Interview - H.A. Hellyer

Dr H.A. Hellyer is nonresident Fellow with the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Centre for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, and Associate Fellow in International Security Studies at the Royal United Services Institute in London. An analyst & political scientist on Arab affairs, Muslim-Western communities, Egyptian politics, European security policies, and political theory, Dr Hellyer was appointed as Deputy Convenor of the UK Government's Taskforce for the 2005 London bombings. He served as the Foreign & Commonwealth Office's (FCO) first Economic & Social Research Council Fellow attached to the 'Islam' & 'Counter-Terrorism' teams with FCO security clearance, as a non-civil servant, independent academic with security clearance. He was previously Senior Research Fellow at the University of Warwick (UK) and Research Associate at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Some of his publications include "Muslims of Europe: the 'Other' Europeans" for Edinburgh University Press, "Engagement with the Muslim Community and Counter-Terrorism: British Lessons for the West" for Brookings Institution Press, and "The Chance for Change in the Arab World: Egypt's Uprising" for Chatham House's Journal of International Affairs. He is currently writing a book on the Egyptian revolutionary uprising of 2011 and its aftermath.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I tend to focus on three different fields – and at the moment, I'm truly fascinated by the current developments in all three. The first relates to the politics of the Arab world, including Islamist politics; the second pertains to Muslim Western populations and their challenges to, as well as challenges from, the countries in which they reside; and the third around the interchange between Islam and modernity.

Many of our assumptions have been challenged in the past 5 years, since the revolutionary uprisings took place in the Arab world. I can still remember a world where academics wrote about the 'resistance axis' in the region, and the likes of Hizbollah and Bashar al-Assad's Damascus were a part of that, described as 'counter-weights' to the machinations of right-wing neoconservatism and imperialism. The frames are wholly different now, on both of those points, due to the Syrian revolutionary uprising – and that leads to an important question for the Arab anti-imperialist left, as well as the old left in the West. Is this what left-wing politics is about, where we sacrifice the Syrian revolutionary uprising on the altar of some kind of imagined 'resistance' – while another type of foreign interference, be it from Tehran, Moscow, or Hizbollah, is critical in propping up a regime that has overseen the killing of tens of thousands of Syrian civilians? That's a question that ought to be asked. In so doing, I hope the answer is *not* for the left to decide that they ought to become akin to the right-wing, whether in the West or the Arab world, and lose their time-honoured commitments to social justice as leftists. But rather, that the left ought to become more nuanced, and really take seriously the autonomy of people as a motivating factor, even when it is politically inconvenient.

I've also been interested to see the discussion unfold around Islamism. Pre 2011, there were certain basic elements that more progressive, liberal and left-wing thinkers had when it came to Islamism in general. The first was that Islamism was, generally, to be considered as 'political Islam' – i.e., that it was normative, mainstream, historically authentic Islam, but simply put into politics. The second was that the Muslim Brotherhood, as the mainstream of Islamism, was, across the board, rather moderate, pluralistic, and democratic.

Now, to be clear – those positions did not evolve out of a vacuum, but were come to over time, and they evolved, at

least partially, as a response to the reductionism that came out of more conservative, rightwing circles in the West when it came to Islamism. As far as the latter was concerned, Islamism was pretty much all the same – and it was all not too far away from the likes of al-Qa'eda. When it came to Islam as Islam – i.e., as religion, rather than identity or ideology – there wasn't really much distinctive discussion on the right about the normative nature of Islamism vis-à-vis Islam – but there was often a great deal of prejudice about Islam and Muslims quite vocally expressed. Sometimes it would be exhibited in the 'bigotry of low expectations' – which is still bigotry.

When you get to 2011, especially up until the summer of 2013, you see a bit of a split begin to emerge, primarily due to Egypt. The experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian politics, and the exhibition of sectarian tendencies, incitement, and reactionary views in a number of arenas, shook up the discussion a bit. One set of responses meant you saw quite a few formerly progressive, liberal or left-leaning academics and intellectuals become very hawkish – and essentially embrace the generally right-wing narrative of how the Brotherhood is basically al-Qa'eda lite. I'm not particularly interested in that as a scholastic debate – it strikes me as populism that isn't rooted in empirical data, but is a useful political argument in certain places that want to drive the region to more conflict.

The split that I saw that I did find interesting, and I think it continues today, is how many in Western academia and the analytical arena, began to wonder in 2011: are we asking the right, hard questions, of the Muslim Brotherhood? Are they really all, as we thought for so long, pluralistic and democratic, in a way that we might think they're the Arab-Muslim versions of the German Christian Democrats? Or do we need to unpack this more?

When the revolutionary uprisings happened, there were, I think, some in the West who mistakenly applied the frame of anti-Islamophobia to what was happening – particularly in Egypt. It was as though the equivalent of the 'Islamophobes' were those who politically opposed the Muslim Brotherhood, regardless of whether or not they respected fundamental rights, or wanted the MB exterminated; whether or not they were themselves religious, and so on. That frame goes on to include the Brotherhood as 'the Muslims' – and all of this is remarkably problematic for a variety of reasons.

