Islamism in the Horn of Africa

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Introduction

This meeting, held at Chatham House on 13 May 2015, examined Islamism in the Horn of Africa. Islamist movements have long existed in this region, playing a significant role in the national politics of Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Political Islam is now increasingly influencing relations between states in the region, and the political impact of this could be either stabilizing or destructive.


The meeting and question and answer session were held on the record, and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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Harry Verhoeven

Water, Civilisation and Power in Sudan is the story of the last 25 years in Sudan from an insider’s perspective. Sudan is important to examine when considering Islamism around the world, as Islamists have been in power there for a quarter of a century. Having said this, it is possible that Islamism does not have a future in the Horn of Africa, compared with other regions on the continent and across the Arab-Islamic world.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Islamism was an elitist project in Sudan which gave way to an agenda of economic salvation when the government changed in 1989. The new Al-Ingaz regime pursued a foreign policy at odds with its economic programme, alienating states such as Egypt and the Gulf states that were to provide the capital for its ambitious irrigated agriculture projects. These large-scale dams were intended to transform Sudan’s weak economy. After a power struggle in the 1990s, Omar al-Bashir became president and demonstrated his understanding that the government needed rebranding. He introduced the ‘competence agenda’ to resolve problems with Egypt and other states, in return for their cooperation with the dam project.

After an influx of capital and an increase in oil revenue, money was spent on government buildings, public sector salaries, the army and dam projects. The planned dam network in Sudan quickly became the largest in Africa, with more than $10 billion of investment over 12 years. Despite this, agricultural activity has remained stagnant, and the dams have not produced as much electricity as was predicted. Therefore, after 2000 the regime unsuccessfully attempted to reinvent itself again. A current reinvention attempt, Sudan’s third, makes it seem unlikely that Islamism can have a solid future in the country.

Sideg Osman

Sudan’s elites are the only group with the power to change the system, but they are also a product of the education and administrative systems in the country, so it is highly unlikely that change will occur through them. In the 1990s, Sudan made surprising progress towards democratic elections, but this progress was thwarted. Subsequently, the government continued to focus on northern Sudan, neglecting Darfur and southern Sudan. During this time no roads, canals or railways were built in southern Sudan because the region was not a priority of Khartoum.
The government is continuing with its agenda of making Sudan the breadbasket of Africa, despite the failure of this strategy in the past. Sudan will never reach this status because South Sudan’s independence left it without the requisite manpower. It is important not to underestimate the impact of South Sudan’s independence. Sudan’s economy collapsed after July 2011 not because of the loss of oil revenue to the South, but because millions of workers were also removed.

**Justin Willis**

Islamism is the belief that Islam should guide public and political life as well as private and domestic life. For Islamists, this is a near-term goal for political and social transformation. Islamism is not necessarily violent in nature, but it is irreconcilably opposed to the political order. It is important to note that Islamism does not have to be doctrinal. It is not the same as Salafism.

In Kenya the narrative surrounding Islamism often focuses on external influences. Programmes of proselytization in Kenya have been funded by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran. These programmes train imams and fund mosques and madrasas with the intention of spreading and reforming Islam. These have been effective and significant, augmented by the debate on Islam and its place in society, and the growth of the internet. Through these channels, Muslims in Kenya have been encouraged to view themselves as part of a wider Muslim community that is struggling against a global inimical force. In the past 25 years, Kenya has also dealt with the wave of Muslim refugees from Somalia which has changed the demographics of its population. Contested figures suggest Muslims now account for between 11 and 12 per cent of the population, and the majority of these are Somali.

Many areas of Kenya with high Muslim populations lag in health, wealth and education indicators in comparison with the rest of the country. Muslims are also politically excluded and vulnerable to abuse by state officials. In the 1990s the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) used Islam as a mobilizing force but did not pursue an Islamist agenda. Since then Christianity has cemented itself into the fabric of Kenyan politics, creating an environment in which the church does not criticize the state. Instead, Islam has become the space for criticism, which comes in the form of peaceful critique, through electoral or constitutional means, or through active violent struggle. Al Shabaab’s claims equate the struggle of the poor in Kenya with the struggle of Kenyan Muslims, and tie this to the struggle of Muslims in the wider global community. The argument is strong and emotive, but has not led to large numbers of conversions.

The weakness of Kenyan security institutions has allowed violence to increase, and has also led to a criminal element of Islamism. It is also increasingly difficult to be a Muslim leader in Kenya because individuals expressing criticism of the government risk harassment from the state, while those who criticize Islamist violence risk losing their status within the Muslim population and may meet violent retaliation from extremists.

The new constitution should improve the situation for marginalized groups in Kenya, but it is not certain that all recommended improvements will be put into practice. Reforming the security services and the Christian, Pentecostal influence in government would be major progress. While there appears to have been an advance in intelligence-gathering, there has also been an alarming growth in the detention of individuals en masse, based on little or no evidence, which alienates people further without solving problems.
The term ‘Islamism’ is controversial because it is perceived to be inherently negative, which is not necessarily true. Many Islamist political movements also have elements in common with ideologies such as Marxism. Such movements are dissatisfied with the status quo and seek radical change. However, ‘radicalism’ is also a highly charged term that needs to be used with care.

