Edited Excerpt

Thank you very much for your kind introduction. It's a bit of a paradox, you know, to ask the question "Where is religion in the present conflict in the Middle East?" Apparently, it's full of religion…we're just out of four years of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. We have among the actors the Iranians, and it's by definition an Islamic State. The main polarisation in the Middle East now is the Shi'ite axis vs the Sunni axis.

So, the area seems to be full of religion, and most of the current actors claim to have religious legitimacy. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, for instance - he speaks with reference to the Ottoman Empire and presents himself as a different sort of Sunni in the area. Saudi Arabia also presents itself as a different sort of the Sunni against the Shi'ites. Iran is the reverse, by definition. Qatar had the policy of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. In Yemen, there's a religious dimension to the civil war: The Houthis vs the Sunnis. And Morocco has a very clever and sophisticated form of religious diplomacy, promoting transnational Muslim groups like the Sufi Brotherhood, and putting forward the traditional Maliki Islam in contrast with Salafism. So apparently, everything is religious in this conflict.

But if we look a bit more in depth, we have a very different landscape and, for me, Islam has a stake in, but is not a driver, of the conflict in the area. We're used to having, since the 1970s, Islamic manifestations, demonstrations in the street, Islamic protests and the call for an Islamic state, for Syariah. It used to be a traditional method of contestation in the Middle East. But starting with what has been called the Arab Spring, we have a very different picture. The Arab Spring, whatever the political impact, is something which is quite new. For the first time, we have popular demonstrations in the streets without any reference to Islam, without any reference to religion. It was about different things: democracy, human rights, and in some countries, it took a nationalist or patriotic turn. But it was never about implementing Syariah, or becoming an Islamic state and so on.

The second point which is quite interesting is that the Israel-Palestine conflict, which used to, at least symbolically, be at the core of the religious mobilisation in the Middle East, doesn't play any role in mobilising the people. We have had some extraordinary moves - the Americans shifting their embassy to Jerusalem, for example - and nothing happened. Ten years, 20 years ago, there would have been a lot of demonstrations, protests, even terrorist actions. But here - nothing. No demonstrations from Morocco, from the Gulf states, from Saudi Arabia. Nothing. The Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, can speak openly of recognising Israel, and nothing happens. No protests. Of course, in Saudi Arabia we don't expect any vocal opposition, but outside Saudi Arabia, there is silence about this issue.

In Egypt, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, we had the Muslim Brotherhood winning the election. Within one year, it was toppled by the military, but the interesting thing is that the political alignments had nothing to do with religious alignments. The Salafis entered politics and supported General Sisi against the Muslim Brotherhood. So we have a paradox: The government which was supposed to have the most Islamic agenda, that of the Muslim Brotherhood, was opposed by the Salafis, who officially support the implementation of Syariah.

So we have a discrepancy between the political alignments and the religious alignments, and if we go a bit further to understand the geo-strategy of the area, it's even more clear. It's full of unholy alliances. Let's take Turkey. Clearly, Erdogan has a religious narrative - it's not about Syariah, has never been about Syariah - it's about reconnecting with the Ottoman tradition and playing a role in the area, using the name of Ottoman legitimacy because he considers himself the heir of the tradition of unifying at least the Sunni Muslim world in the Middle East and he claims to be the potential leader of a Sunni coalition.

But what are the real alliances in Turkey? Now, they may change, they will change, of course, but now, it's Russia and Iran. And Russia and Iran were the arch enemies of the Ottoman Empire! The Ottoman Empire started with fighting against Russia and Iran, the Sunni-Shi'ite divide was there from the beginning of both empires, the Ottoman and the Safavid, and, of course, Russia has been the arch enemy of the Ottoman Empire since the 18th century. But now they are - I wouldn't say best friends, we should not exaggerate - but they're partners in supporting the most secular regime in the present Middle East: Bashar al-Assad's.

