

Political Islam Is Declining in the Middle East

By Prof. Hillel
Frisch

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mosque silhouette image via Pixabay

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The lack of a reaction to the death of former Egyptian president Muhammad Morsi and the absence of religious demands by protesters in Algeria, Sudan, and Iraq suggest that political Islam is waning after the defeat of ISIS three years ago.

Few live images were more dramatic than the collapse and death of former Egyptian president Muhammad Morsi, the first-ever Muslim Brotherhood head of state, in a transparent glass cage on June 17, 2019 during his seemingly never-ending trial proceedings in Cairo.

No one outside Egyptian officialdom questioned the severe conditions of Morsi's incarceration since the day special forces surrounded the presidential home and placed him under arrest in July

2013, paving the way for his minister of defense, Abdel Fatah Sisi, to rise to the presidency in his stead.

For all the human drama of Morsi's death, it prompted barely a whisper among the Egyptian public. It elicited protests by hapless exiled Muslim Brotherhood leaders, a predictable tirade by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and some ineffective criticism from Qatar's al-Jazeera, which shares Erdoğan's antipathy to Sisi and sympathy for the Brotherhood.

When Egyptians took to the streets three months after Morsi's death, their chants – “Down with Sisi's tyrannical regime” – had nothing to do with Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood, or Islamist ideology.

The same can be said of the months-long protests that are taking place in Algeria and Sudan, which have been described as the stirrings of a new “Arab Spring.” Their common denominator is the marked absence of political Islam in the protesters' messages.

In Algeria, the second most populous Arabic-speaking state, the issue revolves around negotiations to achieve a full democratic transition after 67 years of army-dominated one-party rule since Algerian independence. The protests resulted in the removal of senile president Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April 2019.

The protesters address a variety of unifying issues – social justice, the plight of the periphery, youth unemployment – and some over which there is considerable contention, such as the position of the Berbers, the country's indigenous population, and the status of the Amazigh languages. Noticeably absent in the discourse are issues of mosque and state – the bread and butter issues of political Islam.

To anyone familiar with recent Algerian history, the change is dramatic. Just one generation ago, in the 1990s, the country was beset by internecine war between the Algerian “deep state” – the FLN and the army it supported – and the Islamist parties, groups, and militias. It is estimated that between 50,000 and 100,000 were killed in massive acts of terrorism and massacres as both sides accused towns and villages of betrayal and destroyed them in retribution. Eventually, the state gained the upper hand after the largest faction, the Front of Islamic Salvation, gave up the fight in return for amnesty.

Even more striking is the fading of political Islam in Sudan. As in Algeria, the protesters managed to remove their head of state, General Omar Bashir, after 30 years in power. But unlike Algeria, where the regime was never Islamist, Bashir, in his rise to power, had made common cause with the National Islamic Front and imposed *sharia* law on the country. That move fueled

the many insurrections that beset the huge nation and culminated in the secession of the newest state in Africa, the Republic of South Sudan.

Notably, the latest wave of mass protests in Sudan was organized mainly by a professional body, the Sudanese Professionals Association. It is delegates from that organization, not the leaders of more veteran Islamic parties, who are negotiating with the army, which is headed by the commander of the rapid deployment force responsible for brutally suppressing the protesters. The fear is that in both Algeria and Sudan, the army is using negotiations to buy time until the mass movement behind the negotiators fizzles out, at which time the army will send the negotiators to jail or into exile.

Even in Iraq, where religious conflict between Shiites and Sunnis dominated politics and fueled enormous waves of violence following the removal of Saddam Hussein, one sees a waning of the political importance of religion. Protests over the past two years in the south of Iraq, an area exclusively populated by Shiites, is taking place against a Shiite-dominated government. Once again, the issues are youth employment, inadequate public services, and the massive drain on public resources caused by wide-scale corruption. Nary a word on religion and state or Sunni-Shiite relations.

When these Shiite protesters do point an accusing finger, it is no longer at the Sunnis in the north. It is against Iranian intervention in Iraqi affairs and the economic costs of such involvement. Such a state of affairs would have been unthinkable only five years ago, when Sunni-dominated ISIS threatened predominantly Shiite Baghdad.

Recent elections in Tunisia also reflect (albeit less dramatically) the waning of political Islam. In the first round of presidential elections after the decease of a 92-year-old president, the candidate endorsed by the Nahda, a reformist Islamic party, came in a distant third, making him ineligible for the second round.

Though political Islam's power might have waned, it can hardly be pronounced moribund. Two powerful states in the region, Iran and Turkey, are led by determined fundamentalists.

The future of political Islam will depend on the extent to which the protesters achieve their goals through effective organization and prove able to persuade reluctant militaries to give up their power. Failure to achieve these results might resurrect a more hardened political Islam.

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Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