During the first decade of Somalia’s independence, there were many ideologies vying for political space. A coup in the late 1960s swept aside political expression. Two strands of Islamist influence have historically been involved in Somali politics. The first is Salafist thinking, which advocates the need to purify the individual practice of faith and extends this theme to society in general. The second is Ikhwan or Muslim Brotherhood ideology, which espouses the involvement of Islam in the political, economic and social relations of the state. It was transmitted into the region from the middle of the 20th century.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Siad Barre conducted a crackdown on political parties, activist politicians and religious leaders, in an effort to bring about a secular order. During this time, given the context of the oil boom, many were exposed to the Salafist ideas of the Arabian Peninsula. After the Somali state collapsed in 1991, the first decision to become involved in state politics came from Salafist groups looking to take up arms. By 2000, the Djibouti peace process produced a parliament in Somalia with approximately 10 percent of its members drawn from Islamist backgrounds.

The real watershed for Islamist politics in Somalia came in 2005–06, when a coalition was formed between Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organizations. They overcame militias supporting sharia courts and various warlord factions to unite parts of southern and central Somalia. This phase of Somali politics was brief. Currently, Islamism is the most coherent organizational principle in Somalia, but this is not clearly recognized externally because of a tendency to conflate Islamism and Salafism.

An important factor in Somalia’s politics is the country’s relationship with states including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These countries are significant sources of financing and training for Somalia, and also tend to be pro-Islamist. In contrast, other regional players, such as Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya and the African Union, are supportive of a more secular state. Through their funding of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) intervention, the US and EU demonstrate the significance of Western influence. Western countries are clearly uncomfortable with the emergence of an Islamist administration in Somalia.
Question and Answer Session

Questions

Many people from Saudi Arabia and Yemen are going to Somalia. The army are exploiting local people, leaving them marginalized and forced to contact al Shabaab. What message do you think needs to be sent to the Somali federal government?

Can you comment on Islamism in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti?

Dr Osman said he agreed with everything Dr Verhoeven had said, except the conclusion. Why?

Is the UAE really Islamist?

How do you see the future of Sudan’s hydropower mission and economic programme in this post-election period?

Jason Mosley

It is important to highlight that the coherence and capacity of many Islamist organizations in Somalia does not necessarily translate into large membership. But in the context of a volatile social, economic and political environment, becoming involved with a coherent organization that is able to provide some kind of stability has been an important recruitment factor, especially in the south. Indeed it formed a major contribution to al Shabaab’s success from 2008 to 2010.

While the UAE would not support a violent jihadist government in Somalia, it is unlikely that the country would be uncomfortable with a government similar to the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE is already aware of the influence of Islamist groups in the Somali government, yet complex links exist between the countries, transcending state-to-state aid or hard politics.

Sideg Osman

The speaker stated that he had expected Dr Verhoeven to reach the conclusion that there is nothing Islamist about Sudan’s Al-Ingaz regime. It is important to distinguish between the ideology and the manner in which it is expressed. Al-Ingaz did nothing to change the vehicle of ideology – the structure of the administration.

Harry Verhoeven

The use of the term ‘Islamism’ in the context of Sudan is no longer useful, as the ideology has become subservient to the party. The last historical Islamist intellectuals in Sudan left after the revolution, and the resultant government was typically African and no longer exceptional. Strategy in Sudan’s external engagement is dictated by short-term pragmatic politics. For example, Sudan’s current closeness to Qatar, Iran and Saudi Arabia is well understood by all parties to be based on short-term goals.

Questions

Is Islamism a threat to regional security?

Are there any international or pan-African links with ISIS or other Islamist groups?
What is your reference for the dams not producing electricity?

Was oil really not the most important factor post-independence in Sudan?

As mentioned, evangelical groups have become affiliated with the Kenyan government, and this has created the perception that other groups have been marginalized. To what extent has this led to a genuine intolerance of Muslims?

**Harry Verhoeven**

A number of Sudanese veterans from the wars in the 1990s and early 2000s have travelled to Syria and Iraq. They often feel disillusioned with the Sudanese government for not delivering on promises offered. The Merowe Dam has produced some electricity, but the question of its value for money still remains. Considering that the dam cost $5 billion and, according to Sudan’s Dam Implementation Unit, is only producing 1,250 MW of the 2,000 MW projected, it is not good value.

**Sideg Osman**

After the independence of South Sudan, it became clear that people were taking their goods and travelling south. Orders were issued to soldiers that anybody trading with southerners was to be shot. The current Sudan is the creation of Muhammad Ali, not a product of the Sudanese people; no tangible changes have been made since independence.

**Justin Willis**

Terrorism seeks to divide, delegitimize and make itself the only answer. While Christians in Kenya feel endangered, it is important not to forget that Muslims are also terrorized heavily by al Shabaab, an Islamist organization. It is imperative to change the Pentecostal nature of Kenyan politics to include Muslims, though it is unclear how to do this.

**Jason Mosley**

Jason Mosley disagreed with Prof. Willis, and argued that Islamism is a broader phenomenon encompassing more than the violence causing insecurity in Kenya or Syria. Islamism is not necessarily violent, and this totalizing phenomenon is overshadowing the more mundane but no less important topic of Islamism as a non-violent mobilizing force.