So we have here political alignments, strategic alignments which are open and have nothing to do with the different religious claims of the actors. As I said, the Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia is also in the same position. He claims to unify Sunni Arabs against the Shi'ite threats, the Persian Shi'ite threats, but he has given up on what was the main driver of popular mobilisation in the Middle East: The Israel-Palestine conflict. Opposition to Israel was the common denominator between the Sunni actors in the Middle East, and that's finished. Also, MBS has decided to target the Muslim Brotherhood as the main threat to the kingdom, which is also a bit strange because the Brotherhood is at the core of the political Sunni mobilisation in the Middle East. When the Iranian Revolution occurred in 1979, the Iranians tried to enlist the Muslim Brotherhood in the fight against conservative Arab regimes, but it refused to align with Iran. And it was more or less aligned with Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq conflict of the 1980s. So no one can suspect the Muslim Brotherhood of being pro-Iran.

The present Saudi government has decided that the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS are terrorists, which prevents any possibility of having a common Arab-Sunni front against Iran. The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Qatar is a clear example of this impossibility and unwillingness to have a real Arab-Sunni front against Shi'ism. So the real alignments have nothing to do with the ideological claims of religious solidarity. And as I said, we have no Muslim militancy on the street. That is the big difference between the Middle East and South Asia. In Pakistan, in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, we have an Islamic militancy - we have demonstrations, campaigns - but in the Middle East, no. Some years ago – during the Salman Rushdie affair, the American intervention in Iraq - we saw hundreds of thousands of demonstrators on the streets in various countries. Now, nothing.

Now, there are no demonstrations connected with religious issues – they are all linked to local issues: Social conditions, economic conditions, and so on. There are no disturbances connected with trans-national Islamic solidarity. That's something which has disappeared from the Middle East. Of course, you may object. What about ISIS? Daesh is a very interesting case. First, it's a failure. It has been defeated. Interestingly enough, from the beginning of the movement which led to the creation of Daesh - when Abu Musab al- Zarqawi was still a member of al-Qaeda, and began to establish a territorial Islamic emirate in the area, he was warned by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahari that it was a big mistake. Osama warned him to avoid establishing a territorial Islamic

entity because it would concentrate the attacks of all its enemies, the Americans and the local actors. That's exactly what happened. ISIS resisted far better than most of the experts expected, including me - at that time, I said that ISIS would last one year. It lasted four years more, but in the end it was the same result. So what is specifically Islamic about ISIS? Of course, we have the nucleus of Islamic militants, Zarqawi and others, who were committed jihadi Islamist fighters. They were committed to the creation of an Islamic state, to global jihad, to supporting and waging Islamic attacks everywhere in the West. But what is the social basis of Daesh in the area? It's far more complex. Of course, it's very difficult to go there and do field research. But we have some researchers who are local social scientists who are now reaching some conclusions. So what I'm saying here is going to be based on what my young colleague said. He had to leave during ISIS' time, but now he's back there, and he came back with interesting conclusions.

He went there and found that there is a political, military administration which is staffed by local people, local Arabs. Eighty per cent of these guys were with ISIS six months before. What does it mean? It means something very simple: To root itself in the area, ISIS had to play the tribal game, it had to find local allies. Of course, the tribal game is always complex, because it's between different tribes and rivalries, rivalries for many things - wealth, water, power. Officially, ISIS was opposed to the tribal system. It wanted to destroy the tribal system and replace it with an Islamic state. But at the local level, it had to play the tribes, and that's something which we studied in France. We have the book "Tribes and Jihad".

The strange thing is that from the Atlantic to the Indus, every time you have an Islamic emirate, it's in a tribal area. Of course, most of the tribes are not Islamic. But it's always in the tribal areas that you have an Islamic emirate. And the paradox is that the ideology of an Islamic emirate, by definition, is opposed to tribalism. The idea is that it should be a homogenous ummah, with no reference to nationality, race, language, ethnicity, and even clans and families. But, in fact, it is the opposite. I found the same story in Afghanistan just after the Communist coup. The Communists were, of course, officially opposed to the tribal system, but by studying the Communist Party it was absolutely obvious that the party was structured by tribalism. You cannot understand the Taliban if you ignore the tribal dimension. And you only have the Taliban in the tribal areas, only in the Pashtun tribal areas. It means that tribal loyalty is first, and that the tribes do invest in different political actors in order to be safe, to always have somebody who is the winner.

