

UK Islamists and the Arab Uprisings

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THE FULL IMPACT OF THE CASCADE OF UPRISINGS THAT HAVE BECOME KNOWN as the “Arab Spring” is still unclear. Fighting between protesters and the Assad regime continues in Syria, while countries like Egypt, Libya and Tunisia are still defining the new order that will emerge from the upheavals of 2011. Key amongst those currently shaping this new Middle East are a substantial community of Islamists who have spent most of the past few decades in exile and residing in Europe. While much of their activity in Europe has been focused on political change in their home countries, few were untouched by their experiences living in the West. Indeed, many of these exiles consciously sought to use their time in Europe to engage with and advance their respective agendas among Western academic and political institutions, among the Western media, as well as among European Muslims.

The aim of this article is to provide an overview of how UK-based Islamists in particular have responded to the Arab Spring, and to assess how much, if at all, their long personal interactions with Western society have influenced their views and actions in the post-Arab Spring Middle East and North Africa. Given the large number and diversity of Islamists in the West in general and the UK in particular, this article will only focus on a few of the most prominent individuals in the UK. Despite the inherent limitations of such an overview (some important groups, such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, have been omitted from this paper), this study aims to help clarify and describe the often divergent ways in which Islamists, both those currently based in Europe and those newly returned to the Middle East, have so far reacted to the unfolding events of the Arab Spring.

An Evolving Islamist Scene

FOR THE LAST FIFTY YEARS, WESTERN EUROPE, AND TO A LESSER EXTENT THE UNITED States, have acted as havens for Islamists who were born elsewhere. Many of these non-native Islamists originally hailed from the Arab Muslim Brotherhood, its South Asian equivalent the Jamaat-e-Islami, as well as other organizations like the Turkish Milli Görüs and the supposedly pan-Islamic movement Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). The first Islamists fleeing persecution arrived in the 1950s and early 1960s, primarily from Egypt after the Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed and many of its key members forced into exile. Before long, these Brotherhood members began organizing themselves in exile to stir up revolution in their homelands. In 1962, one of the most prominent of these exiles, Said Ramadan, the son-in-law of the founder of the Brotherhood Hasan al-Banna, co-established the UK Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS).¹ While its stated intent today is to “represent” and “serve” the Muslim student population within the United Kingdom, FOSIS initially aimed to promote Islamism among foreign Muslim students in the UK who would then return to their home countries to spread Islamism there. The group also sought to reach out to potential Western-born allies such as Malcolm X.² In the U.S., Muslim Brotherhood activists established the Muslim Student Association for similar reasons.³ At about the same time, a group of middle-class South Asian students decided to establish the UK Islamic Mission (UKIM) out of study groups they used to hold in East London. By 1964 they were holding national conferences and inviting prominent South Asian Jamaat-e-Islami leaders to speak.⁴ These activities were bolstered in the 1970s when more Islamists arrived in the West, including especially from Bangladesh following the 1971 War of Independence. The 1980s brought a new wave of Islamist exiles, particularly from Syria, where in 1982 the Muslim Brotherhood tried and failed to overthrow the regime of Hafez al-Assad and was brutally suppressed. Yet more Islamists arrived in the West in the early to mid-1990s, including most notably leading figures from al-Nahda, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Tunisian wing, and from HT.

The result of these migrations to the West was clearly visible in the UK by the late 1990s, when London was home to the general secretaries of the Muslim Brotherhood branches of Iraq, Syria and Tunisia, as well as to hundreds of lower-level activists. In addition, from the early 1990s members of various jihadist movements also started to migrate to the West, and especially to the UK, as they lost their sanctuaries first in Pakistan and then in Sudan, while also being driven out of Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria. Each wave of new Islamist arrivals created new groups, both formal and informal. Some, like the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia, the Algerian

Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and al-Qaeda, directly aimed at fostering violent revolution in their home countries; some, such as HT, aimed more at creating a global pan-Islamic political identity and movement; others, including some Muslim Brotherhood members and their South Asian counterparts, simply aimed to stop fellow Muslim immigrants in the West from losing their Islamic identity and to maintain their mostly moral support for the Islamist struggle back home. (It is important to keep in mind, however, that these Islamists arrived as but one part of much larger socio-economic Muslim migrations, and also that not all activists arriving from the Muslim world were Islamist. Indeed, a number of secular dissidents, from pro-democracy liberals to Communists, from feminists to gay activists, also established bases in London or Paris, from which they promoted reforms in their home countries as well as among Muslims in the West.)

In retrospect, by opening their borders both to such a wide variety of Islamist activists as well as to large numbers of Muslim economic migrants and refugees, Western governments were effectively turning their societies into large-scale, unplanned social science experiments. Islamist ideas and influence flowed into Europe, and particularly into poor, deprived and sometimes embittered Muslim communities. Some Islamists also saw this as an unprecedented opportunity to influence Western society from within through a process that Islamists describe as “dawa,” or missionary proselytization, but which critics have described as “Islamization.” Yusuf al-Qaradawi, for instance, speaking in the U.S. in 1994, famously told an audience at the Muslim Arab Youth Association that,

What remains, then, is to conquer Rome ... Islam will come back to Europe for the third time, after it was expelled from it twice... Conquest through Dawa [proselytizing] that is what we hope for. We will conquer Europe, we will conquer America! Not through sword but through Dawa.⁵

Such hardline visions of Islamists conquering the West are very much fantasies. However, other implications of the Islamist migration to the West became clear in the post-9/11 decade. Western governments (and again the UK in particular) belatedly realized that Islamist groups had turned some Muslim immigrant communities into havens for supremacist and totalitarian religious ideologies that were either explicitly or potentially violent. These Islamists also created new problems for the civil cohesion of Western societies by fostering a Muslim identity of victimhood, based on the dual narrative that non-Muslims are intrinsically anti-Muslim and that Western governments are consciously waging an open-ended “war on Islam.” This helped to

create environments conducive to the spread of al-Qaeda-style jihadist ideology; cognitive radicalization created greater possibilities for violent radicalization to occur. However, for most Islamist groups, such as the Brotherhood, this was only an accidental by-product of their two principal objectives: to foster the creation of “Islamic states” in Muslim-majority countries, and to encourage Muslims in the West to adopt their Islamist interpretations of Islam. Of course, while Islamist movements were often inspired to work towards these goals as part of a grand political strategy or sense of religious mission, Islamist activism in the West has also been deeply rooted in individual ambition and the desire for personal power and influence.

In the process of working toward these goals, however, Islamists were themselves evolving—sometimes in radical directions, sometimes in moderate ones—due to their experiences of living in the West. For instance, some Islamist exiles who arrived in the West with narrow quasi-nationalist objectives—such as toppling the Saudi monarchy, or overthrowing Colonel Qaddafi—were compelled to develop a more explicitly pan-Islamist agenda in order to reach out to the diverse populations of Muslims residing in the West. This dynamic seemed especially notable among pro-jihadist groups, compared to more political groups like Jamaat-e-Islami. As Dr. Mohammad al-Massari, the prominent Saudi dissident and acquaintance of Osama bin Laden who ran the Center for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (a UK group which lobbied vigorously for the overthrow of the al-Saud monarchy in Saudi Arabia), has said, “Any Islamic movement worth its salt has to become international.”⁶ (Dr. al-Massari himself began his career focused on fostering Islamist revolution in Saudi Arabia, but he increasingly used his perch in London to become involved in an ever-wider array of local and international Islamist groups and efforts.⁷)

While some exiled Islamists became more radical and internationalist in their approach, others began to embrace new, comparatively more moderate views as well as adopt new practices as a consequence of their experiences living in the West. For instance, women began to assume far more important and prominent roles in some UK-based Islamist movements, including in groups like HT and Muslim Brotherhood-influenced groups with strong activist presences at universities. (By contrast, the UK branches of isolationist and less political groups like Tablighi Jamaat still have virtually no public role for women.) Other Islamists, particularly those who sought to form tactical political alliances with non-Muslim groups, including Marxist groups like the Socialist Workers Party, began to tone down their rhetoric against non-Muslims and Western society, often for clear tactical reasons. Others, however, began to speak cogently about the importance of democracy and to pay perhaps more than lip service to the principles of equal rights and individual liberty. These changes within Islamism in the West, and the interplay between the contradictory impulses toward

both greater moderation and ideological radicalization, are worth looking at in detail, and particularly in relation to the role that many of these Islamists now play in the unfolding events of the Arab Spring.

