talk with the grassroots, depending as well on which kind of grassroots they are talking to, which would be quite a bit different. The highlight was the Nour party leadership, who was—I will remember his name. *[Interruption.]* Yasser Borhami was his name. He was basically—I can talk about Fotouh, as well—but at one point when

you interview him as an external, he would give you a framework that, “We accept everything, we are intent on constitutional liberalism, we don’t have a problem with that”. And then, in a leaked conversation with some of his supporters, he was saying, “We’re doing all this because of the sharia and we need just to impose sharia, and we are winning these battles inside.” And he was right; he was winning some of these battles, in terms of forcing some clauses in the constitution.

So you will get this talk all the time; there is a similar situation with the Muslim Brothers. The issue is that these organisations, and specifically in the case of the Muslim Brothers, are quite pragmatic. So, depending on what kind of context and what kind of pressure they are under, they will shift their behaviour quite fast. I will just give an example. In the Algerian case, back in 1992 when the coup happened, they lost the elections. So, rather than supporting another Islamist party—the FIS, or Front Islamique du Salut—that won the elections, they supported the military. At the same time in Cairo, they were saying, “This is wrong. You should support the others.” So there was this pragmatism.

In the case of Iraq, it was the same thing. The Muslim Brothers branch in Iraq was supporting the intervention. The Egyptians were not, but the Iraqi branch supported the intervention because there was no way to get to Saddam aside from the removal by military force. So you have this quite high level of pragmatism. This two-level game that they play all the time is there.

Q31 Mike Gapes: Do either of you want to comment on that?

Ziya Meral: I think there is genuinely a case where we see that the Europe-based or more international spokespersons they have are much more accommodating of a discourse that is at one with us, versus people who are not in Europe and so on. As a strategy, there have been moments where they have put out a statement in Arabic that was different from the statement put out in English, as if nobody would put the two together. Sometimes you see those primitive politics unfold in certain places. But is it like that ideology—the whole *taqiyya* concept—that became very popular in the UK as a way of saying that any Muslim who seems to be this is actually doing this *taqiyya*, this internal principle of misleading us for a reason? I don’t see that as a genuine strong stand that is taken by Islamists. But there are messaging differences for the people you are speaking to.

Also, there is the accommodation of foreign delegations that come to your country and speaking the best of it. It would have been the same with General el-Sisi and others—what we want to hear, we hear all the time with the delegations that visit them, but when we stand back and look at what they do, even for Islamists, you are not able to fool the whole world one way or another with the message of what you are doing rather than what you are saying.

Dr Courtney Freer: I would add that there is a division between what the *hizb*, or the party, says, and what the *harakah*, or the movement, says. For example, in Morocco, Jordan and Kuwait, there is a division between the party, which runs electoral campaigns, and the movement, which runs educational programmes and more social outreach. Oftentimes, you will find that statements from the *harakah* are what we actually think, whereas what the *hizb* says is what we should think, or what we think the public want to hear. For example, it is

always going to be the political bloc that is forming coalitions with secular parties, so there is obviously more flexibility on the part of the political movement than for the social arm.

Q32 Mike Gapes: Can I take you back to what you were saying earlier about religious freedom? Is it part of the wider problem that, within Sunni Islam, people who existed before the Prophet are acceptable but anybody who comes after the Prophet, including Baha'is and Ahmadis, are regarded as apostates? Is it as simple as that, and does that apply right across—not just to Islamists but to anybody who takes a position in Sunni Islam? Presumably there is an issue that Shi'as might be regarded as apostates as well.

Ziya Meral: Sure. I think it's a mixture of factors. There is definitely a traditional theological formulation of handling different types of religious minorities, as you said. People of the book—Christians and Jews—are seen as the predecessors of Islam, versus those others who would be heretics or treated as apostates. There is definitely that, but if you look at the development of the policies towards religious minorities under, for example, the Ottoman empire, it turned into a much more sophisticated management of an empire. It gave religious minorities the permission to run their own legal system, handle their own taxation and have clerical systems. That was maintained in some countries.

For example, in Lebanon today we see the remnant of the Ottoman millet system, with different ethno-religious communities with different shares and their own legal systems. After the first world war, across the Middle East, some others adapted into modern nation states, with homogenisation and the rule of law, which maintained some of the attitudes towards religious minorities.

What Islamists ask for often demands a purification of the land. In other words, even in Islamic writings from Egypt, for example, we have always seen Islamists having troubles—they would think, “Copts have so much power in this country”, because there were a couple of Coptic Prime Ministers in the early 1920s, which would be impossible to think of in Egypt at this stage. We see how they often see domestic religious minorities, or people with different views of Islam, as heretics or apostates who need to be done away with because they defile the land. Ayatollah Khomeini had a similar view. Shi'ite theology has this notion of najis, which is something that makes things impure, and it has been used against religious minorities: if somebody who makes food is najis—dirty—that defiles the food, so a Muslim should not eat it.

