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The Taboo of Atheism in Egypt

Acknowledging the rights of atheists doesn't mean adopting their ideas. While atheists just don't believe in one further religion in comparison to believers, everyone should be entitled to express their ideas and thoughts without intimidation. Challenging religious oppression and rusty social traditions, many Egyptians risk their lives to uphold and protect freedoms and values of tolerance.

Systematic Discrimination

Discrimination against atheists in Egypt is primarily a product of conservative social traditions and state religious establishments – Al-Azhar mosque and the Coptic Church. Laws and policies in Egypt protect religious freedom but punish those ridicule or insult heavenly religions by words or writing – i.e. insulting Buddhism or Hinduism is not punishable by the Egyptian law but insulting Islam, Christianity or Judaism is. Between 2011 and 2013, “Egyptian courts convicted 27 of 42 defendants on charges of contempt for religion,” according to [The Guardian](#).

Interestingly, an Egyptian citizen is only entitled to one of the three monotheistic religions, namely Islam, Christianity and Judaism. In other words, people are allowed to believe or disbelieve in any religion for obvious reasons, but they are not allowed to have their beliefs or disbeliefs legally recognized. Therefore, on official records, all people have to be categorized as such. Diversity in this sense is systematically blinded.

According to official statistics, religious beliefs in Egypt are as follows: 90-94% are Sunni Muslims and 6-10% are Coptic Christians. While atheism is not limited to a specific segment of the Egyptian society, credible research is still lacking on

the matter. It is simply because being without religion is a taboo in Egypt.

Similar to their declared wars on terrorism, corruption and neglect, political and religious state institutions launched a new “war on atheism”.

In a 2014-report, *Dar Al-Ifta Al-Misriyyah* (Al-Azhar center for Islamic legal research) confirmed that the number of atheists in Egypt is no more than 866 individuals – i.e. the proportion of atheists is 0.001% of the Egyptian population. While the methods Al-Azhar “scholars” used to reach this precise figure remain unknown, discriminatory discourse against atheists is commonplace in Egypt.

This discriminatory discourse is especially accentuated by Al-Azhar mosque and the Coptic Church. [Starting from 2014](#), both institutions have been cooperating to fight against atheism in order to “save the Egyptian society”. In the same year, the government embarked a “national campaign” to combat the spread of atheism among young people using the help of a number of psychologists, sociologists and political scientists.

Nemat Satti, chairman of the Central Administration of the parliament and civic education at the Ministry of Youth and Sports, said to [Shorouk News](#) in 2014 that the phenomenon of atheism has become

as noticeable and widespread among young people as the phenomena of harassment, rape and extremism. The comparison is pretty clear.

Media Discourse Against Atheists

This discriminatory discourse against atheists can be detected in the Egyptian media as well. Egyptian media is not neutral when addressing the issue of atheists in the society. Similar to the governmental and religious campaigns, media portrays atheists as patients with mental disorder, who need treatment to get rid of the illusions they are talking about.

For instance, in 2015 in her program [“the morning of the capital”](#) on the Egyptian channel “the Capital TV” (Al-Asima), an Egyptian journalist throws out an atheist guest on air for his ideas. A wrangle broke out between the Egyptian journalist Rania Mahmoud Yaseen, the host of a debate on atheism, and her atheist guest Ahmed Al-Harqan, who spoke about “the lack of historical evidence concerning the existence of the figure of the prophet Mohammad”. Rania Yasin interrupted Al-Harqan saying: “Come on! Leave! We don’t need Atheists or infidels. People should pay attention to the warnings against infidelity, atheism and these outrageous ideas in the society.”

Hence the guest left the debate, it remains to wonder why an Egyptian journalist hosts a debate about such a sensitive issue in Egypt, if she isn’t willing to listen to what atheists have to say.

Stories of Persecution

While the stories of persecuting atheists in Egypt are numerous, here are some cases to show how this taboo is being

handled systematically. So far, there is no evidence that the change of the head of the government or the government’s political orientation correlates with the number of attacks against atheists.

In 2014, Karim Ashraf Mohamed Al-Banna, 21, was jailed for three years for “insulting Islam” by simply declaring he is an atheist on Facebook. Shockingly, his own father testified against him claiming that his son [“was embracing extremist ideas against Islam”](#).

In 2013, Egyptian clerics such as Al-Azhar professor Mahmoud Shaaban, a member of Al-Jama’a Al-[Isalmiyya Asem Abdelmajed](#) and a Salafi scholar [Abu Ishaq Al-Heweny](#) issued an Islamic ruling (fatwa) against Hamed Abdel-Samad for writing a book on Islamic fascism. Abdel-Samad was accused of being heretic and must be killed for it. [Shaaban said on Al-Hafez TV](#) that: “after he [Abdel-Samad] has been confronted with the evidence, his killing is permitted if the [Egyptian] government doesn’t do it.”

In 2012, the Egyptian blogger Alber Saber was sentenced to three years in prison for insulting Islam by posting the trailer of the YouTube video [Innocence of Muslims](#) on his Facebook page. While prosecution didn’t find the trailer on Saber’s Facebook account, they accused him of religious blasphemy after finding a short video of Saber criticizing both Islamic and Coptic religious leaders and institutions.

After detaining Saber for religious blasphemy, “police incited the prisoners against Saber, claiming that he was an atheist and insulted the prophet Mohamed,” stated the [2012 Report On Non-Religious Discrimination](#). Consequently, one of the prisoners injured Saber with a razor blade.