Who were the real ideological actors of ISIS? Not the locals, they had their own agenda, and the main agenda was the resentment of Sunni Arabs for being excluded from any political role in Syria since the coming to power of the Assad family, and in Iraq since the American military intervention of 2003. It is something which is still there: The resentment of Sunni Arabs. If you look at the crisis arc from Palestine, Syria and Iraq, these are former Ottoman Arab provinces, and the majority of this arc is comprised of Sunni Arabs. Now, the only country in this place where you have a Sunni Arab government is Jordan, the smallest and most recent of the states. But from Palestine to Iraq, going through Lebanon and Syria, the Sunni Arabs are excluded. It creates a lot of frustration, and many Sunni Arabs tend to look for any opportunity to contest the existing order, so the strength of Daesh was to provide an alternative by precisely playing a transnational ideology. It failed. The issue of the Sunni Arab frustration is still on the table, and it might create some problems later. But the committed jihadists didn't come from the area, they come from what I call the global jihad: the best fighting units of Daesh were made up of

volunteers coming from the West, from the former Soviet Union, from some Arab countries, by the thousands. A lot of Tunisians, some Moroccans, some Saudis, but few Egyptians, which is also a paradox. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood had been crushed by the government of General Sisi. There was a major repression, and thousands of young demonstrators were killed in 2013, 2014, and so we expected Islamic radicalism among the new generation, the younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The old leaders are in jail, and the reasoning among us was that since there was no one to control the young leaders, they would go for jihad. But it didn't happen. We didn't find many Egyptians in Syria, and amongst them, there were none from the Muslim Brotherhood. You have no significant group of former Muslim Brotherhood members in ISIS.

Once again, this shows that Islam no longer has the potential for radical mobilisation. We have a strong discrepancy, the fact that the most radical people are coming from non-Muslim countries, from Europe. But even in Europe, these young volunteers who join jihad are very isolated. They're not coming from the mosque. Most of them are self-radicalised. And we have an astonishing percentage of converts, 25 per cent of those coming from the West to fight with ISIS ware converts. This strange phenomenon has been true since the 1990s – the proportion of converts, those who joined al-Qaeda, has stayed the same. The new thing is "family-isation": We have more and more young women joining jihad. The conclusion is that jihad is not really taking root in the Middle East. Jihad is not waged by local people, or when they claim to wage jihad, it's for local reasons. It doesn't mean that Islam doesn't play a role, but here we have to make a distinction between the Middle East and South Asia. As I said, in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia, we have demonstrations for achieving some Muslim agenda. But there are two things which are interesting. First, it's not a revolutionary movement which is trying to topple the existing regimes. And there is an ambivalent relationship between the street demonstrations against blasphemy, apostasy and the regimes. There is some sort of complacency. We are not confronted by secular regimes fighting an Islamic insurrection. It's far more complex, the relationship, and the agenda of the demonstrators is not a political agenda in the strict sense of the word: to implement an Islamic government. They want the government to take decisions on some issues, and if we look at these issues, they are less and less about implementing Syariah, generally speaking.

Instead, they are about three topics: apostasy, blasphemy, and, more recently, the fight against homosexuality. And that is strange in a sense because here the idea is that the fight is within society. Take blasphemy: The Rushdie Affair involved somebody in the West who was blasphemous against the Prophet. So it was still part, you know, of Western imperialism against Muslim countries. But now, the people who are accused of blasphemy are from Pakistan, from Bangladesh, and so it's a bit difficult to claim that it is a Western agenda. The same is true of apostasy. It's the idea that somebody who is Muslim can convert to Christianity, or to another religion. Of course, you can say that apostasy has always been forbidden in Islam. But it was never at the top of the political issues. Never. It was an issue for Islamic courts, not a way to mobilise public opinion. Public opinion is now mobilising around this issue of apostasy. What does it mean? It means there is a sense of fragility within the Muslim community, that it might disappear, that people might leave Islam, that the boundaries must be closed to prevent this.

The complaint against homosexuality is also very interesting because it's new. There was a declaration by Muhammad Yusuf of the Jakim Institution in Malaysia. He explained why his organisation is waging a campaign

against homosexuality in the following way. He said there are more and more gays in Malaysia. Well, how does he know? Anyway, he said Jakim should fight against it. But how to fight? He says we have to distinguish between the sin and the sinner, and we have to cure homosexuals. Well, this argument, I know it very well. It's the argument of the American Evangelicals.