The Exiles of Al-Nahda

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD IN THE MIDDLE EAST, CONTRARY TO MUCH OF ITS OWN propaganda and that of many of its critics, is composed of diverse and de-centralized movements whose factions and regional branches are often involved in bitter factional and personal disputes. (The historical tensions between the Syrian and Palestinian Muslim Brotherhoods are just one example of this.) Despite this, some common Brotherhood responses to the Arab uprisings of 2011 can be observed. After some initial hesitation, Brotherhood branches across the Middle East and in exile eventually came to welcome the Arab Spring. They asserted the need for “freedom” and “democracy” in the region while also moving to capitalize on emerging opportunities to advance their respective agendas.

Exiled elements of the Brotherhood residing in the West have had the most immediately visible political impact in Tunisia. Since the early 1990s, the majority of overt senior members and sympathizers of al-Nahda (the “Renaissance” or “Awakening” Party), the main Tunisian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, have lived in exile in Europe. Founded in 1981, al-Nahda was part of a wave of Islamist parties that enjoyed a surge in support in the wake of the Iranian revolution and challenged the secular leaderships of the Muslim world. In Tunisia, al-Nahda activists were persecuted with mass arrests in 1989, following an election in which some party affiliates ran as independents, and numerous subsequent incarcerations and bans on literature.⁸ Many of al-Nahda’s senior leaders relocated to London, including Rashid al-Ghannouchi, the top leader and founder of al-Nahda, who was granted asylum in the UK in 1993. Ghannouchi is today regarded as one of the most moderate of leading Arab Islamists. In a typical interview broadcast by the BBC in early 2012, Ghannouchi declared, “we don’t want a religious state because in this state a religious hierarchy would control the state and not the people.” He went on to say that he would prefer that people did not wear bikinis or drink alcohol, but that whether or not they did was their choice. Similarly, he stated that if Tunisians elected a Jewish leader, then that would be acceptable.⁹

It would be easy to ascribe Ghannouchi’s apparent moderation to the eighteen years that he spent in the UK. However, he says (and a careful review of his public statements largely confirms this) that his political ideas have not substantially changed since the early 1990s and that he has always held moderate political views. For instance, on the

issue of political pluralism, he told the *Financial Times* in 2011 that since “our founding statement on 5 June 1981, journalists have asked me: if the Tunisian people elected communists would you accept that? I [have] answered that if the Tunisian people do that then I would respect the will of the Tunisian people.”¹⁰ This position seems consistent with many of the other positions that Ghannouchi has taken. Indeed, despite occasional outbursts (notably on Israel), Ghannouchi was rarely as hardline as other Brotherhood members who fled from Egypt or Syria. As early as 1994, Ghannouchi told a *New York Times* journalist in London that he appreciated the West’s political freedoms: “we Islamists may have a lot of criticism of Western values, yet we are seeking refuge in such atheist countries because we appreciate the benefits of freedom and the value of democracy.”¹¹ Similarly in Arabic in his 1993 book “Public Liberties in an Islamic state” (*Al-Hurriyat al-Ammah Fid-Dawlah al-Islamiyyah*), he criticized Sudan’s Muslim Brotherhood-backed regime as illegitimate, accusing it of seeking to “pull people with chains to paradise.”¹² Although Ghannouchi’s views have yet to be fully tested by the temptations of power, it is clearly arguable that his modern views are simply an evolution of his early 1990s positions. His pro-democratic statements are also, of course, not unique to Western-based Islamists; a number of Islamists who remained in the Middle East hold similar views about democracy. However, even if Ghannouchi’s experience living in the West did not decisively influence his thought about political pluralism and related topics, his and other al-Nahda members’ time in the West has still been important to their movement’s overall development.

One important consequence of al-Nahda’s period of exile in the UK has been that its members were involved in a variety of pan-Brotherhood initiatives and networked extensively with other Islamist groups. For instance, Ghannouchi became involved with the European Council for Fatwa and Research,¹³ an important Brotherhood initiative led by Yusuf al-Qaradawi that has attempted to make the Brotherhood’s version of politicized Islam the default interpretation of the religion among European Muslims. Ghannouchi also developed close relationships with individual members of the Brotherhood—for example, he collaborated with Azzam Tamimi, the prominent Palestinian Brotherhood activist who produced a flattering biography of Ghannouchi for Oxford University Press.¹⁴ Despite his poor command of English, Ghannouchi also frequently interacted with young UK-born Muslims, including while he was speaker at FOSIS-organized events.¹⁵ It could be argued, therefore, that exile in the UK helped to expose Ghannouchi to pan-Islamist circles and other variants of Islamism more than had he remained in Tunisia. It also potentially broadened his intellectual outlook to encompass non-Arab countries such as Turkey, whose ruling Islamist-inspired Justice and Development Party (AKP) Ghannouchi today cites as a major influence.

Other prominent al-Nahda members also became involved in UK-focused Brother-

hood projects. For example, Said Ferjani, a close confidant of Ghannouchi who had followed him since his early days in Tunisia and came to the UK after being freed from prison on charges of being involved in a coup plotted by al-Nahda,¹⁶ became involved with the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the Brotherhood's main UK front-group, where he served as Head of Policy, Media and Public Relations. This was a demanding and often hectic job that involved regular meetings with the media, a wide range of Muslim activists, as well as representatives of think tanks and officials from all levels of the UK government. It was through this experience in London that Ferjani became a resourceful and effective lobbyist; he notably sought, via the MAB, to benefit from and influence the British government's counter-radicalization Prevent strategy. Such experiences gave Ferjani inside knowledge of how the UK government bureaucracy functions and he became adept at lobbying and networking. In a notable success, for instance, Ferjani's networking and advocacy work led to the MAB becoming one of four Muslim organizations chosen to act as founders of the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB), a UK government-funded body intended to address radicalization and poor governance in British mosques.¹⁷ Ferjani in 2008-2009 acted as the organization's chair and is currently the chair of its Self-Regulation and Standards Committee. He has repeatedly survived attempts by anti-extremism campaigners and politicians within the Conservative Party to have the MAB removed from MINAB.¹⁸ (One leading critic of the MAB's involvement in the MINAB, for instance, said it would be "fatal to the struggle against extremism were the allies of Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood to regulate and ultimately control ... Britain's Islamic religious institutions."¹⁹) Sometimes Ferjani's work with the MAB took him abroad; this was in marked contrast to many Tunisia-based al-Nahda activists, who were often banned from travelling. This provided Ferjani and the UK-based exiles of al-Nahda with unprecedented opportunities to mix with Islamists from other countries, and to experience the realities of global politics. In May 2010, for instance, he visited Turkey on behalf of the group to lobby the AKP government to "veto Israel's possible accession into the OSCE," exposing him further to high-level politicking.²⁰

Ghannouchi's daughters, who became personally involved in the Brotherhood movement and in related political causes, also help to show how life in the West has impacted al-Nahda's organization and development. For example, his daughter Soumaya al-Ghannouchi became a prominent media figure while only in her twenties in the 2003-2005 UK protests against the Iraq War. These organized protests were often staged in conjunction with pan-Brotherhood groups such as the MAB as well as far-left organizations such as the Socialist Workers Party. Through this experience, al-Nahda activists like Ms. Ghannouchi acquired useful experience working in coalitions with other Islamist as well as non-Islamist movements. They were also exposed to a

range of non-Islamist ideas. Another daughter, Intissar Kherigi (who uses Ghannouchi's familial surname) also rose to prominence by helping organize "Islam Expo," a pan-Islamist event held in London in 2006 that brought together Islamist speakers (including her father) from around the world.²¹ Both daughters have also written extensively, particularly for *The Guardian* and the *al-Jazeera* website. While they do not argue for Islamist policies *per se*, a frequent theme of their polemical writing is opposing Western counter-terrorism strategies and foreign policy as hostile toward Muslims, often from a left-leaning perspective. For instance, Soumaya Ghannouchi accused Tony Blair of "secularized missionary absolutism" and of "constantly pointing the finger at Muslims."²² A third daughter, Yusra Ghannouchi, also engaged in activism and later became a spokeswoman for her father's party.²³

As the Tunisian revolution unfolded in December 2010, al-Nahda used all the tools, skills, knowledge and contacts that it acquired during exile in the West to good effect. From the first days of the uprising, Ghannouchi's daughters immediately used their contacts in the media and their existing public profiles to advance al-Nahda's agenda both overtly and surreptitiously. For example, on January 14, Intissar Kherigi was interviewed by the BBC World TV channel, where she was introduced only as a "Tunisian activist and a specialist in human rights in Tunisia;" her affiliation with al-Nahda was not mentioned. She then lambasted the interim Tunisian government as "completely discredited" and praised "the many opposition parties who are out there, some of whom are in exile, who have fought for democracy for a long time and who are willing to come forward and form a united government together"—a clear reference to her father's al-Nahda.²⁴ Later in 2011, Intissar Kherigi even testified before the British Parliament on the Arab Spring, opening her testimony by saying that "I am speaking as a British Tunisian, who has long been active in the struggle for human rights and democracy in Tunisia, and in a personal capacity."²⁵ While obscuring her affiliation to al-Nahda and posing as a neutral human rights activist, she then delivered her assessment of the Tunisian situation to parliament, being careful to allay Western concerns and describing Islamist parties innocuously as "faith-based political parties."