According to the same report, there were similar incidents in 2012 against individ-

uals who allegedly insulted Islam or the prophet Mohammad such as the Christian school secretary Makram Diab, who was sentenced to six years in prison, Ayman Yusef Mansur, 24, who was sentenced to three years in prison with hard labour.

These are not the first incidents in Egypt against atheists. In 2007, the blogger Abdel Kareem Soliman was sentenced to four years in prison for insulting Islam and the president. Another blogger, Kareem Amer, was sentenced to three years in prison for “Facebook posts deemed offensive to Islam”, according to [2012 Report On Non-Religious Discrimination](#).

While atheism in Egypt remains a taboo, systematic discrimination against atheists remains significant. Prompted by conservative traditions and state religious and political establishments, there are restrictions that deny atheists the right to engage in a serious debate about their fundamental rights.

Hakim Khatib

Editor-in-chief of the Mashreq Politics and Culture Journal

New Order Has Just Begun in the Middle East

Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, Russia has limited itself to its traditional role of providing arms as well as military and logistical experts to its Arab allies. As Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's regime weakened, the Russians intensified their military support dramatically. Recently, Russia opted to expand its role in Syria to include direct intervention against enemies of the regime. The move towards direct intervention constitutes a revolution in Russia's role in the Middle East and portends a deeper shift in the region.

Russian Geopolitical and Economic Interests

Russia has claimed that its intervention in Syria was intended to destroy IS after the US-led campaign proved to be an “abject failure”, according to an unnamed US military official speaking to CBS News. Well acquainted with terrorism, one might argue that Moscow is undertaking a preemptive war against Islamic extremist groups. But some have linked the intervention to the Ukrainian crisis as well as the desire for increased leverage in the Middle East and more power at the negotiating table.

Thus Russia's stated intentions have been met with scepticism about the real motive behind the decision to intervene directly. One widespread opinion is that Russia wants to secure a military presence on the Mediterranean Sea. While this sounds plausible, Russia has been enjoying this presence for some time already.

Mediterranean ports are of great geopolitical and economic interest, as their water does not freeze in wintertime. Those ports have long played an important role

in Russian foreign policy. The Russian Empire fought a series of wars with the Ottoman Empire in a quest to establish a warm-water port. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I didn't give Russia any further control. The Soviet Union enjoyed access to naval bases throughout the Mediterranean, yet its collapse brought an end to that access, except for the base in Tartus in Syria. Since 1971, Russian navy has had presence in Tartus and with Russia's recent intervention, this port enjoyed unprecedented fame.

So what really lies behind the dramatic shift in Russian foreign policy?

Dramatic Shift

In fact, Russia's recent direct intervention in Syria gave a goodbye kiss to the conventional regional order that ruled the Middle East for ages. Traditionally and even at the peak of the Cold War, Russia's (either the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation) role was limited to sending arms, military and logistical experts to its Arab allies. The current intervention constituted a revolution in Russia's role and

marked an extraordinary heavy military intervention.

The recent Russian intervention coincided with a number of important events. First is the Iranian nuclear deal, which gives Iran a more prominent regional role, especially when considering the economic potentials this deal left Iran with. Second is the US gradual withdrawal from the region, which was symbolized in the withdrawal of its troops from Iraq, handing over Iraq's destiny to the Iranians, cooling off efforts in the Palestinian- Israeli conflict that led to the emergence of other initiatives (e.g. the French, the New Zealand), and finally its decision to withdraw the defensive shield from Turkey for technical reasons according to the US announcement. Giving up its historical allies in Egypt (Mubarak) and Tunisia (Ben Ali), in addition to leaving the Saudis and the Gulf to fight Iran's influence in Yemen alone are other signs of US declining role in the Middle East.

A few years ago, the president of the US Council on Foreign Relations, Richard N. Haass, wrote that the era of the United States' domination in the Middle East was coming to an end and that the region's future would be characterized by reduced US influence. Many observers do not believe the US will voluntarily abandon its role in the region, but the actions of other nations, combined with the Russians' plans in Syria, clearly point in this direction.

Under the slogan "fight against terrorism", China sent aircraft carrier "Liaoning-CV-16" to Tartus. Sources revealed that Beijing is heading to reinforce its forces with "J-15 Flying Shark" jets and "Z-18F & Z-18J" helicopters equipped with anti-submarine, in coordination with Tehran and Baghdad. France and Britain followed suit; the latter announced that it

would mobilize reinforcements and military capabilities to the Mediterranean and Paris said it would send "Charles de Gaulle" aircraft carrier to participate in operations against ISIS in addition to six Rafale Jets in the United Arab Emirates and six Mirage aircraft in Jordan.

For its part, the US, whose aircraft carriers have been absent from the region since 2007, ordered a mere 50 special operations troops to Syria in order to help coordinate 'local' ground forces in the north of the country. US President Barack Obama condemned Russia's direct intervention strategy, saying it was "doomed to fail". And yet in a press conference in August 2014, he acknowledged that the United States "does not have a strategy" in Syria.

Prior Knowledge of Moscow's Decision

Nevertheless Washington was not taken by surprise when the Russians commenced their operations in Syria. Assuming that the Obama-Putin summit, which came hours before the Russian earliest move in Syria, did not tackle Russia's intervention plans, there were many clues that prove US prior knowledge of Moscow's decision.

In July 2015 Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani visited Moscow to coordinate the Russian military intervention and thus forging the new Iranian-Russian alliance in Syria. According to a Reuters report, Soleimani's visit was preceded by high-level Russian-Iranian contact and meetings to coordinate military strategies. Two months later, Iraq, Russia, Iran and Syria agreed to set up an intelligence-sharing committee in Baghdad in order to harmonize efforts in fighting ISIS.