In the West, it's now too late to go back against blasphemy, and Ireland just abolished one of the last European laws against blasphemy, but it's clear that the religious faith communities, the Christians, are now more and more going to the courts to ask to be protected against offence to one's religion. Recently, strangely enough, the European Court of Human Rights said they're right. The Court has endorsed the sentencing of an Australian woman who said something bad about the Prophet Muhammad. Normally in Europe, it's considered freedom of expression, so you cannot do anything. The court said yes, she has touched a sensitive issue, and so she has been fined, for tort, damages, emotional damages. So here, we have an interesting convergence, with the different kinds of fundamentalists, conservative religious actors, who feel both in Muslim countries and in the West more and more in the minority. They feel that secularism is winning, and that it's not just a cultural plot from the West. It is starting from within.

In Egypt some weeks ago, the government of General Sisi enacted a law banning atheism. First, how can you ban atheism? It's a bit tough. But it means that you cannot say "well, by the way, I'm not sure if God exists". This law is interesting because there's never been such a law, and I think most of the religious people didn't ask for such a law. It means that if we ban atheism, it is because we have atheism, and we have, you know, a growing movement - a minority movement, of course. It started with the Maghrebs, the more liberal ones in this sense. The Maghreb is a good laboratory because we see trends develop there that will go elsewhere, and with less preparation: Conversions, apostasy. We now have officially recognised Protestant churches in Algeria made up of converts. Of course, when the head of the Church asked to be recognised as the General Secretary of the Protestant Church, the government said "no. You are a Muslim". The guy said "no, I converted, I'm a Christian", but they refused. The administration said there's no conversion in Islam, that's apostasy. He asked: "Where is apostasy in Algerian law? There is no law on apostasy, but there's a law on freedom of religion." And in the end, he won, which is interesting. Same phenomenon in Tunisia.

So what I'm seeing now is a shift from political Islam to the issue of what is the room for religion is in societies which are more and more secular. Of course, the more secularised societies are in the West. But there is this feeling in many Muslim countries that secularism is arising from within, and is no longer a foreign political tool. And there is a sense of uncertainty, if I can say that. For me, and I will stop and end on that, the main reason is the de-culturalisation of religion, which has been done in the West. The fact is that the dominant culture is no more a Christian culture. It used to be a secularised Christian culture until the 1960s, but now it is no more, it is a very different culture, and in most of the Muslim countries, of course, you still have a dominant Muslim culture. But the traditional forms of Islam are more and more undermined by globalisation, Europeanisation, mobility, demographic changes, and by, I would say, a collapse of clerical institutions.

The states have control now over the clerical institutions - they took control from Morocco to Malaysia, and when you have an official clergy where the imams are civil servants, you do not have the spirituality that many people

are looking for in faith communities. The "state-isation" of religion is a tool of secularisation of religion everywhere. Of course we have, in Indonesia for instance, a lot of religious, faith brotherhoods - not like the Muslim Brotherhood, but religious, non-state associations, fraternities, which are under the state structure, and which people join voluntarily and can practise culturally-embedded and socially-embedded Islam. But the states are going against that. A good example is Turkey. AKP, Erdogan's party, is a political organisation. The AKP never constructed religious organisations. They never had imams, mosques, institutions, things like that. It was a political movement. Besides the AKP, you had the Gulen movement. The Gulen Movement was the reverse: It was a civil society movement, a brotherhood which was totally outside the state structure, and whose aim was to bring up a new generation of religiously-trained middle-class individuals who would then join the civil service. So the alliance was obvious. The Gulen Movement provided religious officials and votes, while the AKP was in charge of politics.

But then came the abortive coup attempt in 2016, when the Gulen Movement tried to take power, and Erdogan retaliated and destroyed it. But by destroying the movement, he deprived Turkey of soft power. The Gulen Movement was very active abroad. It had networks of schools and educators, and was a good source of support for Turkish soft power. It has been destroyed by Erdogan, who, of course, is politicising religion. More than that, he is transforming religion into a state structure, which in a sense is the end of real religion. We have problems like this almost everywhere. The policy of Islamisation, paradoxically, is turning into a form of secularisation in Muslim countries, and the most obvious example is Iran, which is probably now, after 30 years of an Islamic regime, is probably the most secular society in the Middle East.