Aided by the media experience and skills that exiled activists acquired while living in the West, al-Nahda has continued its efforts to shape Western perceptions of the Arab uprisings since its return to Tunisia. For example, al-Nahda in Tunisia has clearly recognized, probably partly due to Soumaya's involvement in the Stop The War movement, that young, educated women were more effective and less threatening spokespeople for the movement than older male members. No doubt, involving younger women helped rebut long-standing criticisms that the group is misogynistic, male-dominated and regressive. In the 2011 Tunisian general election, al-Nahda embraced this approach in their campaign strategy (in which the entire Ghannouchi family was

heavily involved) by fielding Souad Abdel Rahim, a photogenic woman who didn't wear *hijab*, as a candidate in a prosperous area of Tunis and making her accessible to Western media organizations.²⁶ Similarly, al-Nahda's alliance with leftist groups in parliament arguably draws heavily on the lessons learnt from the MAB's alliance with far-left British groups.

Today, al-Nahda, as the largest political party in Tunisia, also draws heavily on the media and public relations experience that Said Ferjani gained in the UK as the MAB's public relations man and through his work with the UK government in MINAB. Ferjani is now al-Nahda's main contact for Western media in Tunisia. So far, this has given him prominent and mostly uncritical coverage in the Western media, for instance in a front-page *New York Times* story on Tunisia by Anthony Shadid in February 2012.²⁷ Similarly, Ferjani appeared on BBC Hardtalk, where he stated that he "disagreed with Sharia as a source of legislation" and said that his ideal system would include "what's best in the West, a democratic system and the heritage of Islam."²⁸ While Ferjani may well believe this, his skill in knowing how to clearly present Islamist principles to a Western audience is clearly invaluable to al-Nahda. His ability is particularly apparent when compared to al-Nahda's secretary-general, Hamadi Jbeli, a less-travelled man who remained in Tunisia under Ben Ali. In November 2011, Jbeli caused a major storm when he importunately announced that "the sixth caliphate" had begun.²⁹ In light of this, it appears that the experience and knowledge of the West that Ferjani and Ghannouchi's daughters acquired while in exile in London are one of the main reasons why al-Nahda's rise to power in Tunisia has caused less concern in the West than might otherwise be expected. Similarly, Soumaya al-Ghannouchi is one of her father's closest advisors, particularly on international issues, for instance accompanying him to the World Economic Forum in 2012.

But while al-Nahda has scored successes in Western political and media circles, the Ghannouchis and other exiles have to some degree struggled since returning to their home country of Tunisia. This may be the result of the perceived advantages these exiles enjoyed while abroad when compared to the rest of the movement. It is also due to their perceived nepotism. For example, the movement's rapid appointment of Soumaya Ghannouchi's husband, Rafik Abdesselem Bouchlaka (a former low-ranking employee at the al-Jazeera Centre for Studies in Qatar), to Tunisian foreign minister became a contentious issue within al-Nahda. Said Ferjani's daughter, the pro-al-Nahda London-based activist Kaouther Ferjani, wrote on her Twitter account, "im pro nahdha but even i know he wasnt best suited for the job, there were better candidates from within nahdha." She pointedly hash-tagged this as "#nomorenepotism."³¹ When asked about such criticism by *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Rashid al-Ghannouchi responded, "I believe that the questions raised about this are not appropriate, and such questions are

being raised from the door of political opposition.” Such curt responses help explain why Ghannouchi and his family have a reputation for being intolerant of criticism.³² They also show a lack of awareness that Tunisians might resent such nepotistic practices, particularly in light of Ben Ali’s similar practices, as well as evidence that Ghannouchi’s time in the UK has not instilled in him too much belief in meritocracy.

On March 26, 2012, al-Nahda announced that it opposed calls for the Tunisian constitution to make Sharia the source of all legislation. This raises the question of whether al-Nahda is still an “Islamist” movement or if it has now moved decisively in the direction of “post-Islamism” or secularism. Definitions aside (and bearing in mind that al-Nahda’s professed moderation and pragmatism have not yet been fully proven in the new Tunisia), it remains an open question as to whether Ghannouchi would have ultimately reached the same conclusion if he had not lived in the UK—not least because much of his criticism of traditional Islamism is informed by the examples of Iran, Sudan and other failed Islamist states. Indeed, it is worth noting that, unlike Ferjani and others, Ghannouchi himself does not speak English fluently, spent most of his time in the UK moving in exclusively Arab and Islamist circles, and had little contact with mainstream British society. But even if it is hard to argue that the movement’s core ideology has been decisively affected by the experiences of its former exiles, it seems clear that al-Nahda’s political skills and public relations capabilities have been immeasurably enhanced by the group’s time in exile. This does much to explain the group’s success in post-Ben Ali Tunisia—particularly against disorganized political rivals. Indeed, al-Nahda’s success has helped establish it as an international force as well. In June 2012, Ghannouchi headed to Cairo as part of an effort to help the Muslim Brotherhood broker a post-election political victory. It seems the Tunisian leader was welcomed as a political mediator in Egypt because of his influence and stature in the wider Islamic movement. At about the same time as this high-profile visit, rumors circulated in Tunis that Ghannouchi may soon step down from his position in al-Nahda in Tunisia to assume a global leadership role in the Brotherhood movement.³³

Egypt and the Palestinian Question

COMPARED TO BEN ALI’S TUNISIA, THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD IN HOSNI MUBARAK’S Egypt was able to operate relatively more openly, even though the regime severely restricted the Brotherhood’s rights and used periodic arrests, harassments and crack-downs to contain their political influence. One result was that the Egyptian Brotherhood had relatively little need for a comprehensive organization-in-exile. A notable

individual exception was Kemal Helbawy, a veteran Muslim Brotherhood member who joined the group in 1951 after seeing Hassan al-Banna give a public speech. In many respects the consummate Islamist-in-exile, Helbawy spent his time in exile (mostly in the UK) working for change in Egypt while simultaneously assisting pan-Islamist causes in the UK and internationally. For instance, Helbawy acted as the Brotherhood's main representative in Europe from the 1970s onwards, while also working with the Afghan Mujahidin in Pakistan in the 1980s and then in the mid-1990s co-founding the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the UK's main pan-ethnic Islamist group that includes large numbers of South Asian Jamaat-e-Islami followers. He also established the Arab-focused MAB after having already founded the Brotherhood's main British institutional headquarters, the Muslim Welfare House, in north London. Helbawy additionally helped develop the Brotherhood's presence in other European countries while collaborating with men like Youssef Nada in Switzerland and Ibrahim Zayat in Germany (whose daughter married one of Helbawy's sons). In addition to being enormously active in Europe, Helbawy remained connected to the Egyptian Islamist movement and in early February 2011 was still describing himself as a "senior member" of the Egyptian Brotherhood serving as one of the group's most public faces on Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and other television channels.³⁴ For decades, therefore, Helbawy was in many respects the model Brotherhood loyalist and activist, someone who advocated for the group and strengthened it in Egypt, the UK and further afield.

Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, however, Helbawy returned to Egypt in April 2011 after almost 30 years in exile and, soon after, rebelled against the Egyptian Brotherhood's political party. Rather than supporting the Brotherhood's official front-group, the Freedom and Justice Party, he instead vocally sided with the party's breakaway progressive wing led by Abdel Moneim Aboul Fetouh, becoming ever more vocal ahead of the May 2012 first-round presidential elections. In an explosive interview on prime-time Egyptian television in early April 2012, he condemned the Brotherhood's decision to nominate Khairat al-Shater as the movement's candidate for president, declaring, "the current leadership wants to be in control of all the authorities in the country. They are hungry for power and their will to dominate is no different to that of the Mubarak regime."³⁵ Helbawy then crowned this performance by announcing his resignation from the Brotherhood on air and he has continued to attack the movement in subsequent interviews. This is a remarkable step for an individual who had served the group for over half a century.

In retrospect, the roots of this split between Helbawy and the Egyptian Brotherhood leadership are clear. Helbawy, an English literature graduate, had lived in the UK for many years, set up his own organizations and also interacted widely with Muslim and non-Muslim society. Like other Brotherhood members exiled to the West, various aspects

of British life including the openness of its democracy undeniably affected his outlook, and he became critical of many aspects of Egyptian society. In an interview in early 2010 he declared, “I have said a million times that a woman like [former Prime Minister Margaret] Thatcher is a hundred times better than any man” while also constantly denouncing Muslim societies for technological backwardness and resistance to new ideas.³⁶ In a similar vein, in 2008, Helbawy opposed the clause in the Brotherhood’s draft constitution preventing non-Muslims from becoming head of state. In 2010, he also condemned the Brotherhood’s decision to participate in that year’s fraudulent elections.³⁷ During the years when the Brotherhood was in opposition and in exile, such differences could be papered over and ignored. But in the post-Mubarak era, such open splits may have become increasingly unavoidable.