A senior US official confirmed on 18 September that more than 20 Condor transport plane flights had delivered tanks, weapons, other equipment, and marines to Russia's new military hub near Latakia in western Syria, followed by 16 Russian Su-27 fighter aircraft, along with 12 close support aircraft, four large Hip troop-transport helicopters and four Hind helicopter gunships.

Hence, it is clear that the US administration was at least aware of the Russian massive preparations and yet opted to keep its presence to the minimum. In this vein, it can be strategically said that this decision goes in line with the aforementioned US grand plan in the region and marks a calculated strategic gain when securing a small share in a Russian traditional sphere of influence: Syria.

Russia therefore might be looking to kill as many birds as possible with one stone. Moscow will first and foremost dictate its political will on any future solution in Syria and the inclusion of Iran and Russia in Vienna talks is just a case in point.

In short, Russia must now be taken seriously as a major player on the Middle East scene. The Russian recent intervention in Syria was not the first move in that direction and regional powers have reached the same conclusion even before.

Fadi Elhusseini

A research fellow at the Institute for Middle East Studies – Canada

Turkey–Israel Normalization – Why Ever Not?

“Normalization” is a dirty word among Palestinian leaders, of both Fatah and Hamas persuasions. It implies acceptance of Israel’s right to exist and, by some perverse logic, a downgrading of Palestinian rights.

It must have come as something of a shock, therefore, to read the remarks of Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on December 13 about Turkey’s future relations with Israel: “I have already said that once the compensation and the embargo problems were resolved, the normalization process may start. This normalization process would be good for us, Israel, Palestine and the entire region.”

To be honest, there really is no fundamental reason for relations between Turkey and Israel to be anything but cordial. Indeed for fifty years following the founding of the state of Israel, cordiality was the keynote. In March 1949 Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize the new state. Subsequently, despite occasional differences of opinion following the Six-Day War and its consequences, cooperation between the two countries on a variety of fronts was not only close, but deep. By the end of the 1990s a succession of Turkey’s prime ministers had visited Israel, and then-Israeli president, Ezer Weizman had visited Turkey on three occasions to sign agreements aimed at fostering cooperation in the fields of art, culture, education, science, and sports. This was followed by a series of security agree-

ments designed to ensure the closest cooperation between the two countries on intelligence and military matters. Meanwhile 200,000 Israelis flocked to Turkish beaches and casinos each year, and under a Turkish-Israeli free trade agreement trade between the two countries boomed.

This happy state of affairs received its set-back with Erdogan’s rise to prominence in Turkey’s political arena. Erdogan came from an Islamist background and, whatever lip-service he may have paid to the Turkey’s secularist tradition introduced by Kemal Ataturk in the 1920s, he was inherently opposed to it. Early in his career he joined the Islamist Welfare Party (IWP), and rose to become a member of parliament. Barred from taking his seat on a technicality, in 1994 he was elected mayor of Istanbul, where he antagonised secularists by banning alcohol in the city’s cafés.

Erdogan then helped form the Justice and Development Party (the AKP) which proved wildly popular and won the parliamentary election in 2002. He took office as prime minister in May, 2003.

Despite a state visit to Israel in 2005, Erdogan’s accession soon marked a

sharp deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations. Rooted in hard-line Islamism, Erdogan's priority was soon revealed as courting favour with the Muslim world. Support for the extremist terror organizations Hamas and Hezbollah began to dominate Turkey's approach to foreign affairs. Vehement in his condemnation of Israel's incursion into Gaza in 2008-9 to counter Hamas's rocket attacks, he had a memorable public spat with Israel's then-President Shimon Peres at the Davos conference in 2009, and stormed out of the meeting. Then came the notorious Mavi Marmara affair, when an AKP-inspired plan to provoke an incident with Israel on the high seas succeeded only too well, leading to the death of nine Turkish citizens.

In spite of all this, a community of interests between Turkey and Israel persisted and, in the way of foreign relations, imposed its own imperatives. Between 2009 and 2014 two-way trade between Turkey and Israel positively mushroomed. From some \$2.6 billion in 2009, by 2014 it had exceeded \$5.6 billion – which perhaps explains why negotiating teams charged with restoring ties between Turkey and Israel had begun meeting as early as April 2013. Quite separately, discussions had also begun on the extent of the financial compensation to be paid by Israel to the families of the Turkish citizens killed on board the Mavi Marmara.

Russia's incursion into Syria brought a sudden shake-up of the political pattern. Russia's President Vladimir Putin, side by side with Shi'ite Iran, entered the conflict in support of his long-time ally, President Bashar Assad; Erdogan, profoundly Sunni, was directing some of his fire at Assad's troops – although he

was equally interested in pounding Kurdish forces.

Then on November 24 came Turkey's downing of a Russian SU-24 fighter jet along the Syrian border. The result was a crisis in Turco-Russian relations. Turkey imports most of its natural gas from Russia, and for some time the two sides had been discussing a possible natural gas pipeline beneath the Black Sea to channel gas from Russia to Turkey and beyond. Two days after the Russian aircraft was shot down, Russia cancelled the project. Suddenly Turkey's future energy supplies seemed in jeopardy, and Turkish politicians, energy companies, and others began calling for talks with Israel about future natural gas imports.