Q and A

Q: I have a question which has to do with your perception of non-ideologue Islam. But this is very much in British, Bangladesh, Malaysia, India - but when we come to the Maghreb, which is Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, then, the most fragile place seems to be Tunisia, whereas in Morocco, the Franco-Moroccan Islamic political approach, and the Algerian FLN Fifth Republic type is the same group. They have that stability, but the one which is non-secular, in Tunisia, seems to be most fragile. Why is that?

A: Tunisia is fragile for good reasons. You do not have a strong state - the Ben Ali regime was a despotic regime, but it was never been able to really control society. It was usually the unions which were able to keep autonomy during the dictatorship, and it's an open country. I think more than 10 per cent of Tunisians don't live in Tunisia. They're in France, in Italy, in the USA, and so on. In Tunisia, you also have freedom of expression - not in terms of the media, but in terms of the state. You can eat during Ramadan in Tunisia without being arrested by conservative Muslims. You can say that you are an atheist, or that you've an association with atheism.

The fragility of the country now is mainly economic. But the paradox of Tunisia is that it's one of the countries which exported the highest number of jihadists in terms of the global population. The countries which are sending

the most jihadists relative to their Muslim populations are Tunisia, Belgium and Kosovo. It's not Saudi Arabia, it's not Egypt at all, it's not even Morocco. Broadly speaking, liberal trends are stronger in North Africa, but so is radicalisation, and there's a link between both. Take Morocco: You have no jihadists inside Morocco, but the Moroccans are over-represented amongst Western European jihadists. If you look at Denmark, Belgium, Holland, you would think that the majority of jihadists from there are of Turkish or Egyptian origin, because the majority of the Muslims are from Turkey or Egypt. Not at all. You have almost no Turks. But we have Moroccans, second-generation Moroccans. The most represented group among the jihadists in in France, Spain, Belgium, Holland, Denmark and so on is second-generation Moroccans. I think that the issue here is that it has the highest level of de-culturalisation of Islam in the region. A big issue in the Maghreb is that of language and education. As a result, few people study the classical Hadith when the want to learn about Islam. Instead, they use French, English or German and read small Salafi booklets, which try to explain Islam in 20 pages.

Q: About two weeks ago, Thomas Friedman wrote one of his famous pieces in The New York Times and admitted that the promise of reform in Saudi Arabia, including religious reform, is gone because of the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, and the position of Mohammad bin Salman is becoming a little shaky there. Is that true? You said that there are some tendencies towards, or early indications, of secularism or secularisation in the Middle East and North Africa. If we transplant that to this part of the world, we see that the running mate of President Jokowi, Ma'ruf Amin, a religious figure. How do you reconcile these two things – secularisation among Sunni Arabs, but in Indonesia, another centre of Islam, a running mate who is an Islamic leader in the country?

A: Well, on the first question, I think we first have to ask if Mohammad bin Salman is a reformer. He's neither a reformer nor a conservative. He's a man of power. The issue for him is to have the power. It's not just a personal issue, it's because the Saudi system was, you know, coming to an end. The Saudi system is very simple. You have a political family, clan, tribe, the Sauds, and you have the Wahhabi clergy. It's an alliance -- the clergy is in charge of civil society, and the family is in charge of politics and power. And the family was working on a form of consensus. They had disagreements, of course, but these were kept in-house, and whenever there were crises or frustrations, they were solved between themselves. As long as you only had a few princes, you could achieve a consensus. But now that you're arriving at a third generation of Sauds, you have hundreds of princes. And you cannot reach a consensus when so many are involved. So you either you transform the family into a parliament, or jump to a system of one man in charge.