Helbawy’s example may be typical of the experience of other Islamist exiles who, after the Arab Spring, are now beginning to realize that they have grown apart from their own organizations. For a man like Helbawy who served the Brotherhood diligently for decades, this must be especially galling. Angered by what he sees as the Brotherhood’s selling out of Egypt’s revolutionaries in favor of political maneuverings and backdoor deals with the military, Helbawy has stated “I cannot stand in the ranks of people who turned their backs on the revolution.”³⁸ For secretive organizations like the Brotherhood, such angry former members are potential threats. “Helbawy knows all the Brotherhood’s secrets,” said one former jihadist in London. “And the Brotherhood know that once Helbawy starts talking, it is impossible to make him shut up.”³⁹ Returned exiles like Helbawy who are accustomed to pursuing their own quasi-independent policies in freer political environments may also present problems for the Brotherhood’s efforts to maintain their characteristic political regimentation and ideological coherence. In 2011, after Osama bin Laden’s death, Helbawy, then still a Brotherhood member embarrassed the group, by eulogizing the al-Qaeda leader, stating “I ask Allah to have mercy upon Osama bin Laden, to treat him generously, to enlighten his grave, and to make him join the prophets, the martyrs, and the good people.”⁴⁰ Similarly, since his open break with the Brotherhood, Helbawy has travelled to the Islamic Republic of Iran and praised the Iranian revolution, illustrating that he has not yet fully changed his stripes.⁴¹

Other Brotherhood Factions

IT IS IMPORTANT TOO TO LOOK AT EXILED BROTHERHOOD MEMBERS WHOSE HOME countries have been so far untouched by revolution. Thus far, for instance, a number of Palestinian Brotherhood members exiled in the West have been visibly invigorated

by the Arab uprisings. Azzam Tamimi, for example, the prominent Palestinian UK-based Brotherhood member, has stated,

The more Arab dictatorships that are replaced by genuine democracies, the closer Palestine will be to liberation. Democracies representing the will of the Arab peoples can only be anti-Israel and pro-Palestinian ... Whichever way one looks at it, the Arab revolutions are the best news the Palestinians have had for decades.⁴²

This line that Hamas's struggle will benefit from the Arab Spring has been increasingly touted not only by Brotherhood activists but also by a number of other Islamist organizations in the West. Indeed, it may signal a renewed focus on Israel and Palestine by Islamists in years to come. In March 2012 in the UK, for instance, FOSIS and a pro-Hamas group convened a joint event entitled "Arab Spring: Destination Palestine?" The event featured a number of long-time supporters of Hamas such as Azzam Tamimi and Ibrahim Hewitt, who argued that the Arab Spring would ultimately lead to the defeat of Israel.⁴³ Further afield, such sentiments have been echoed by Brotherhood ministers in Morocco,⁴⁴ and have also been fuelled by Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood suggestions that the movement does not necessarily recognize Egypt's peace treaty with Israel.⁴⁵ At the same time, however, some existing political positions and coalitions have become complicated by the Arab uprisings. In early 2012, for example, Tamimi criticized his Western left-wing allies ("some of our leftist friends") for standing by Bashar al-Assad because they viewed Syria as "part of the resistance axis as opposed to the pro-American moderation axis."⁴⁶

In a similar fashion, other Brotherhood figures in the UK have also sought to use the Arab Spring to advance their own political agendas, even if this means abandoning old alliances and seeking new ones. For example, Anas al-Tikriti, one of the shrewdest UK-based Brotherhood activists and the son of the leader of Iraq's Muslim Brotherhood, has described how he himself has tried to encourage Western support for Islamists in the wake of the Arab uprisings:

I was asked at a recent meeting with some of Washington's wheelers and dealers about what the American government should do with the Islamic movements gaining prominence and claiming the lime-light across the Arab world, I answered simply: support them ... unless we encourage them and offer them an incentive, their own crop of hard-liners will have been proven right.⁴⁷

This is a new iteration of Tikriti's previous lobbying strategy, which has sought to persuade Western governments that they should fund Brotherhood groups as moderate alternatives to al-Qaeda. (Indeed, Tikriti along with other Brotherhood activists such as Helbawy actively pushed this policy in conjunction with a number of non-Muslim counterparts, including Robert Lambert, a former policeman who established the Muslim Contact Unit within the Metropolitan Police.) It seems that Tikriti and others like him regard the Arab Spring as a new opportunity to leverage themselves into positions of power and influence, and perhaps even to acquire new funds from Western sources, through arguing that Western support for the Brotherhood parties can undermine and moderate more extremist Islamist elements.

The Party of Liberation

THE UK BRANCH OF HIZB UT-TAHRIR (THE PARTY OF LIBERATION—HT) REACTED QUICKLY TO the opportunities presented by the Arab uprisings, despite having one of the smallest presences on the ground in the Middle East. After the first demonstrations began to erupt in Tunisia in December 2010, the group seems to have rapidly developed a comprehensive strategy of how to use the events to advance their narrative. Firstly, HT sought to claim that the Tunisian uprising was motivated by a general desire for “Islamic” rule. Secondly, they asserted that the popular uprisings were under threat from the West. Thirdly, the movement sought to take ownership of the uprisings. On January 15, 2011, HT's London office posted a grainy YouTube of a demonstration in Tunisia titled, “where the masses can clearly be heard calling for Islam and Khilafah.” In reality, the video was from a small and unrepresentative Salafi-led demonstration.⁴⁸ On January 29, 2011, HT activists attempted to take over an anti-Mubarak protest that was taking place outside the Egyptian embassy in London. Following a confrontation with non-Islamist Egyptians, HT was forced to hold their protest around the corner.⁴⁹ Later that same day, the group held a large town-hall meeting in central London under the banner “After Tunisia: The Future of the Muslim World.” Addressed by senior British-based HT leaders Imran Waheed and Taji Mustafa, and Tunisian Ons Chafi, the meeting participants condemned Western support of “cruel tyrants” like Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak. While there was agreement with the broad assessment that the protests were due to “the relentless oppression by the regimes, the economic hardship faced by ordinary people due to the neglect by governments, and changes in means of communication had meant that people were rising up to remove the old regimes,” the HT speakers also concluded that “real change could only come under a Khilafa state, which could be independent of the West and which solved people's problems according to Islam.”⁵⁰ In the following weeks, HT's

activities followed a similar pattern of pronouncements on the “Islamic” nature of the uprisings, meetings and attempts to take over demonstrations, and movement activists appeared convinced that the arrival of their long-idealized Islamic State was imminent.

Soon, however, HT’s view of Middle East events became noticeably more negative. On February 11, the day that Mubarak resigned, HT leader Imran Waheed held a small “community meeting” in Bradford on the subject of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. According to an HT write-up of the event, “the speakers warned that Muslims must not be fooled by mere cosmetic changes in Egypt and the Muslim world while the corrupt *kufir* systems remain in place.”⁵¹ As the prospects for an imminently restored Khilafa have receded, HT has increasingly soured on the Middle East. The number of publicized conferences and protests focused on the Arab Spring decreased and they returned instead to a steady diet of small, often poorly attended, meetings whose focus was toppling the Pakistani government. By the middle of 2011 and the annual HT “London Khilafah Conference,” the group had fallen back on accusing the West of conspiring against Islam. They claimed that Western governments were not “giving up” on seeking to control Muslim-majority countries, and also that they were trying to “engineer the change” in Egypt and elsewhere. The subtext of these pronouncements was that the West was responsible for the non-appearance of the caliphate, rather than that HT’s message had been mostly rejected by the Arab masses. Meanwhile, HT spokesman Taji Mustafa condemned the lack of change in the Middle East, pointing to the fact that “Egypt is still supplying gas to the Zionist entity Israel.” He also complained that people ignored the alleged “voices” calling for “Khilafa.”⁵²