On November 30 Erdogan remarked to reporters in Paris that he believed he was "able to fix ties" with Israel. On December 13 he said: "This normalization process would be good for us, Israel, Palestine and the entire region,, We need to consider the interests of the people of the region and introduce peace." By December 15 it had become clear that talks between Turkey and Israel to heal the diplomatic rift were gaining momentum. Reports indicated that a key element in establishing "normalized relations" would be Turkey's ability to import natural gas from the vast reserves that have been discovered in Israel's sovereign waters much of which is still waiting to be exploited.

Erdogan is insisting on his three pre-conditions for re-establishing normal relations with Israel – an apology for the deaths of the Turkish citizens aboard the Mavi Marmara; agreed compensation for the victims' families, and an end to Israel's blockade of Gaza. The apology has already been given by Netanyahu; compensation terms appear to

have been agreed; and the so-called blockade of Gaza has been attenuated to such a degree that only the most obviously military materiel is now prohibited.

But Turkey is not getting things all its own way. As part of the deal Turkey has agreed to expel Saleh al-Aruri, a senior member of Hamas's military wing. Aruri has been directing terrorist operatives in the West Bank from his base in Istanbul. Moreover, shortly after the Turkey deal was concluded, Israel announced a three-way summit to take place in January between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras, and Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiades. Joint exploitation of the huge Mediterranean gas reserves will doubtless feature largely on the agenda. Israel is in effect telling Cyprus and Greece that any normalization of ties with Turkey will not come at their expense. It is also sending a message to Turkey that Israel has other options in the region.

Perhaps, also, the sight of Israel and an erstwhile enemy normalizing their relations will send a message to the implacable opponents of normalization in the Palestinian camp. Deals to the advantage of both parties can be hammered out, even where Israel is involved. It can be done.

Neville Teller

The author of the book "The Search for Détente" (2014)

Muslims and Human Liberty

On December 11, Irshad Manji along with Mohammed Dajani addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of Manji's remarks.

The difference between “reformist” Muslims and “moderates” is not semantic. The latter term is misleading because many “moderate” Muslims exhibit all the traits of orthodoxy, including dogma and a fear of challenging their communities’ groupthink. The qualities associated with religious moderation are positive and desirable as a goal, but they are inadequate as a means to realize positive change in Islam. Although Islam has the potential to be wise and tolerant, it has been deeply corrupted, and rooting out this corruption requires something more potent — even radical — than moderation. It requires reform. As Martin Luther King Jr. said about a racially segregated America, moderation in times of moral crisis is a cop-out.

The good news is that a new generation of Muslims is increasingly using the word “reformist” to describe their pluralist and humanist aspirations for Islam. Their vision for “reformist Islam” is not one that merely abstains from terrorism. It includes dignity for gays and lesbians, full equality for women, respect for religious minorities, and tolerance for different points of view. In all likelihood, a critical mass of this generation’s Muslims will provide audible calls and visible evidence for each of these principles.

Society should seek out and support budding reformists, just as humanist Christians and secularists in eight-

eenth-century Germany rallied behind reformers of an insular, walled-off Judaism. Muslims must lead the movement for Islamic reform and prepare for the inevitable backlash from Muslim elders and self-appointed community leaders. Their success will also require mainstream backing.

Steeped in group identity, many Muslims fear they will be ostracized if they speak out in their communities. This dynamic inhibits them from naming imperialism within Islam, even though Muslim imperialists target and kill fellow Muslims in far greater numbers than foreign powers.

The fear of stigma is cultural more than religious. The Quran contains plenty of passages about the need to display moral courage by standing up to abuse of power inside one’s own tribe. Islamic scripture also calls on Muslims to think rationally. There are three times more surahs advocating introspection and analysis than blind submission. In this sense, reformist Muslims are at least as authentic as the moderates and, quite frankly, more constructive.

More Muslims need to read — not simply recite — the Quran. Instead of reading, grappling with, and understanding it, many moderate Muslims simply repeat stale cultural shibboleths. Among the most damaging of these is the Arab custom of group honor, which intimi-

dates moderate Muslims into silence lest they be accused of selling out their communities and dishonoring their families by sowing internal chaos and division. Group honor narrows the possibilities for individual liberty, freedom of thought, and personal responsibility. It victimizes women because they are assigned the burden of carrying familial shame. Men also face cultural pressures to conform to low expectations of behavior, which leads to their infantilization. In this way, both genders experience limited choices and lack of empowerment.

Arab cultural norms, with the assistance of petrodollars, have colonized the faith of Islam, undermining even traditionally pluralist and tolerant practices such as those of Indonesia. This reality is all the more disturbing given that 80 percent of Muslims worldwide are non-Arab. Yet instead of exposing the cultural imperialism that emanates from Saudi Arabia and its oil-rich neighbors, “moderate” Muslims tend to obsess about American, Israeli, and Indian colonialism. Out of defensiveness, they practice a dangerous form of distraction. This highlights the shortcomings of moderation — in theory, it is an admirable end state, but in practice, it is incapable of reclaiming Islam’s better angels.

Practically speaking, then, moderation may be the objective, but reform is the means to that end. Moderation as a destination is beautiful and Islamic, but only reform will generate the creative tension necessary to push Muslims out

of their comfort zones and engage with the critical questions facing Islam.

In pursuing this goal, reformist Muslims can be assured of their religious integrity. Muslims are obliged to worship one God, not God’s self-appointed ambassadors. Because nobody can legitimately claim a monopoly on truth and knowledge, the paradoxical conclusion is that Muslims have a spiritual duty to build societies in which we can disagree with each other in peace and with civility. In short, commitment to one God obliges us to defend human liberty.