You often see that game being played, but how it plays out politically depends on the particular country, its historical heritage and the legal system it uses. For example, in Jordan sharia law is used in personal status matters. Christians and others can accommodate having their own personal status on marriage, custody and so on in their own tradition, but if you are a convert, for example from Islam to another religion, or if they want to declare you an apostate for some reason, and there is no judicial court they can take you to, they take you to the personal status court and annul your marriage, seize your bank accounts and remove your civil ID records. So how it plays itself out becomes difficult.

Q33 Mike Gapes: Even in non-Islamist regimes?

Ziya Meral: Yes.

34 Mike Gapes: Okay. This is the final question from me. On the relationship between Islamist groups and violence, are political Islamist groups prepared to use violence to achieve their goals? I know the history of what happened in Egypt. We have been told that people sometimes used violence, including assassination, but then they renounced violence. Was violence a principle within their way of working or was it just a tactic at a particular time? I am interested in that relationship, and not just in Egypt.

Dr Omar Ashour: It depends again on which political organisation we are talking about. If you go from the West to the East, you have in Algeria, for example, the case of the FIS, which was an organisation or party that gathered Islamists from different strands—Salafists and Ikhwanis—and later on some of them became jihadists. After 1992, what happened? Major factions from within it, including some of the leadership, decided to take up arms because for them that was the only other way to resist.

In the case of Libya, for example, you had organisations such as the Islamic Libyan Fighting Group, which I would classify as a local jihadist organisation that was trying to overthrow the Gaddafi regime by force. Then, after that, they reconciled with him in the same scenario as happened in Egypt in 1997, but with the Islamic group organisation. They issued 416 pages of condemnation of political violence, with theological evidence, historical evidence, instrumental arguments and so on. It was celebrated by secularist Colonel Gaddafi back in March 2010—I attended that conference in Tripoli. It showed the leadership of that organisation. Of course, when things collapsed the members took up arms again during the revolution. But once Gaddafi was removed they formed two political parties, two factions. The organisation splintered and they formed two political parties. They ran in elections but did not win anything. One faction, the Central Nation faction, won two seats. The other faction, the al-Watan faction, did not win anything.

On the relations, this is from an organisation that used to condemn democracy and had significant literature in that sense condemning democracy. So it depends a lot on what kind of context and which organisation we are talking about. The relationship is dynamic. There is a realisation that arms is somewhere between a good safety net and the way to power. Indeed, I think the main difference here is whether it is the main way to power and the theologically Islamically legitimate way to power or it is something else, because then we are talking about the pragmatic use of violence.

Q35 Mike Gapes: Am I correct in saying that the Libyan group that you referred to—the Islamic Fighting Group—also had links with al-Qaeda?

Dr Omar Ashour: Yes. They did not give an oath of allegiance to al-Qaeda, but the members knew Osama bin Laden. They were with the Taliban at one point. The leadership fled. Some of their members joined al-Qaeda. Abu Laith al-Libi was a member of al-Qaeda.

Dr Courtney Freer: I would just add that the Muslim Brotherhood is not ideologically linked to violence. Violence is not seen as a tactic in terms of Hassan al-Banna. The idea is to change politics through society, as I mentioned before, rather than use violence to destroy the social and political system and replace it with something else.

One principle that did get carried on and led to violence within the Brotherhood is this idea of the re-establishment of a Caliphate, which is something that Hassan al-Banna did speak and write about. That said, the Muslim Brotherhood has become so localised and so nationalised that there has not really been much progress towards, or even talk about, a Caliphate, at least among the Brotherhood to whom I have spoken. I think that kind of strand of the Caliphate is something that has been passed down, but it is something that has been used very differently by the Brotherhood than it has been by violent organisations.

That the Brotherhood is now under so much political strain and under crackdowns in so many places is a test to see what it will do, but thus far it seems committed to non-violence. Indeed, when the Brotherhood has done badly in elections, it has accepted those results and has continued participating in elections despite the fact that it has lost.

Ziya Meral: I second all that has been said, but also external stimuli become really important, in the sense that very few of them have verbalised and clearly thought-through theologies of violence with regard to why violence is part of their political agenda, but state persecution and clampdown often have that radicalising effect, and people's experiences in prisons often lead to them seeing political Islam as not the answer; they say, "See, it is not changing anything and we are suffering." Those have been established as major stimuli that take a political Islamic person down the track of violent extremism.

Secondly, in failed states people tend rightly to say, "I need to protect myself. I need to re-establish order," or there is an invading force and a war that actually triggers insurgencies. Therefore, the theology becomes adapted into the context rather than the context being shaped by the theology. Rather than the question of whether a single religion leads to violence, it could have been a lot better for us to look at how violent conflicts impact religion and religious beliefs and how they interact with them. Even in Sinai at the moment, the insurgencies that have been emerging for the last couple of years are much more reflective of the realities of Sinai and the long and complex patterns that are there. ISIS, for example, did not necessarily emerge because of a theological belief; it was the context of Iraq and Syria and all the dynamics that we see.