HT’s negative perspective on the Arab Spring was tied to its ideological conceit that anything short of a caliphate was “un-Islamic” and thus a failure, and that any form of voting was *haram*. As a result, in the Middle East itself, the group’s members effectively wrote themselves out of the script by boycotting elections in Tunisia and Egypt as “un-Islamic.” HT’s failure to benefit in any tangible way from the Arab Spring is in part a reflection of its western experience. A fringe movement in the Middle East, its supporters in the West had reacted to the society around them by dismissing everything, including especially western parliamentarianism, as “un-Islamic.” While this rejection of parliamentary democracy succeeded, for a time, in winning over some young British Muslims who felt rejected by the West, it failed to bring the group to power in Muslim-majority countries or achieve any real change in the UK. While many Islamist groups in the West adapted their ideology in light of changing circumstances and sharpened their tactics and political skills, HT’s time in the West has weakened the group by disconnecting it from changing realities in the Middle East, even as it gained some skill at mobilizing disenchanted youths in the UK. Perhaps most importantly, the group adopted an ideologically hostile position toward the West and its

ideas and institutions that prevented it from understanding how political realities in the Middle East had changed or learning anything from the western experience. In particular, HT believers failed to register or understand the growing grassroots Arab yearning for some form of democracy and the declining support for the idea of recreating the caliphate, which is seen increasingly as a fantasy and irrelevant, or to understand what potential merits of democracy might be. This ongoing clash between Islamist fantasy and Arab reality is well-illustrated by HT's latest stunt in March 2012: a call for countries to re-adopt gold as an everyday currency, a policy that could hardly be more removed from the daily realities of the Arab World.⁵³

The Extremists

ANJEM CHOUDHARY, A FORMER LEADER AND FOUNDING MEMBER (ALONGSIDE OMAR Bakri Mohammed) of al-Muhajiroun and its many descendant groups, is arguably the most prominent and publicly confrontational Islamist active in the UK. Choudhary and his followers' (now known as "Ummah United") initial reaction to the Arab uprisings was to take to the streets and join secular, Islamist and other groups in calling for the overthrow of regimes. Outside the Tunisian Embassy in January 2011, for example, Choudhary called for the overthrow of Ben Ali, Mubarak as well as Pakistan's President Zardari (a theme dear to the hearts of Britain's predominantly South Asian Muslim population), while also calling for the implementation of the Khilafa and Sharia in those countries.⁵⁴ By February, Choudhary, like HT, clearly felt like his extremist vision was succeeding in the Middle East, and he reported on CNN that "people are praying in the streets," and that having tried "nationalism" and "dictatorship," they were now "wanting to taste Islam." Choudhary then became uncharacteristically realistic when he admitted that it was likely that a "temporary solution [in North Africa] may be government with American support," but he remained convinced that over time "this will turn into Sharia."⁵⁵

Later in the year, however, Choudhary's harder line returned. In an open letter he urged Libyans to "implement the Khilafah" and declared that "Libya does not require democracy."⁵⁶ By the end of 2011, he changed his story yet gain. In an article offering what purported to be an "Islamic perspective" on the year's events, Choudhary highlighted the increasing importance of political Islam across North Africa, but acknowledged that some form of un-Islamic, "democratic regime may materialize in the short term." He continued to see the uprisings as an opening for Islamists "to culture the masses about the real long term workable alternative of Shariah law and the resumption of the Khilafah."⁵⁷ By March 2012, Choudhary and his followers demonstrated that

their core beliefs about a Western conspiracy against Islam had not changed with the release of a short video showing a meager-looking demonstration in London where a group of about six made speeches and handed out flyers on the events in Syria. At the root of the bloody crackdown in Syria, the protestors claimed, is the fact that “no Western regime is going to help the Syrian people, because they are in bed with the Syrian regime.”⁵⁸

Choudhary’s line is relatively moderate when compared to his mentor’s, Omar Bakri Mohammed. Bakri Mohammed claimed early on that the revolts were signs that the time had come for Islam to rise up. He called upon Egyptians to apprehend prisoners to exchange for people incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay or for the “Blind Sheikh” Omar Abdel Rahman. (The Egyptian MB candidate for president Mohammad Morsi has since said he would personally lobby for the release of the Blind Sheikh if he won office, showing Bakri Mohammed correctly recognized the potential political support that the issue could generate in Egypt. Since winning office, President Morsi has pledged to seek Rahman’s release from prison.⁵⁹) While Bakri Mohammed did initially warn that Western “crusaders” could still “stab the Muslims in the back,” he nevertheless predicted that with the start of the Arab Spring, “we are seeing the beginning of the end of the crusaders.”⁶⁰

A year later, Bakri Mohammed’s focus had shifted single-mindedly to his homeland Syria, and he called on the Syrian fighters to show no mercy to their enemies and to “eliminate them, mutilate them” and record it on video. Peaceful demonstrations had failed, and he said there was now a need to rise up and fight.⁶¹ Prior to this he gave an interview to the *Daily Telegraph* in which he denied that al-Qaeda had a presence in Syria (they were “enjoying themselves, have a break, have a kitkat,” he said, echoing a popular British marketing jingle⁶²), and stated that,

I am the first one to call for holy jihad in Syria and for now there is no al-Qaeda in Syria. If Syrians keep asking for “freedom, democracy”—try take it [sic], by all means enjoy it, even bring in Madonna and Michael Jackson. But if you want to call us, say ‘oh God help us,’ and your Muslim brothers will come. We will send you lions.⁶³

A month later, he went on Arabic television again to highlight that he had no connection to al-Qaeda, but that stories of their arrival in Syria were merely lies propagated by the Assad regime to scare foreigners. Unlike his acolyte Choudhary, who has at least maintained a somewhat coherent line of argument, Bakri Mohammed has repeatedly contradicted himself. According to Bakri Mohammed, al-Qaeda and other “salafi movements” had thus far not participated in the Arab uprisings and were in-

stead taking “a warrior’s rest [to] then gather the booty at the end.” However, he has also declared that, “the only winner in the Arab revolutions is Islamist forces like al-Qaeda, the Salafis, Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Muslim Brotherhood.” As he put it, “the ultimate proof is that Islamists already came to power in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.” Despite contradicting himself, he has been clear about his desire to see the Arab Spring reach Syria and topple the Assad regime.

Abdullah al-Faisal, the formerly Britain-based Jamaican cleric known for his radically sectarian (*takfiri*) views, has shown little inclination to moderate or reassess his hardline ideology in light of the Arab uprisings. In July 2011, he ridiculed the West’s previous support for various Arab leaders who were now in trouble, and he highlighted how the West had done little to help them survive.⁶⁴ By October, he became obsessed that the West was conspiring to hijack the Arab revolts. In a blistering speech entitled “Empire Strikes Back,” he declared, “when there is a revolution in a Muslim country, they [the West] try to take it over,” and he pointed to Libya and Tunisia as two clear examples where the initial revolution was being subsumed by forces that he found unacceptable. In notes written emphatically in capital letters, Faisal declared “WE MUST IMPLEMENT SHARIAH IN LIBYA SO WE DON’T REPLACE 1 TAGHOOT [false deity] W/ ANOTHER TAGHOOT.”⁶⁵ Unlike Choudhary, who moderates his call for the implementation of Sharia in countries like Libya by framing it as a “suggestion” for the Libyans, Faisal bizarrely claimed that “THE FLAG OF KHILAFAH ARE HANGING FROM ALL THE BUILDINGS IN BENGHAZI”⁶⁶ and cited this as evidence that ordinary Libyans would never want “democracy.”⁶⁷ Three months later, Faisal’s argument against the purportedly democratic nature of the Arab uprisings had hardened even further, and he declared that “those who died in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt...if they died fighting for democracy, they died not being loved by Allah.”⁶⁸ By early 2012, Faisal—like other hardliners—appeared to have lost hope that the rebellions were bringing about new Islamic regimes in the Middle East. By the time Syria became the focus of international attention, he simply harped on the illegitimacy of the “Shia Alawite” Assad, claiming his downfall would precede the fall of the Iranian regime.⁶⁹ Like Choudhary’s acolytes, he saw the lack of “Islamic” progress in the Syrian revolt as evidence of a Western plot, and he dismissed the uprisings as illegitimate, stating that “the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt were not Islamic revolutions, they were democratic revolutions.”⁷⁰

The Arab uprisings also seemed to accentuate factional conflicts among UK-based Arab Islamist extremists. Many, for example, who remained committed to their hardline agendas and who sought to ascribe an Islamic character to the uprisings began to criticize those former UK-based Islamist exiles who returned home to participate in the new secular party politics of the post-2011 era. For example, the aforementioned

Mohammed al-Massari appeared on Press TV on January 20, 2011 as the uprisings in Tunisia were beginning. He dismissed Rashid al-Ghannouchi's chances of accomplishing much once he went back to Tunisia, saying al-Nahda as an Islamic movement knows "how to fight but not how to govern." Al-Massari further dismissed the non-religious dimensions of the uprisings, asserting that "the claim the revolution has nothing to do with Islam is not true."⁷¹ By March, the Arab Spring had begun to reach Massari's home country of Saudi Arabia and he appeared once again on Press TV, predicting "thousands more" Islamic activists would soon turn up on the streets to protest against the monarchy.⁷² These new demonstrators never materialized, and a seemingly disillusioned Massari has since resumed his earlier activities as pan-Islamist preacher who produces occasional videos on Islamic law or the genealogy of hadiths and regularly posts to his revived Tajdeed.net website.