This summary was prepared by Patrick Schmidt for The Washington Institute.

Irshad Manji

The author of Allah, Liberty, and Love (2011)

ISIS Attack in Istanbul – Two Targets in One

According to Turkish authorities, a Syrian member of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) detonated a suicide bomb in a park between two of Istanbul's major tourist attractions – the Hagia Sofia and the Blue Mosque (officially the Sultan Ahmet mosque). Many Americans have been to this park while visiting arguably two of the most visited sites in the world – over 24 million people toured them in 2014.

Ten people were killed in the blast, including nine Germans – 15 other people (nationalities unknown) were injured. The tenth fatality was a Peruvian tourist. Germans make up the largest group of tourists to visit these sites – over five million per year, or about 20 per cent of the total.

ISIS's targeting of a major tourism venue in Istanbul was not coincidental. Tourism is one of the easiest sources of revenue to disrupt – one need only look at the tremendous losses incurred by Egypt and Tunisia in the wake of sectarian violence. Turkey has suffered as well, with 2015 revenues estimated to be about \$30 billion, down almost 15 per cent over previous years.

Although there have been previous ISIS attacks in Turkey, those targets have been aimed at either Turkish or Kurdish targets. This attack on a clearly tourist venue marks a shift in ISIS's focus in Turkey.

Turkey is a priority target for ISIS – in the past, the Turks were not as strident in closing their often porous border

with Syria, resulting in thousands of fighters transiting Turkey into Syria, including many from Western Europe.

With the Turks reacting to Western pressure to more tightly control their borders, the flow of foreign fighters – necessary to replenish ISIS's substantial manpower losses – has been stemmed, but not stopped.

Also, the Turkish government last year opted to allow the United States and other coalition countries to use its air bases located just north of Syria – including the large NATO facility at Incirlik – reducing the flight times from take-off to target to mere minutes rather than a few hours. The airstrikes have taken a toll on ISIS – they are attempting to punish Turkey for aligning with the U.S.-lead coalition.

With this attack in Istanbul, ISIS is not only striking at Turkey, but at the West. I doubt that the suicide bomber knew that he would be killing Germans – I assume he was simply attacking westerners – Europeans and Americans. In its own twisted manner, ISIS's selection

Rick Francona

Author of Ally to Adversary - An Eyewitness Account of Iraq's Fall from Grace

of a tourism venue hit both Turkey and the West.

Turkish leaders claim that this attack only strengthens the country's resolve. I hope that is true, even though they will pay an economic price.

Pressure on Sheikh Salman to Respond to Human Rights Allegations

Pressure is building on Asian Football Confederation president and world soccer body FIFA presidential candidate Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa to respond with chapter and verse to allegations that he played a role in the detention and abuse of athletes during the 2011 popular uprising in his native Bahrain. The revolt was brutally squashed with the help of Saudi troops.

The pressure has already in recent months prompted Salman, who refused to discuss the issue for the 4.5 years since the events allegedly occurred, to deny that athletes were abused at the time and reject allegations that he was involved. His denials have left key questions unanswered and moved a prominent German politician, human rights activists, and Mark Pieth, the academic employed by FIFA at one point to oversee its reform efforts, to publicly oppose Salman's standing for office.

Salman has put forward proposals for a reform of FIFA, the scandal-ridden world soccer body, that go some way towards the core of the group's deep-seated corruption problems. Salman's proposals include a separation of FIFA's governance role from the group's significant business interests that include billions of dollars in revenues from sponsorship and World Cup broadcasting rights.

Despite the merit of his proposals, Sal-

man has also demonstrated that he is the product of an autocratic system and the scion of an entitled ruling family by employing lawyers to handle criticism and probing questions in the media in a bid to straight out of the blocks intimidate journalists rather than engage them and resort to legal steps only as a last resort.

In doing so, Salman follows in the footsteps of his relative and former sports superior, Prince Nasser bin Hamad al-Khalifa, a son of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, commander of the Royal Guard and head of the Bahrain Olympic Committee and the government's Supreme Council for Youth and Sports.

Salman employs the same lawyers as Prince Nasser, London-based Schillings whose motto is "[Defending Reputation, Demanding Privacy](#)". Schillings in 2014 [unsuccessfully attempted to fundamentally alter in line with the Bahrain government's version of events](#) this writer's reporting on the lifting of Prince Nas-

ser's immunity by an English court. The court lifted Prince Nasser's immunity in a case initiated by several Bahrainis who alleged that they were tortured in the aftermath of the 2011 popular uprising. In 2011, the Bahrain News Agency (BNA) reported that Prince Nasser had issued [a decree ordering that measures be taken against those guilty of insulting Bahrain and its leadership](#). Prince Nasser formed the committee after an earlier royal decree had declared a state of emergency in Bahrain. The royal decree allowed the Bahrain military to crackdown on the protests and establish military courts. Salman reportedly was at the time general secretary of the supreme sports and youth council.

A series of BNA stories further reported on the implementation of Prince Nasser's decree and the launch of a committee to investigate "breaches by individuals associated with the sports movement during the recent unfortunate events in the Kingdom of Bahrain." BNA reported that the committee met on 10 April 2011 under [Salman's chairmanship](#).

BNA also reported that the Bahrain Football Association (BFA) that was at the time headed by Salman [threatened penalties and suspensions for those who "violated the law"](#), including athletes, administrators and coaches who participated in ["illegal demonstrations"](#) or any other act that aims to ["overthrow the regime or insult national figures."](#) BNA said that the [BFA had suspended clubs](#), noting that: "the Bahrain FA stressed that these penalties were issued in accordance with the Investigative Committee's decisions concerning all those who have offended our leadership and our precious Kingdom."