Therefore, I think the majority of political Islamists—or Islamists as we know them—see violence as possibly a tactical move given certain parameters are there, but most of them actually do not even accept that as a moral approach to this long-term project. But again, external stimuli become the threshold for that.

Q36 Chair: Given what has happened since the Arab Spring in particular, not least in Egypt and elsewhere—there are two questions here, but I will put them together—has the appeal of political Islam now passed its peak? Is this now a declining force in the region? Regardless of the answer to that question, in what ideological direction do you see political Islam going?

Dr Omar Ashour: I do not think it is a declining force. Again, it depends on which organisation and which context we are talking about. When you have an open, free and fair election, they will fluctuate; they will get their 40%, which they got before in places like Egypt and Tunisia, and then they will fail in addressing the problems of these countries with their policies, because those problems are much bigger than their capacities, so they will be voted out and they will try to enhance their game and then come back in one way or another.

I am talking about the political Islamists, not about the violent types—the al-Qaeda types and the IS types. That is a completely different story.

Q37 Chair: No, it was relating to people who are called political Islamists who might be drawn into violence given the circumstances they find themselves in.

Ziya Meral: Yes, I think we see some young men—again—and women who gave democracy a chance and are frustrated with this period when they are being persecuted and things are not changing. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and so on, we see people joining militancy in fighting for other battles or taking arms between themselves. It is a deeply religious region, so that we will always have religious actors, religious visions and religious networks is a given. It is just that the characteristics they take and the political and social significance they have depend upon the context. If there was genuinely a democratic kind of wave on the horizon in the region, which is very difficult to forecast, we could once again see normalisation of this tension, but we know—we have been here before—that the more we have these authoritarian regimes and the more we have failed states and active conflicts creating large numbers of refugees and daily exposure to violence, the more the radicalisation side of it becomes a clear possibility and an ongoing process. Will we see Muslim politicians learning lessons and actually promoting a new wave of adaptation in the 21st century? At the moment, I do not know. I still see it as this incubation period. It could go multiple different ways from now on.

Dr Courtney Freer: The Muslim Brotherhood is quite a flexible organisation. The very fact that it can exist in contexts as diverse as Algeria and the UAE demonstrates that it is able to adapt to different political openings that it is allowed, and to find different ways to have influence. Whether it is through leaning more heavily on social services or on an ideological appeal in somewhere like the UAE, the Muslim Brotherhood has proven its ability to survive in very different contexts. I think we will continue to see that.

Q38 Chair: Finally, turning to Sir John Jenkins' review here in the UK, do you agree with the broader critical findings of that review?

Ziya Meral: I do in the sense that it was right to point out that the Muslim Brotherhood is not a terrorist organisation as we would define it within British law and experience. The report's public conclusions made it clear that there were questionable practices, and questions around the agendas and the networks. But, at the same time, it does not necessarily pose a security threat to the UK. Yes, it could very well be a phase for somebody on the journey to radicalisation, but by and large the organisation is not a group that we would name in those terms. That is the broad picture that we were able to see from the public version of the report, and it is a fair assessment in that context.

Q39 Chair: Do you both agree?

Dr Omar Ashour: I partly agree with the published main findings. I did not read the whole report but I can highlight issues that I think need some qualifiers. Sometimes they were not very nuanced and sometimes they were inaccurate. There were statements that were quite sweeping in one way or another. I disagreed with those or I thought they were not very accurate.

Dr Courtney Freer: I agree. I think it overplayed the connection between the Brotherhood and violence and violent groups a bit. The idea that I got from the main findings was that the Brotherhood was portrayed as a much more cohesive organisation internationally than it in fact is.

Q40 Chair: Perhaps we can finish on that point, because we need to finish now. What are the links between the Brotherhood groups in different states? Just how cohesive is this?

Dr Courtney Freer: Not at all. If you look at the agendas of Brotherhood groups, they are very much localised and tailored to national circumstances. The international body of the Muslim Brotherhood does not have any kind of controlling mechanism through which it can control or dictate any of the agendas in the national context. It is a very loose, feeble coalition of people linked by ideology and not by much else really.

Dr Omar Ashour: The international links are important for the logistical support sometimes. They are mobilisation to say that the organisation is about Islam and is not just about local networks or for demobilisation; sometimes it is for solidarity of some form or another. Aside from those issues, it is more of a discussion forum. They really do not give orders to each other. I mentioned the case of Algeria, where the branches were giving different stances. I mentioned the cases of Iraq and Kuwait. In Syria and Egypt in the 1960s, the Brothers were basically being executed and thrown in jail by Nasser. The Syrian branch of the Muslim Brothers was very supportive of Nasser. Nasser would meet the general guide, Mustafa al-Siba'i, who published his book "Socialism in Islam" with Egyptian state money. So they are two very different approaches, as if they are completely interconnected. That is the international organisation.

Ziya Meral: I second everything that has been said.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for giving evidence. That is a good start to the public part of our inquiry. I am immensely grateful to each of you.