The UK-based Egyptian Islamists Yasser al-Sirri and Hani al-Sibai also both largely kept their own reactions to the Arab Spring focused on the situation in their home country. Early on, as events in Tahrir Square appeared headed toward a bloodbath, Yasser al-Sirri published a statement that read "to the Egyptian army, men of the armed forces: move and side with the people before it is too late." Hani al-Sibai's statements expressed anxiety about "the people's uprising being hijacked by a [radical] Islamist trend."⁷³ Nine months later, al-Sirri, who had once been detained for involvement with al-Qaeda, told *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* that "after the revolution in Egypt, the justifications for the presence of secret organizations in Egypt have ended" and added that "it is time for [political] action and there is no room for clandestine or armed action any more." Al-Sirri's call to engage in politics and his rejection of armed jihad as an instrument of political change may be seen as an important expression of a new pragmatism among some jihadist ideologues after the Arab Spring. Nonetheless, al-Sirri has continued to argue that the West and the U.S. in particular pose a threat to Muslim societies and that, in his opinion, the Western countries "are trying to nip the Arab Spring in the bud." This is clearly another indication that Islamist "pragmatism" and "moderation" have limits.⁷⁴ Indeed, al-Sirri's statement potentially provides a justification for future jihad—just as al-Sirri called for in February 2011, when he proposed that Egyptians sink some ships to block the Suez Canal. Ironically, al-Sirri proposed that action not because he thought the West was attempting to thwart the Arab uprisings, but because he complained that the West seemed to be ignoring them.⁷⁵ Others following a similar complex trajectory include Osama Rushdie, a formerly hardline Gama'a al-Islamiya member based in the UK, who has returned to Egypt and now supports Aboul Fetouh.⁷⁶

By and large, the older generation of extremists who arrived in Europe in the 1990s have, despite their pan-Islamist rhetoric, clearly retained a fixation on the respective

nations from which they fled. For the most part, they see the Arab Spring as a positive development, although they seem unsure what their role is in this new era and often seem to be struggling to interpret fast-moving events, sometimes adopting more moderate positions, sometimes reverting to comfortable anti-western and extremist tropes. However, when looking at younger extremists born in the UK like Choudhary and his acolytes or Abdullah al-Faisal, a different tendency emerges. In general, this group was initially enthusiastic about the Arab uprisings since they viewed them as realizations of their long-held calls for Islamic revolution across the Middle East. But when the Arab rebellions have turned to ballot boxes, this group has fallen back to their old anti-democratic positions, and they have increasingly embraced ever more tenuous, even implausible, positions. For them, the ongoing strife in Syria is a clear-cut example of how the West is conspiring against Muslim warriors who are fighting for the oppressed masses. They believe this despite the fact that strongest support for intervention comes from the West.⁷⁷

The Post-Islamists

ONE POTENTIALLY FAR-REACHING EFFECT OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS ON ISLAMISM IN Europe has been to further distinguish between unrepentant old-style doctrinaire Islamists, such as Azzam Tamimi or the extremist Omar Bakri Mohammed, and those exiles gradually embracing a less ideologically rigid, “post-Islamist” outlook. For the latter group, doctrinaire Islamism has become increasingly diluted by pragmatic considerations and influenced as well by a range of secular, liberal and democratic ideas, sometimes to the point of no longer being recognizably Islamist. This ideational journey has been arguably most pronounced among those Islamists whose high public profile has obliged them to engage extensively with Western thinkers, journalists and academics. In some instances, the events of the Arab Spring catalyzed and perhaps even accelerated this change of mind. A good example of this is Dilwar Hussain, a well-educated former prominent supporter of a number of Jamaat-e-Islami-derived groups who is now the president of the Brotherhood-founded Islamic Society of Britain. In January 2012, he wrote an article on the Islamists and the Arab Spring:

While some are hailing this [the Arab Spring] as a success of “Islamism,” I would like to suggest—perhaps counter-intuitively—that it is actually an indication of the demise of Islamism; at least old-style, traditional Islamism of the type that sought to create an “Islamic state,” an Islamic version of a Hobbesian Leviathan to govern society.

He added:

For decades now, some activists have looked to the Islamist movements for inspiration. But with the recent developments post-Arab Spring, the evolution of the AKP in Turkey, and the natural process of settlement, some are arguing that the stratification developing within the Islamist movements is just as important as the split between Islamists and non-Islamist Muslim activists. If the old slogans of “Islam is the solution” are being replaced with notions of “freedom and justice” ... what does that mean for Islamist-influenced movements and their agendas in the West?

He concluded that a

more open and embracing vision of who we are, and what Islam means to us will be realized [once] there is a shift towards a post-Islamist paradigm among activists in the West. But can this happen? I would argue that it must.⁷⁸

A similar progression toward a less doctrinaire and more pragmatic understanding of how Islam and politics intersect can be seen in the writings of another previously prominent member of British Islamist circles, a convert to Islam, Sarah Joseph. In response to the Arab uprisings, she wrote of her loss of faith in simplistic Islamist arguments:

I am no longer a Utopian. I once believed that we could create an ideal community or society, where justice reigned and people committed themselves to its maintenance because it was worth the sacrifice. However, life has shown me that this is unlikely, and idealized communities are probably not possible on this earth. Not even the Prophet’s community was filled with faultless individuals, all living in perfect harmony and peace.

It is possible, and perhaps even likely, that other Islamist activists will also come to realize that their idealistic conceptions of an “Islamic State” will not provide solutions to any of the social, political and economic woes facing Middle Eastern societies. Indeed, such a realization has led other UK-based Islamists even further down the path toward explicitly rejecting Islamism altogether. For instance, Inayat Bunglawala, who was formerly the main spokesman for the Muslim Council of Britain and

who was for many years one of the most prominent defenders of Islamism in the UK, wrote in January 2012 that,

When I was younger I was taught by many senior Muslim leaders in the UK and elsewhere that secularism was akin to atheism and that only a truly Islamic state which enforced the Shariah would provide the real answer to humanity's problems. Looking back, I just shake my head and can't believe I actually swallowed that argument for so long. It is just so embarrassing. By contrast, the Arab Spring has brought many welcome developments, particularly the fact the people in Egypt and Tunisia have now been able to freely elect their own leaders. One can only hope that the leaders of the Islamic-minded parties that have won those elections now look to best serve their people with honesty and humility. An "Islamic state" which does not respect the human rights of all its people including freedom of religion and gay rights would necessarily be an unjust state.⁷⁹

Bunglawala's statements are typical of how some high-profile Islamists have shifted some of their perspectives over time thanks to extensive debate and engagement with non-Islamists. This is an indication of how "critical engagement" with Islamists in the West can potentially be useful in challenging fundamental Islamist tenets and promoting greater ideological moderation. That said, as in the case of Helbawy, Bunglawala's political views have only partially moderated. On his blog, for example, he frequently obsesses over Jews and Israel, recently defended the winning image of Iran's 2006 Holocaust Cartoon competition,⁸⁰ blamed anti-Islamist campaigning on the conspiracies of "the pro-Israel lobby,"⁸¹ referred to the British ambassador to Tel Aviv as "our Jewish ambassador,"⁸² and so on.

Tariq Ramadan, likewise, remains a controversial figure for critics of Islamism. But it is notable that since the start of the uprisings, Muslim Brotherhood organizations both in the West and in the Middle East have almost ceased to mention or reference him. This likely has to do with Ramadan's willingness to be critical of the Muslim Brotherhood and its doctrinaire ideology. Ramadan has broadly aligned himself with a number of new Islamist trends which look to Turkey's AKP and to the so-called "Turkish model" in their efforts to create what they describe as a "democratic civil State."⁸³ Simultaneously, he has described the traditional Islamism of the Brotherhood not as divine, but as a political and man-made movement that represents an "ideological response which must be assessed in the light of the prevailing issues of the day."⁸⁴ He has also criticized the youth-led Egyptian Islamist trend, stating that it "essentially

accepts the capitalist order—which I am not happy with,”⁸⁵ and has further argued that “some Islamist parties—are playing with Islam in an attempt to gain legitimacy.”⁸⁶ Alternatively, he has complained that “a veil of silence has fallen over Bahrain,” and that Sunni Islamists have broadly welcomed this for their own sectarian reasons.⁸⁷