A Bahraini newspaper, in another indi-

cation of the implementation of Prince Nasser's decree, quoted at the time Bahrain Table Tennis Association Chairman Sheikh Ahmed bin Hamad Al Khalifa, as saying that his group had decided to act against players who "offended the nation and its wise leadership."

BNA is the official organ of the government in a country that Reporters Without Borders ranks number 163 out of 180 countries; the media are tightly controlled through repressive articles in its penal code; journalists, activists, photographers and social media users are targeted; and in which writers exercise self-censorship including avoiding statements of fact like the fact that Shiites constitute the majority in Bahrain.

In total, an estimated 150 athletes and sports executives were arrested on the basis of Prince Nasser's decree. Several alleged immediately after their release that they were tortured during their detention, among them two members of Bahrain's national soccer team. The players remained silent for the 4.5 years since they first alleged having been abused. Recently, however, they denied the allegations in media appearances organized by Salman's election campaign.

In his refusal in the last five years to discuss the allegations, Salman insisted that sports and politics was separate, a statement contradicted by BNA's reporting and the fact that Bahrain's ruling family keeps a tight rein on the country's sports.

Since launching his presidential campaign, Salman has denied in interviews the establishment of the investigation committee and the assertion that he headed it but has yet to directly address the consistent BNA reporting. At no time, did Salman suggest that he ob-

jected to the penalizing of athletes and executives or that he would not have accepted to chair the committee if it had been established.

Salman's position has sparked opposition to his FIFA presidential candidacy. Speaking to Germany's [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung](#), Pieth who headed an independent governance committee for FIFA that issued its recommendations in 2013, called for strong opposition to Salman's candidacy.

"The outcry has to come from the 209 (national) associations" that elect the FIFA president, Pieth said. "You have to ask: Is Salman a credible representative for democracy and a new start? Is he suitable? A representative of an autocratic ruling family is not suitable to lead this institution out of the crisis," he added.

Referring to support for Salman by Kuwaiti Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad Al-Sabah widely viewed as one of the most powerful men in international sports, Pieth went on to say that "we have a mechanism that we call patronage, not a mafia. But they are similar. It is perpetuated by the people in question."

A member of Kuwait's ruling family as well as of the International Olympic Committee and FIFA's executive committee Al-Sabah is locked into a power struggle within his own ruling family. He is appealing a six-month prison sentence for allegedly violating a gag order and faces a civil suit for damages based on allegations that he and his brother, the head of the Kuwaiti Football Association, were responsible for Kuwait's re-

cent suspension by the IOC, FIFA and a host of other international sports associations.

Salman's foremost rival among the six presidential candidate, Jordan's Prince Ali Bin Al-Hussein, appeared to be hinting at the patronage mechanism when he this month registered his concern with the FIFA electoral committee about a cooperation agreement with the Confederation of African Football (CAF) that the Bahraini signed last week on behalf of the AFC. The agreement or at least its timing was widely seen as an attempt to secure Africa's votes for Salman.

"I have always promoted cross-regional understanding, however the timing of this MOU between the AFC and the CAF looks like a blatant attempt to engineer a bloc vote," Prince Ali said.

In a separate statement, Claudia Roth, deputy chair of the Bundestag, the German parliament and head of the Green Party, said Salman's election would be "a mockery of the victims of the human rights abuses in Bahrain... An attempt at democratization, an opening with the recognition of equal rights for a large percentage of the population was suppressed with brutal violence in 2011. To that end tanks were dispatched to Bahrain from Saudi Arabia. Many were killed and wounded. Among others, athletes were arrested; there are clear indications of torture that also include soccer players," Roth said.

James M. Dorsey

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Saudi Political Intolerance

Beheadings in public, including a prominent Saudi Shiite cleric, prompted reactions not only inside Saudi Arabia but also in Iran, Iraq and most recently in Bahrain. Saudi Arabia's death wedding in January 2016 signals the Kingdom's intolerance towards any dissent against the royal family. The Saudi law of January 2014 doesn't "merely criminalise dissent", but defines it as "terrorism", according to [The Independent](#).

While claiming to fight against terrorism, Saudi Arabia is looking forward to settle political scores inside and outside its borders. The executions are not a precedent for Saudi Arabia. Only in 2015, the average of executions reached 12 persons every month. Western Allies, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States know that no consequences to account for. Historically, western powers have nearly always turned a blind eye to atrocities attributed to their Gulf allies because of economic calculations such as import of oil and export of arms. Thus, historical allies are unwilling or unable to make a real change.

Recent Escalations

Expanding across the region, violent clashes broke out between police forces and demonstrators on 23 January in the Bahraini [Island Sitra](#), close to the capital Manama. These clashes came in the context of the on going three-week-protests to condemn Saudi Arabia's execution of Nimr Al-Nimr.

Saudi Arabia's ambassador in Iraq Thamer Al-Sabhan said to [Al-Sumaria](#) TV that: "Iraqi reactions to the execution of Al-Nimr has raised eyebrows in the Kingdom, especially that they did

not condemn the attack on our embassy in Iran." Al-Sabhan revealed that the Saudi embassy in Baghdad had "received serious threats" following the executions.

Hundreds of Al-Nimr supporters marched in Al-Qatif in Saudi Arabia's eastern province in protest at the execution. The protestors were [chanting](#): "Down with the Al-Saud!", the name of the Saudi royal family.

