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## Interview with Alison Pargeter

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*Author of Return to the Shadows: The Muslim Brotherhood and An-Nahda since the Arab Spring (Saqi Books, 2016)*

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**Could you talk a bit about yourself? What spawned your interest in North African politics?**

My interest in North African politics was sparked while I was doing an MA in International History and decided to focus my dissertation on Anglo-Libyan relations during the 1950s and 1960s. My interest in Libya grew from there and I became increasingly fascinated by the country, even more so because at that time so few western academics were looking at it. After working on Libya, my interest broadened to the wider region and to Islamist groups and currents operating in it in particular.

**In my view, NATO's Libya intervention was a total disaster. A number of motives have been given for it, such as France's return to the Mediterranean, Gaddafi's pan-Africanist plans, Western coveting of Libyan resources etc. What were, in your view, the main driving forces and protagonists behind it?**

The main protagonists were the UK and the French, who despite their proclamations to the opposite, were clearly keen to see regime change in Libya.

Colonel Qadhafi had long been considered problematic by the British for a variety of reasons including his support for the IRA, the killing of WPC Yvonne Fletcher etc. Meanwhile the Conservative government of David Cameron was keen to distance itself from the previous administration of Tony Blair, who had famously brought Qadhafi in from the cold and assisted in his rehabilitation. In addition, Britain viewed the Arab Spring as a major opportunity to champion what it thought at the time was a shift towards democracy in North Africa and to better position itself in the region.

However, Britain, along with other international powers, was only prepared to undertake a limited or light intervention in Libya. This had far reaching consequences and left many Libyans feeling as though they had been abandoned by the international community once it had got what it wanted, something that left them to the mercy of the armed groups that proliferated after Qadhafi's fall, as well as to the repeated meddling of regional powers.

**In a recent UK Parliament report on the Libyan intervention, British**

**officials talk about completely surrendering to French designs. Why is that? What is next for UK policy in the region? Any inner workings that suggest a change of direction?**

I am not sure what exactly that referred to. However, I think the UK is as stumped as the rest of international community regarding what policy to adopt towards Libya. There have been and still are so many peace plans and proposals on the table, but none of them has given rise to any proper solution for the country, which remains utterly fragmented and shattered. With none of the key players on the ground willing to compromise on some of the core issues, and with different European countries pulling in different directions, it is difficult to see how real peace is to be achieved.

Indeed, the UK, along with the rest of the international community has played a very poor game in Libya, with no real engagement or plan. This includes the international community's backing of the Libyan Political Agreement of December 2015 that established the Government of National Accord. The push to get this agreement signed despite the obvious flaws and the fact that some of the most important players on the ground refused to accept it, was driven primarily by the international community's desire to create a vehicle to sanction military action against ISIS in Sirte and that could also assist in dealing with migration flows. As such, the agreement and the government it spawned never had proper legitimacy or authority in Libya and has only served to create another layer of complexity and confusion in an already chaotic situation.

**A leitmotif of your book is political Islam's inability to come up with tangible responses to tangible problems. Yet, given North African societies' conservative nature (albeit to varying degrees) isn't the region trapped in a vicious circle, where societal conservatism engenders (predominantly) conservative contestants of power, which –after failing to live up to expectations- give birth to other (sometimes even more) conservative contestants, f.e. Salafists?**

To me the region, or parts of it at least, are caught between conservative Islamism (in various forms, including the Muslim Brotherhood) on one hand and military backed dictatorship on the other. Both these forces are authoritarian in nature and resistant to reform. This is the case in Egypt and is also increasingly the case in Libya. It is difficult to see how either country is going to extricate itself from this conundrum as there are no alternatives on offer. Indeed, one of the failures of the Arab Spring was that it could not produce any alternative vision for these societies.

**North African political movements often talk about establishing a local (i.e. Tunisian, Libyan, Egyptian) version of democracy. To me this is dubious at best and smacks of a hidden agenda at worst. Democracy has certain tenets, i.e. there is no English, French or Greek democracy. What is your take?**

I am not sure about talk of establishing local democracies. However, there is certainly a push at the moment within some political Islamist groups to push the idea of a national, traditional Islam i.e. a Tunisian Islam or a Libyan Islam.

The promotion of such a concept is a direct response to the failure of political Islam as a global force following the toppling of President Morsi in 2013. Local Islamist groups such as An-Nahda in Tunisia, parts of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, and the PJD in Morocco are keen to distance themselves from

the failures of the Egyptian Brotherhood's experience in power. This Egyptian experience has tainted their image severely.

As such, they have shifted their emphasis to the concept of a national or traditional Islam that is specific to their local situation. This is not a new idea. Indeed, there were elements within An-Nahda during the 1980s who subscribed to the idea of promoting a Tunisian Islam and who were deeply uncomfortable about the movement's close links to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. These elements moved away from An-Nahda as a result.

However, the talk of a national form of Islam that is being promoted by these groups at the moment is mainly tactical and has little in the way of real substance.

**In the book's conclusion, you predict that political Islam is deeply rooted in the region and not going anywhere. But little introspection seems to have been done by those movements to avoid repeating mistakes of the past. In addition (do correct me if I am wrong) none of them seems genuinely interested in inclusive democracy. Isn't there a looming danger of repeating the same things over and over and expecting different results?**

I agree that there is little real introspection by these movements, aside perhaps from An-Nahda that has shifted its position to the point where it asserts that it is no longer an Islamist movement. This, I believe, is largely to do with the stance of its leader, Sheikh Rachid Al-Ghannouchi, who has been able to carry the movement in different direction despite real disquiet among An-Nahda's grass roots.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood talks a lot about self-review, but rarely enters into any meaningful reassessment of its ideology. Discussions within the movement about what went wrong during its year in power tend to focus on organizational or practical aspects rather than anything more deep-seated. This is hardly surprising given that it has been completely shattered over the past 4 years. However, the MB is a movement that has never been inclined to self-review and as such, one shouldn't expect any real shift in this respect.

Were these movements to come to power again, therefore, there is a real chance that they could repeat many of the same mistakes. However, this doesn't mean they will lose the backing of their core support base who support them because in their eyes they represent Islam. In addition, the only tangible alternative is a regime that is equally resistant to real change or reform. Thus these movements, or the ideology they espouse, will likely persist.

**Why didn't you include the Algerian and Moroccan branches of the MB (or their approximate equivalents) in your book? Was it only to avoid broadening the scope too much?**

Aside from time constraints, I wanted to focus on those countries that had undergone revolutions during the Arab Spring.

Ms Pargeter, on behalf of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East & Islamic Studies, thank you very much indeed!