Recently Ramadan has said, “I am not a member of the Brotherhood. My vision is completely different. My aim is to be critical of what they say about Sharia—how it should be implemented and how it should not.”⁸⁸ Like many of Ramadan’s pronouncements, this one is opaque. But this statement does broadly summarize Ramadan’s current position—i.e., that he is not formally part of the Muslim Brotherhood and yet sees himself as part of an evolving Islamist trend, which Ramadan apparently believes he can better influence as a critical and supportive outsider than as a card-carrying member of any political organization. Furthermore, Ramadan’s exclusion from many Western Islamist events may indicate a fear in these circles that even Ramadan, one of Islamism’s most potent assets, may himself be heading down the path toward “post-Islamism.” Moreover, this may indicate that in an age when the Brotherhood is openly forming parties, lobbying voters and putting forward candidates for Arab presidencies, Ramadan’s notorious fence-sitting on controversial political and ideological issues, and refusal to commit himself to any clear-cut position, is no longer appreciated.⁸⁹

Conclusions

UK ISLAMISM, LIKE ISLAM IN BRITAIN AS A WHOLE, REMAINS VERY MUCH A CACOPHONY of disparate trends and a work in progress whose ultimate trajectory is hard to determine. Given the enormous diversity of Islamist groups and individuals in the UK, no single pattern defines Islamists’ reactions to the Arab Spring. At the same time, however, the Arab uprisings have clearly shaken up the often stagnant waters of British Islamism, catalyzing change and accelerating existing trends; sometimes triggering new moderation and pragmatism, in other instances reinforcing existing extremist views. In response to the Arab Spring some Islamist activists who found refuge in the West grew noticeably more moderate and open-minded, even to the point of abandoning Islamist doctrine or breaking openly with their own organizations. Others, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and those from the deeply anti-democratic extremist trend within UK Islamism (including some Brotherhood members), grew evermore entrenched in their doctrines and conspiracy theories, and even more suspicious of anything new. Similarly, the Arab Spring has underscored that in almost all instances, it is clear that most exiles who have spent time in Europe know the West better than it knows them, while their experience in the West has also made them far more politically and media

savvy than were previous generations. Regardless of their personal politics, the leaders of groups like al-Nahda and the Egyptian Brotherhood will seek to use this knowledge of the West to their own advantage in the years to come.

That said, not all exile groups used their time in exile to re-organize, to acquire new skills, and to rebrand and reshape their political messages. For instance, the UK-based leaders of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood seem to continue to be isolated in the era of the Arab Spring. Their efforts to overthrow Bashar al-Assad have been historically unpopular in London Islamist circles because of Assad's support for Hamas. Unlike al-Nahda, exiled members of the Syrian Brotherhood (and particularly their most prominent member, the shy, reticent and non-English speaking Ali Bayanouni) did not court Western policymakers, or potential political allies or journalists, and they have failed to forge ties with other Islamists as well as other exile communities like Syrian Kurds and Christians. As such, the Syrian Brothers have been unable to do much to persuade UK or international audiences of the importance of supporting the rebellion against the Assad regime. Indeed, the Syrian Brotherhood has struggled to convince Syrians in exile and in Syria itself mainly because these audiences lack confidence in the group's professed moderation.⁹⁰

The impact of the Arab Spring on "homegrown" Islamist parties and UK-born individuals has also been pronounced. While many UK-born extremists were initially enthusiastic about the Arab Spring, they rapidly demonstrated their inability to do much beyond commenting and organizing protests outside embassies. For some groups—most notably Hizb ut-Tahrir—the lack of radical "Islamic" change in the Middle East following the Arab uprisings has left them disillusioned. These extremists have already rationalized the failure of their much hoped-for Khilafa to appear by retreating into old tropes about Western domination and conspiracy. As the Brotherhood and its affiliated groups increasingly exercise political power in the Arab world, this extremist position seems evermore absurd. Because of their incapacity to respond to the new political opportunities created by the Arab Spring, these extremist groups and their ideology risk becoming increasingly irrelevant.

On the other hand, the Arab Spring has given more open-minded Islamists—both exiles and UK-born, Arab and non-Arab—the opportunity to reconsider simplistic ideological perspectives that "Islam is the solution" as well as their long-standing prejudices against the West and their delusions about Western conspiracies against Islam. Others, most notably pro-Hamas activists, have taken a longer-term view of the Arab uprisings, portraying them as events leading one step closer to the fulfillment of their doctrinal goals of destroying Israel.

In addition to shaking up Islamist ideas and sharpening divisions within the Islamist movement, the Arab uprisings have also impacted the organizational structures,

practices and capacities of some Islamist movements in the UK. Indeed, the return of exiles to the Middle East has meant that the leadership of some UK-based Islamist movements—most notably those connected to the Tunisian and Egyptian Brotherhoods—have been weakened or hollowed out. Over the longer term, it is possible that the continued migration of senior leaders and organizers from the UK in particular is going to have a damaging effect on the capacity of Islamist movements to propagate their own ideas in the West. After all, the Arab Spring has already plucked away some of UK Islamism’s most able and experienced political organizers as well as some younger rising stars, like the Scottish-born Osama Saeed, a former MAB youth leader who now works for *al-Jazeera* in Qatar. Now, in groups like the MAB, there is simply no younger generation ready to take over from older leaders. By contrast, other groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun’s radical offspring have lost few senior leaders to the Arab Spring and, even though their political agendas appear increasingly less relevant, these groups still maintain large memberships of younger and ambitious activists. Will this mean, therefore, an acceleration of the increasing trend toward moderation among young British Muslims due to a general weakening of Brotherhood groups in the West and the descent of extremist groups into ever-deeper obscurantism? Or will the weakening of UK-based Brotherhood groups create a vacuum into which more extremist groups will step? Either way, it is already clear that while many Islamists arrived in the West hoping to change it, it was instead in many cases the West that changed them. It is also clear that the Arab Spring, and its ultimate outcomes, will likely play a decisive role in shaping the evolution of Islamism in the UK and throughout Western Muslim communities; indeed, its effects are already being felt.

NOTES

1. <http://ireland.fosis.org.uk/about-us/history>.
2. In 1964, FOSIS arranged for Malcolm X to speak at Manchester and Sheffield universities, during a visit to the UK; http://www.workershistory.org/linked_docs/NWLHJ27_Sherwood.pdf.
3. <http://www.angelfire.com/in/muslimscholars/three.html>.
4. Philip Lewis, *Islamic Britain: Religion, Politics and Identity Amongst British Muslims* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994), p. 102.
5. <http://www.investigativeproject.org/3418/qaradawi-no-chopping-off-of-hands-nowbut-later-is>.
6. Al-Massari ran the Center for the Defense of Legitimate Rights.

- http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=26182&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=178&no_cache=1.
7. This included the website Tajdeed.net, which became a key forum for the dissemination of radical ideas and material worldwide. Even though al-Massari claimed to have shut the website down in 2005, it remains in operation. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4191396.stm>. The site is accessible here: <http://tajdeed.net/>.
 8. http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/06/29/tunisia_new_al_nahda.
 9. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01bljwp>.
 10. "Interview transcript: Rachid Ghannouchi," *Financial Times*, January 18, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/24d710a6-22ee-11e0-ad0b-00144feab49a.html#axzz1q9NysppY>.
 11. <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/09/weekinreview/conversations-sheik-rashid-el-ghanoushi-islamic-fundamentalist-abroad-talks.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.
 12. Cited in Azzam Tamimi, Rachid Ghannouchi: *A Democrat within Islamism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). p. 206.
 13. http://www.euro-muslim.com/en_u_foundation_details.aspx?news_id=343.
 14. Azzam Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
 15. Azzam Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 249.
 16. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/18/world/africa/tunisia-islamists-test-ideas-decades-in-the-making.html?pagewanted=all>.
 17. Ferjani's skill in winning such representational leverage for the Brotherhood is remarkable given that the Brotherhood controls no more than 5 out of the UK's estimated 900 mosques. It is also worth noting that the other three founding organizations were the al-Khoei Foundation, a Shia organization headquartered in America; the British Muslim Forum, which is now largely defunct; and the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), an organization with close foundational links to Jamaat-e-Islami.
 18. <http://www.minab.org.uk/about-us/committees>.
 19. Paul Goodman, "MINAB's mosques may not be so moderate," *Daily Telegraph*, November 30, 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3644400/MINABs-mosques-may-not-be-so-moderate.html>.
 20. <http://mabonline.net/?p=2734>.
 21. <http://islamexpo.com/attractions.php?id=7&art=26&page=attractions.php>.
 22. Soumaya Ghannouchi, "Who's the extremist," *The Guardian*, August 5, 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/aug/05/comment.politics>;
Soumaya Ghannouchi's pages:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/soumayaghannoushi> and
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/profile/soumaya-ghanoushi.html>; Intissar Kherigi's:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/intissar-kherigi?INTCMP=SRCH> and
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/profile/intissar-kherigi.html>.
 23. <http://blogs.aljazeera.com/liveblog/Yusra-Ghannouchi>.
 24. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9Ivc0-OwTM>.
 25. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmcaff/c1672-i/c167201.htm>.
 26. <http://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFL5E7LJ3ZR20111020>;