Contrary to Saudi Arabia, [Iran considers](#) Al-Nimr as "the champion of a marginalised Shiite minority" in the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Nimr was jailed and then sentenced to death because of his political role during the times of the [Arab uprising between 2011 and 2013](#), when he campaigned against oppression and also in support of Bahraini people. Opposition is simply abhorred in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Style of Execution

While the world was preparing to start the New Year, Saudi Arabia was preparing for a mass execution of dozens of people on a single day. On 02 January 2016, Saudi Arabia's Interior Ministry announced to have executed 47 prisoners on terrorism charges, including the

Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr Al-Nimr. According to [Reuters](#), beside Al-Nimr, other three of those executed were Shiite.

Saudi Ministry of Justice spokesman Mansour Al-Qufari said: “Four of the executions were implemented by firing squad, while the rest were beheaded by a sword.” Al-Qufari stressed: “Security forces will not hesitate at all to punish terrorists and instigators”.

The 47 Saudis were accused of sedition, disobedience and embracing extremist (takfiri) approach, which contains doctrines of those who went out of the main stream of Islam (Khawarej or rebels). [They were accused of violating](#) the holy book, the sanctity of Sunni consensus of the nation’s predecessors (Salaf) and participating and perpetrating murderous and terrorist acts against Saudi military and security forces.

Saudi Arabia’s Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz Al-Sheikh defended the executions as in line with Islamic Sharia and described them as “just and merciful to the prisoners.”

[James Lynch, Deputy Director of the Middle East and North Africa](#) Program at Amnesty International said that Saudi Arabia’s executions in 2015 “coupled with the secretive and arbitrary nature of court decisions and executions in the kingdom, leave us no option but to take these latest warning signs very seriously.

“Among those who are at imminent risk of execution are these six Shi’a Muslim activists who were clearly convicted in unfair trials. It is clear that the Saudi Arabian authorities are using the guise of counter-terrorism to settle political scores,” Lynch added.

Long History of Execution

Saudi Arabia enjoys a long history of executing people. According to International Amnesty report 2014/15, “authorities in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were unrelenting in their efforts to stifle dissent and stamp out any sign of opposition to those holding power, confident that their main allies among the western democracies were unlikely to demur.”

Over the past years, Saudi authorities made an “extensive use of the death penalty” to execute dozens by public beheading. [At least 151](#) people were put to death in 2015, the highest recorded figure since 1995. This is an average of 12 persons every month.

Historical Allies

While some voices were shy, others were explicit in condemning the Saudi executions. Indeed, the western response to Saudi Arabia’s public beheadings is delicate in comparison with that to ISIS’s public beheadings.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon was dismayed by Saudi Arabia’s actions, whereas the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, [said executing Al-Nimr risks](#) “exacerbating sectarian tensions” between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

[Germany’s Foreign Ministry](#) described death penalty as an inhumane punishment. “The cleric’s execution strengthens our existing concerns about the growing tensions and the deepening rifts in the region,” [Germany responded](#). The Saudis and so do western allies

know that the brutality of the executions is going to be forgiven similar to the Bahraini scenario during the times of the Arab uprisings. Backed by other Gulf States, Bahrain brutally cracked down protests by using live ammunition in Shiite-majority villages. At that time, shy western reactions condemning violence marked the nature of alliance between the West and the Gulf States. [Joe Stork](#), the deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch described the crackdown as follows: “Bahrain has brutally punished those protesting peacefully for greater freedom and accountability while the US and other allies looked the other way.”

In the light of international indifference, there is little hope that Saudi Arabia will tolerate different voices, be it political, religious or social.

Hakim Khatib

Editor-in-chief of the Mashreq Politics and Culture Journal

Cultural Bridge Has Not Been Destroyed in Afghanistan

By following Persian news outlets concerning Taliban's recent suicide attack against the secular [TOLO TV station](#) in Kabul on 20 January 2016, in which at least seven people died and 20 were wounded, we realize that the cultural bridge hasn't been destroyed yet. While observing the shows, debates and intellectual discussions about this unique TV station in Kabul, I found out that concerns for freedom of expression, liberty and peace were widely shared by Afghani and Persian journalists alike.

Why Is TOLO So Important?

[TOLO](#) currently provides free-to-air services to viewers in 14 Afghani cities and the surrounding countries. TOLO is a young TV and news outlet in Afghanistan. They speak up-to-date Persian and critically cover a wide range of topics, which concern people in Afghanistan. However, the wider media in Afghanistan broadly neglects them. While other media outlets are unwilling or unable to criticize issues related to tribalism, ethnicity and matters on Taliban affairs, TOLO attempts to shed light on these issues.

TOLO TV is followed and watched in Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and the diaspora of many Persians from these countries.

While observing several of their TV shows such as “Afghan Star” along with other political, social and historical debates, I found out that more than 41% of Afghani population follow their shows.

TOLO TV and Iranian Journalist Association

On 25 January 2016, the “Iranian Journalist Association”, in and outside Iran, wrote a letter on behalf of their colleagues and their “cultural compatriots” addressing issues on freedom of speech, liberty and peace.

As might be known for many, publications of Iranian writers in Persian, which aren't allowed to see light in Iran, are currently published without censorship in Afghanistan, which is not much difficult to understand.

Tajiks and Hazaras, Persian-speaking ethnic minorities living in Iran for decades, have great links to their friends, relatives and fellow students in Afghanistan. At least, cultural ties in many fields between Iranians on one hand and Persians from Afghanistan on the other remain strong.