MBS took the latter option, but because it was not based on consensus, he had to destroy the family, had to kill the family, undermine the family. He did well. He's good at the negative action, if I can say that. He did things which were unthinkable - putting his cousins in jail, insulting uncles, things like that. Something like that is unheard of. And for me, that's also part of the de-culturalisation process - not only did he not respect the political code of the family, but he didn't respect politeness, courtesy, you know, the code of honor that is very important, at least was very important until now. The Wahhabi clergy sensed that he's not a reformist in Islam. For him, it's just a matter of power. Once he has destroyed the family, he had to destroy the clergy, or at least deprive the clergy of any pretensions to political power. He did that in one week. But the consequences are tremendous because in

doing so, he destroyed the prestige of the Wahhabi clergy. You take these young guys, from Germany and so forth, who self-radicalise on the Internet. Many of them, they are not into terrorism. Many of them go for Salafism, and because they didn't listen to their parents, because their parents are out of the game, they're looking for change. And they talk among themselves: Which is the best sheikh? They discuss fatwas, ask if camembert is halal, may I eat French cheese, and so on. These are important questions, and they always find a mullah online, a fatwa online. The Saudi clergy had prestige, and suddenly, they lost it. The problem with MBS is that he did not provide any alternative, only force.

In doing so, he has made the system fragile, and has undermined the international Wahhabi Salafi institution. The alternative to this "state-isation" of Islam is to have civil society faith communities, where you find outside politics a spiritual environment, a form of solidarity. This, by the way, is done in Western nations. Now, in Catholic Europe, the influence of the Church is very low. The attendance at Mass is under 10 per cent everywhere, except in Poland, and it's even decreased to around 5 per cent of the population now. But you have an increase in non-clerical faith communities, and this movement, which is based on shared spirituality and includes groups like Focolare in Italy, is expanding because it corresponds to the demands of the people.

Q: Could you expand a bit more on the causality or the cause or effect of the "state-isation" of Islam because it struck me that this is something that is hardly new. If you go back to Ottoman times, the "state-isation" of Islam was already there. It strikes me that the only place where this is actually novel is in Iran, and in Shi'ite Islam in general. So that's one question which also raises the issue of whether it's helpful to think of this in linear terms, or whether it's episodic, in bursts. Whether it's correct to think of this in linear terms as in whether something has risen and then fallen, or in episodic terms as in bursts of fanaticism in reaction to broader issues.

The second question I'd like to ask, to bring it back to Saudi Arabia: Isn't there the possibility that Mohammed bin Salman's crackdown on the clergy has created many living martyrs, and it strikes me that these living martyrs are the very same clerics that the young European men and women that you mentioned refer to them. I'd like to get your thoughts on where that might go, and whether a backlash is being created as we speak.

A: For the last question: Yes, it is very difficult to see what is temporary, what is long term, so we don't see any cult of martyrs now. But what will happen in 10ne, two or three years, is open. From the first part, you know, what I call "state-isation" is not political control, where you always have a kind of political control over Islam by a de facto power in a Muslim country. What we have is a transformation of the players into a stable bureaucracy. It's something more in-depth, more important. And the interesting thing is that the starting point was not the Muslim countries. It started, for instance, with Stalin, who created the official Mufti, totally controlled by the state. So we now have this trend of having national mufti, national Syariah, homogenisation of the training, hierarchy between the different imams, the fact that the state administration is in charge of producing the preachers, and so on.

So that's a general kind of "state-isation" of the clergy. In Iran, it's different, because the clergy is the only place

where you had an autonomous, institutionalised clergy. And this tradition is under threat of politicisation. In Iran, they often speak of the state mullahs. The mullahs who play politics, and I think that what was typical of Iran, the juxtaposition of Islam and the revolutionary state, is now in jeopardy because I think that when Ayatollah Ali Khamenei dies, there will be no real clerical authority. I may be wrong, I don't see any credible personality who could replace him and keep this alliance between the clergy, or the majority of the clergy, and the state. So I foresee more or less a coming into power of the Revolutionary Council, which will turn Iran into a far more classical military dictatorship. The exceptionalism of Iran, I think, is reaching its limits. In the West, governments are trying to set up "good" Muslim communities, and by "good", they mean moderate. A moderate believer is someone who believes moderately. And this is a problem, because when people are religious-minded, they don't believe moderately. These are all the contradictions of a secular state managing religion.