- <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/tunisia/8862963/Tunisias-Islamist-victory-good-for-women-says-female-figurehead.html>.
27. "Islamists' Ideas on Democracy and Faith Face Test in Tunisia," *New York Times*, February 17, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/18/world/africa/tunisia-islamists-test-ideas-decades-in-the-making.html?hp>.
 28. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00pbgq4>.
 29. <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/11/15/177378.html>.
 30. http://antzproduction.com/back_to_tunisia-2.html.
 31. <http://asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=3&id=27849>.
 32. In London, Ghannouchi was particularly notorious among Arab activists for his use of the UK's litigant-friendly libel laws to silence criticism and perceived inaccuracies, for instance, winning £61,000 from the *Al-Arab* newspaper in 2003 and £165,000 from the *Al-Arabiya* channel in 2008; http://www.carter-ruck.com/documents/newsletters/pdfs/newsletter_summer2008.pdf.
 33. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/12/muslim-brotherhood-share-power-egypt?news-feed=true>.
 34. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12356922>.
 35. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/38392/Egypt/Politics-/Will-ElShater-nomination-split-Egypt's-Brotherhood.aspx>.
 36. <http://ikhwanmisr.net/article.php?id=22724>. He also made the claim to a rather surprised-looking BBC Politics show in early 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12356922>.
 37. <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/profile-kamal-al-helbawy-defector-conscience>.
 38. Ibid.
 39. Author interview, former jihadist, London, May 2012.
 40. <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2011/05/bin-laden-the-muslim-brotherhood-and-medhi-hasan.html>.
 41. <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1619455>.
 42. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/02/palestinian-freedom-arab-unrest-egypt>.
 43. http://www.studentrights.org.uk/article/1893/extremist_speakers_in_conference_at_cardiff_university_update_event_moved_off_campus_.
 44. http://www.studentrights.org.uk/article/1893/extremist_speakers_in_conference_at_cardiff_university_update_event_moved_off_campus_.
 45. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-fate-of-israel-peace-treaty-may-be-decided-in-referendum-1.404889>.
 46. <http://azzamtamimi.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/what-syrian-people-want-is-what-matters.html>.
 47. Al-Tikriti is the son of the leader of Iraq's Muslim Brotherhood and has attempted to acquire funding from the British government, most notably through the Cordoba Foundation, an NGO that acts as a forum for pro-Islamist thought in the UK; <http://www.fairobserver.com/article/western-fear-%E2%80%98islamist-other%E2%80%99>.
 48. <http://www.hizb.org.uk/current-affairs/tunisia-protests-muslims-call-for-islam-and-khilafah>.
 49. <http://www.demotix.com/news/573113/hizb-ut-tahrir-turned-away-embassy-protest>; <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/01/29/uk-britain-egypt-protest-idUKTRE70S3D920110129>.
 50. <http://www.hizb.org.uk/dawah/first-tunisia-then-egypt--a-call-for-real-change-in-the-arab-world>.

51. <http://www.hizb.org.uk/dawah/bradford-community-meeting-discusses-the-uprisings-in-tunisia-and-egypt>.
52. <http://www.hizb.org.uk/dawah/video-one-ummah-one-struggle>.
53. Hizb ut-Tahrir, "Press launch of 'Gold Standard'," March 22, 2012, <http://www.thegoldreport.co.uk/publications/gold-standard-the-future-for-a-stable-global-currency>.
54. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsv2ol0xAo>.
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56. <http://www.anjemchoudary.com/press-releases/lybia-the-islamic-verdict>.
57. <http://www.anjemchoudary.com/press-releases/2011-the-year-in-review-an-islamic-perspective>.
58. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39BpIrrxwM&list=UUN3SY9jKwPWWzX1cV_Gw7Q&index=1&feature=plcp.
59. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/7/41881/Egypt/Presidential-elections-/Brotherhoods-Mursi-vows-to-help-USheld-Blind-Sheik.aspx>.
60. "Islamic awakening—Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen riots demonstrations revelation (sic)," uploaded January 28, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHXw137CbEo>.
61. "An address to the Muslims of Syria," February 1, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTX4qaghWOQ>.
62. The grammatical error is Bakri's and is a reference to a famous British advertisement slogan for a chocolate bar.
63. "Muslim cleric banned from Britain claims al Qaeda poised to launch suicide attacks in Syria," *Telegraph*, January 25, 2012.
64. <http://www.authentictauheed.com/2011/07/109-khilafah-system-is-ultimate.html>.
65. <http://www.authentictauheed.com/2011/10/211-empire-strikes-back.html>.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. <http://www.authentictauheed.com/2011/12/239-love-love-love.html>.
69. <http://www.authentictauheed.com/2012/01/q-adam-and-shaitan-part3.html>.
70. <http://www.authentictauheed.com/2012/03/266-tafseer-surah-taubah-verse-of-sword.html>.
71. "Tunisia still in 'revolutionary mood'," *Press TV*, January 20, 2011, <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/161086.html>.
72. "Massive protests loom in Saudi Arabia," *Press TV*, March 5, 2011.
73. "Egyptian Islamists in Exile Call on Army to side with people," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 1, 2011. This was clearly a departure for a man who has long been on the UN- and US-sanctioned terrorist list and started his career as the lawyer for Egyptian Islamic Jihad members; <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/pdf/AQList.pdf>.
74. "Is al Qaeda over? Egyptian security experts sound off," *Asharq al-Awsat*, September 13, 2011.
75. "Egypt Uprising the Middle East Crisis XV: London-based Egyptian Islamist Yasser al-Sirri calls to block international shipping in the Suez Canal and to halt the flow of oil," *MEMRI*, Special Dispatch no.3557, February 3, 2011, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/print4971.htm>.
76. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/36/122/42074/Presidential-elections-/Presidential-elections-news/AbulFotouh-to-thousands-of-supporters-I-warned-SCA.aspx>.
77. A final detail to note, however, in the British jihadist scene is that the vast majority of the cur-

rent generation of British jihadists find their roots in South Asia. For them, while events in the Arab world have some salience—and in particular amongst those animated by pan-Islamist ideas—their focus has tended to be towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, where it is hard to find much evidence of impact from the Arab Spring. For them, the events in the Arab Spring did little to undermine the injustice of the current war in Afghanistan or drone strikes in Pakistan, key issues that dominate their outlook.

78. http://www.emel.com/article?id=94&a_id=2569.

79. <http://inayatcorner.wordpress.com/2012/01/21/terror-in-nigeria-why-an-islamic-state-is-not-the-answer/>.

80. <http://inayatcorner.wordpress.com/2012/02/13/the-jesus-and-mo-cartoon-and-the-right-to-offend-2/>.

81. <http://inayatcorner.wordpress.com/2011/02/16/pro-israel-lobby-continues-smear-campaign-against-engage/>.

82. <http://inayatcorner.wordpress.com/2011/11/14/our-jewish-ambassador-to-israel-and-the-plot-to-attack-iran/>.

83. <http://www.tariqramadan.com/Erdogan-visits-Egypt-Tunisia-and,11735.html?lang=fr>.

84. <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/islamists-current-dilemma-1.970001>.

85. <http://thinkafricapress.com/egypt/islamism-and-arab-spring-talk-tariq-ramadan>.

86. <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/political-islam-will-have-to-deal-with-clashing-interests-1.921436>.

87. <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/tunisia-s-challenging-future-1.990551>.

88. <http://thinkafricapress.com/egypt/islamism-and-arab-spring-talk-tariq-ramadan>.

89. It is true, however, that Ramadan's recent move to Qatar to become head of the Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE), a Qatari government project that is also supported by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, complicates such analysis. And yet, at the same time, Ramadan's relocation to Qatar can equally be seen as a reminder that the Brotherhood's members are often distinguished not by strict fidelity to any single idea but rather by a hunger for money and proximity to power, Qatar of course being the richest and most important power-broker in the new Middle East. It is worth adding, however, that a rejection of Islamist doctrines does not necessarily lead individuals to become more moderate or democratic, or for that matter, less hostile to the West. Indeed, several individuals above remain religiously or socially conservative, for instance on issues relating to women, and deeply hostile to Israel to the point of anti-Semitism. Others may also retain an "us vs. them," almost tribalist, orientation and an unthinking support for the "Muslim" side in political conflict, a trend sometimes referred to among British Muslims as "Muslim-ism."

90. It is worth highlighting that this does not mean that the Syrian revolution is not something that has been noted by the British public at large, or the Islamist community in particular. As we saw earlier, it continues to be a focus of the British Islamist conversation, as well as the public discourse in general. What is clear, however, is that the Syrian Brotherhood members based in the UK have played no role in advancing this narrative or shaping the message.