



## **Combating Islamism: A New Fault-line in the Arab World**

*Dr. Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui\**

Since the removal of Egypt's first democratically elected President Mohammad Morsi nine months ago, the military-backed government has intensified its brutal crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood (MBH). The government's so called "war against terrorism" is meant to stifle the voice of the country's strongest Islamist-political organisation in the post-Mubarak era that has created a new fault line in the Arab world.

As the military tightens the noose around the Islamists, thousands of members of the now banned MBH have been put behind the bars or facing trial for a series of charges, including espionage and plotting terror attacks against the state. Over 1200 supporters and members of the Egypt's largest Islamist group were sentenced to death last month.

The unabated state offensive against the Islamists has set a bad precedent for other Arab countries where the Islamists are being subjected to state atrocities while several other Islamist groups have been blacklisted or designated as terrorist organisations.

Such hate campaign against the Islamist has created a new fault line in the region dividing it between pro- and anti-Islamists blocks. This also reflects how new alliances are taking shape in the region against the ascendant Islamist forces. For instance, Saudi Arabia and the UAE blacklisted MBH along with other Islamist groups in their respective countries.

A Saudi royal decree pronounced the MBH a terrorist organisation, Hezbollah of Saudi Arabia, "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria", "Houthi movement of Yemen" and "Nusrah movement" in Levant region have also been included. The United Arab Emirates endorsed the Saudi move and put similar bans on these organisations. This move on the part of Saudi Arabia and UAE has not only opened a new vista of confrontation between the Islamist forces and anti-Islamist regimes but, simultaneously, created a new strategic rift in the region.

The Saudi decree bans any kind of association or union with the activities and ideologies of banned groups. Under the new law, possession of pro-Islamist literatures tantamounts to criminal offense and merely showing solidarity towards the Islamic activists may result in jail term. Further, any association with banned groups would be construed as violation of one's allegiance to the nation.

The issue is not merely about banning these groups but what is more appalling is the quantum and degree of punishment prescribed for these actions. Instead of drawing a distinction among many faces of Islamic activism, Saudi Arabia has chosen a reductionist approach and lumped all the Islamist groups together.

While resorting to a reductionist approach at home, Saudi Arabia has acted very selectively regionally as it has spared the Hezbollah of Lebanon and Syria which serves as a major foreign policy plank of Iran. By doing so, Saudi Arabia apparently seems to have tried to create a new alliance and roadmap in the region where both Tehran and Riyadh would venture to expand their respective influences.

The Saudi royal decree has not only banned the Islamists but also castigated Qatar for its support to the MBH and other similar forces in the region. Qatar has been accused of supporting Houthi movement in Yemen which does not appear to suit Saudi strategic interest. In a surprise diplomatic move, Saudi Arabia along with the UAE and Bahrain recalled their ambassadors from Qatar in the beginning of March accusing it of breaching the principles of a 'unified destiny'.

Likewise, Saudi Arabia is considering a series of measure against Qatar such as air space ban, a freeze of Qatari airways license in Saudi Arabia, barring Qataris from entering its territories-, cutting all commercial trades including a freeze on all trade agreements signed since 2006.

Qatar has been condemned for breaching the trilateral agreement signed in November 2013 with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The agreement stipulates all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members not to interfere in each others' internal affairs, not to support destabilizing forces and ostracize the resurgent media. The destabilizing forces and resurgent media are considered to be the MBH and Al-Jazeera respectively which are receiving support from Qatar. The major problem of Saudi government appears to be perceptible interference by Qatar in Saudi Arabia. Qatar has also been demonized for its support to Al-Jazeera satellite channel because it continues to air pro-MBH views in the region.

Doha's unwavering support to the MBH surfaced as the trigger resulting in dip in bilateral ties to such a low. It can be recalled how Qatar had adopted an exceptional instance towards Egyptian army against the wishes of Saudi Arabia-led block when it had ousted MBH government in July coup in Egypt. Qatar had offered a blanket support to Morsi and pledged billions of dollars. To counter the Qatari aid, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE pledged US \$ 15 billion to Egypt and forced the army-backed Egyptian government to return US \$ 2 billion to Qatar. The tension between Saudi-led block and Qatar was further exacerbated by the presence of renowned Islamic cleric Yusuf Qarzavi on Qatari soil who seldom misses an opportunity to support the MBH. The absence of Qatar and Turkey in recently held high profile Islamic Summit in Egypt can also be seen in the light of deepening rift between pro-Islamist and anti-Islamist regime in the region.

There has been a history of rivalry among the key players in the region but this time rise of Islamism in the post-Arab Spring phase has become a trigger for fresh rivalry. Given the changing and expanding nature of the rivalry, it seems that MBH will surface prominently and act significantly in the foreign policy formulation of regional countries.

It is difficult to predict the immediate outcome of the ongoing diplomatic row between Qatar and Saudi-led block but this might lead to a crosscutting alliance in the region involving non-Arab players too such as Turkey and Iran. The exclusion of the Islamists is likely to result in a severe backlash impacting all sides. Moreover, this novel division of the region is likely to harm the present political progression of democracy and will leave the democratic aspirations of the people unaccomplished.

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*\* Dr. Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui, Research fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi*

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