Afghan Journalist Association

Afghani Journalist Association condemned the assailant attack against the TV station, describing it as a crime

“against all values of humanity”. In the same vein, the UN even called the day of the assault as “the black Wednesday against all media in Afghanistan’s history”.

One of the heads at the Afghani Journalist Association, Mohammad Fahim Dashty, was a close friend with Ahmad Shah Massoud, who survived a suicide attack against Massoud on 9 September 2001, said: “From now on, we call the Taliban terrorists. They’re not our brothers and compatriots like Karzai and Ghani intended to convince us since the fall of the Taliban.”

Taliban Against the New Generations

In many ways TOLO TV represents the mouthpiece of the new generation of Afghanis. Their staff is built of artists, poets, social scientists, and filmmakers etc., who are interested in providing a counter-narrative against tribal habits, honour killings, Taliban warlords and patriarchy.

The only reason the Taliban attacked them is because of their broad coverage of the on-going events in the Afghani city Kunduz in autumn 2015. TOLO linked Taliban members to looting incidents in Kunduz. Consequently, the Taliban felt “debased” by TOLO news and branded them as an outlaw “item”.

On 23 January 2016 three days after the attack, the Taliban announced the beginning of new negotiations with the Ghani government. One of their wishes

is to be recognized as an official entity in Afghani government along with their Qatar-based office.

Despite Taliban’s threats to carry out more attacks against those who oppose them, it must be noted that Taliban is very heterogeneous with many different viewpoints within the group.

Homayun Alam

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Ancient Syria: Are Syrians Really Arabs?

There are several stories about the origin of the name of Syria. But the strongest historical explanation links the name to the Assyrian Kingdom, which stretched from Mesopotamia in the east to the Mediterranean in the west. While it wasn't possible for Greek language to start words with vowels, they called the region Syria instead of Assyria. The name of this region remained Assyria in the English language.

The word *Syria* or *Assyria* referred to a region larger than the current political borders of Syria. In the past, it included the whole eastern coast of the Mediterranean reaching Mosul to the east, Al-Jouf desert (located in the north of current Saudi Arabia) and Sinai to the south and Cilicia to the north (located at the southern coast of Turkey).

It is believed that the name of Syria emerged when the Greek confused the Assyrian Empire, which ruled that region, with the Aramaeans (Aramaic people) who lived in that region. While Syriac is also derived from the word Syria, Europeans still confuse the words Syrian/Syriac when referring to the Christians of the east (Mashreq). While Syriac, also known as Syriac-Aramaic, refers to an Aramaic ethnicity and dialect in ancient Syria before the Christ, this minority still lives in Syria today. Although Islam as a religion wasn't limited to only Arabs and many of the indigenous people of the region converted into the new religion, the confusion persists. For instance, the Muslim and Christian inhabitants of Maaloula town and its surrounding villages such as Jubaadeen and Bakha'a in the countryside of Damascus still use the Aramaic

language, while Syriac language is still used in the eastern and north-eastern parts of current Syria.

The history of Syrian civilisation dates back to about 8000 BC. Almost every region in Syria contains historical monuments dating back to thousands of years BC. The most prominent of these ruins are the cuneiform tablets of Ugarit Ras Shamra, which date back to 1500 BC, when humans invented the first alphabet.

Factors such as its strategic location, fertile soil, abundant water and mild climate made it become a centre of numerous and diverse ancient civilizations. Besides, its important geographical location made it a centre for interaction among human cultures and civilizations; therefore, it represents the birthplace of many early human populations, religions and arts. Its people discovered agriculture, animal husbandry and the first industries.

Aramaic was not the first civilization to arise in Syria, but it has the deepest civilisational impact on Syrian history. Although it was unable to establish a single state, but rather a group of city-kingsdoms across Syria, Aramaic language spread to cover the geographical

area of Syria region reaching Mesopotamia and Persia. Aramaic played the most prominent role in fusing Syrian cultures into one civilization, which is diverse in nature.

The Syrian people as presently constituted are nationally, ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse. They are the product of all civilizations swung by the region – starting from the Semitic migrations before Islam to the Pharaohs, Persians, Romans, Muslim Arabs, the Kurds, the Turks, the Mongols, the Tatars, the French to the modern migrations of the Circassians, Armenians and the Balkanite.

This diversity also represents multilingualism, which is still used by the society – Arabic, Kurdish, Circassian, Armenian, Syriac and Aramaic. The spread of the Arabic language cannot be considered, although local dialects still contain a lot of words and rules of Syriac language, a measurement to assume that Syrians hailed from “Arabs”. The prominence of Arab culture compared to other cultures of the region for many centuries, and the gradual embrace of Islam among indigenous people are the most important reasons for the spread of Arabic language in Syria.

The Syrian cultural inventory, compared to the number of population and geographical area, is absolutely the most varied society in terms of the immaterial heritage, customs and traditions, arts and local spoken dialects, which still use non-Arabic vocabulary (Syrians were able to integrate them into the Arabic dictionary later). However, Islam is

the most widespread religion in Syrian society.

Based on the diverse nature of Syrian people, Islam there represents the most diverse schools of thought, which constitute the Islamic spectrum in the orient. And so is it for Christian communities. Syrian Christians do not follow one church, but rather several. If we go further with our analysis, we find that many doctrines have branched out to different sub-sects.

This mixture in terms of ideas and rich heritage, witnessed several points of bloody conflicts between its constituents throughout hundreds of centuries, but peaceful coexistence remains the most basic human feature of Syrian Society.

Translated by Hakim Khatib

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