That discussion has taken a backseat since 2013 – unsurprisingly so, because after the military overthrew Morsi in July 2013, the security services forcefully dispersed the pro-Morsi sit-ins in August, leading to around 1000 dead civilians over the course of a day, and the Brotherhood was banned in December, these kinds of discussions became far less pressing and pertinent. Calling power to account, I think, is a primordial, necessary and demanded duty of any public voice, whether that of an analyst, an academic or a commentator – and in Egypt right now, it's not the MB who are in power.

Nevertheless, it was very interesting to watch that argument unfold from 2011-2013, because you saw a number of academics and analysts, who spend and spent a lot of time *in* the region, begin to nuance their positions a lot. Increasingly, you saw analysts and scholars taking far more specific positions – looking at the Brotherhood not as a monolith, but different from country to country, and with a variety of trends within each of them. You also saw, I think, far more of an appreciation of those from within the region be taken a lot more seriously in those discussions. People like Ibrahim al-Houdeiby, Heba Morayef or Hossam Bahgat, for example – and I found scholarly friends, colleagues and teachers like Nathan Brown, Michael Hanna, or Michele Dunne, to name a few, to be particularly receptive to those rooted voices in the region, who likewise respected fundamental rights for all.

I think that's positive – not so that we can, as some might want, portray the Brotherhood as essentially the evil source of all terrorism worldwide. But the approach ought not to be that we are so lacking in nuance that we imagine that all Brotherhood movements or ideologies are easy to generalise as essentially good or bad all the time.

The second set of debates I look at relates to the encounter between Islam and the West, through the Muslim Western presence in the Occident. For those of who take seriously the notions of fundamental rights and pluralism within the West, Islamophobia or anti-Muslim sentiment matters tremendously. It ought to, and I personally engaged in that arena from 911 onwards, mostly in the UK and the European continent, as well as in the US. I do think the Muslim presence in the Occident is one of the most challenges questions of our time, as Westerners. Questions around religion in the public sphere – questions around how much we really do, or we really do not, as Europeans,

North Americans or Australians, value genuine pluralism. I find it of great concern that for the past ten years, many arguments that you would have found only on the far-right of politics have become normalised as part of mainstream political discourse – and that is something we may be simply sleep-walking into, bereft as we are, all too often, of real political leadership. Do we really view Muslims as part and parcel of our societies – or are they still, somehow, 'guests'? When I wrote my book on Muslim Europeans, I was insistent on describing them as Muslims "of" Europe – i.e., they belonged to Europe, and Europe belonged to them. If we start at that point, then I think we'll come through things alright – if we insist on viewing them as somehow not quite equal in terms of belonging, then we're really just opening up the doors of bigotry and prejudice.

My final field pertains to Islam and modernity – and I see signs of fascinating discussions, particularly when people take it seriously. I don't always agree with them (and they don't always agree with each other!), but I do find some good work being done by the likes of academics like Sherman Jackson, Andrew March and Mohammed Fadel, Intisar Rabb – and I am looking forward to more. There are an increasing number of people within the academy who have actually studied religion in traditional Muslim settings, and they're making their mark within academia. There are of course people like Umar Faruq Abdallah Wymann-Landgraf

in Chicago, M. Afifi al-Akiti in Oxford, and others – these are Muslim religious authorities in their own right, who are also deeply respected within Western academia, and the interchange between the two, I think, will be very fruitful. I would have liked to have seen more of an exchange, such as between Western scholars and the likes of someone like the Malaysian Islamic scholar, S.M. Naquib al-Attas – maybe that will take place at some point.

Now, one thing that you also see, unfortunately, is the utter confusion about how Islamic religious authority functions for Sunni Muslims – and as a result, you have this rather bizarre discussion around 'How Islamic is ISIS'. On the one hand, you have those arguing Islam is irrelevant to the question – and on the other, you have those insisting ISIS is not just Islamic, but very Islamic. Both sets of responses, to my mind, have not properly understood just how Islamic religious authority has traditionally formed itself – and as such, they miss the mark altogether, often with disastrous results.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I'm hoping that I have many more changes in understanding to come my way – I'm not that old!

But perhaps there are three things that I can point to. The first is my own background, which is rather varied – I grew up in three countries, and have a rather multi-ethnic heritage and roots in three continents. That gives me a sense of 'rootedness' in a few places – but also a sense of cosmopolitanism that tends to, I hope, assist me in my work.

That emphasis on rootedness that I try to push myself on in my own work also pushes me to seek out changes in perspective, I think, depending on the ground. When I write, I don't try to write for a single audience in London or Washington DC, despite my institution bases. I'm writing first and foremost according to certain principles, I trust. But when I think about the relevancy of what I am writing for my audience, I am always keen that it first, and foremost, be familiar to people *in* the place I'm writing about. If what I write on Egypt strikes someone in Egypt that I consider to be well-informed as off-base, that would concern me. Sometimes, I may very well be writing primarily for the Beltway or Whitehall – but more often than not, I want to be faithful to those I am writing about. And hopefully, those far away will benefit more from the writing as a result. All of that contributes to shifts, and continual shifts, in how I think. I hope that is for the better.

The second thing that has prompted shifts in my thinking was experiential – and that was living through the revolutionary uprising in 2011 in Egypt, as well as observing the uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world. Especially Libya and Syria. I generally abhor jingoistic displays of nationalism at the best of times – but the Libyan flag went up in my home very early on during 2011, having been purchased in Tahrir Square. It remains up – despite all that has happened. Syria is a country immensely dear to me – many of my classmates were Syrians, and I had been to the country before 2011.

Interview - H.A. Hellyer

Written by E-International Relations

That experience in 2011 – partly in Tahrir Square itself, but also further afield, struck a deep chord with me. I'm writing about this more in my forthcoming book on the aftermath of the Egyptian revolutionary uprising – but I find it difficult to explain how it was, for me, personally, incredibly soul enriching.

At the same, it was soul wrenching – and that was, perhaps, the third shift. There have been tales of great bravery and courage in the past five years – but there have also been tremendous sagas of destruction. Some more evil than others, but still. We've seen the devastation of Syria in the last few years – a tragedy that I believe will write as the tragedy of my generation. I can't overestimate how utterly tragic that is – as was the despicable stance of various players in the international community, as it allowed all to unfold in a remarkably predictably fashion.

But there are also other types of tragedies – and the hateful discourse that I saw unfold in Egypt post 2012 and 2013 was only exceeded by the hateful actions that resulted in death and ruin in the summer of 2013.

The political violence of the likes of al-Qa'eda and Da'ash is grotesque and abhorrent, of course – but over time, we've grown to expect that individuals that adhere to such ideologies won't play by the same rules as those who adhere to more honourable codes of conduct – and that's not to excuse the death and destruction that has been wrought by powerful state armies and institutions across the region, as well as the world. A family killed by a missile from a state army is as dead as a family killed by a group like al-Qa'eda.

But the discourse that I witnessed, firsthand, in Egypt by both 'sides' of the divide – whether in terms of the pro-Morsi Islamist camp, or the anti-Islamist pro-army camp, was educational on one level, while utterly repugnant on another. The dehumanisation and demonization, using different vocabularies to be sure, of the 'Other' by these different camps, only made the shedding of blood, the destruction of places of worship, and the abjuring of fundamental rights, that much easier. But that dehumanisation didn't come from strange, alien beings – it came from very normal people. People I knew, and who I couldn't have imagined would be so callous to their political opponents.

Indeed, it went beyond even depicting their opponents in that fashion – they had to dehumanise even those who were *not* their opponents, but rejected that kind of discourse. In the past three years in particular, it's been very easy to receive accusations of being pro-Islamist, pro-army, pro-Morsi, pro-Sisi, pro-secular – and all in the same week. Sometimes, on the same day – even from people who have read your work, and really should know better.

But that's what happens in societies that are so deeply polarised – and I'd never quite experienced that first hand before. The relationship between discourse and actions is real – and being in Cairo on the 14th of August 2013, when the pro-Morsi sit-in was violently dispersed by the Egyptian security forces, leading to around 1000 civilians dead, will forever be a reminder to me.

Has the Egyptian revolution of 2011 failed now that Sisi is in power? Or has it gone subterranean?

I would say that that the Egyptian revolutionary uprising began because certain factors spurred people – and those factors remain. Now, the uprising ended on the 11th of February when Mubarak was pushed from power – but for many revolutionary activists and supporters, that didn't mean the end of the revolution. It did mean the end of the revolution for most Egyptians – but not for those activists. They continued to believe in the revolution as an animating force that continued. Now, I don't hear 'revolution' used that much as a word anymore – even with Egyptian revolutionary activists – but I think the resonance of that animating force remains. It's disparate, to be sure – but something very special was encapsulated in the January 25th uprising, and I think there are quite a few Egyptians who refuse to negate that. I'd say it is a minority that back that revolutionary spirit, against what they identify as counter-revolutionary forces within the state, or pseudo-revolutionary & opportunistic pro-Morsi groupings – but nevertheless, I still see #Jan25 supporters active within civil society. Has the revolution failed? I guess it if had, we wouldn't still be asking about it. That's a historical question – and in historical terms, it is clear that 2011 was a landmark on the one hand, and that it only happened 4 years ago on the other. That's not enough time to judge, in my opinion – such is the nature of history.

The Islamic State is often categorized, including by themselves, as rejecting (Western) modernity, how

modern is the group?

I think Da'esh is incredibly modern – but it gains political currency by claiming it rejects modernity altogether. The fact is, it approaches political life in a very modern manner; uses technology in a very modern manner; and while it tries to arrogate pre-modern symbolism in order to give itself credibility and a claim of 'rootedness', it abjures fundamental values of pre-modern Muslim societies altogether. Now, it doesn't come out of nowhere – there are factors that explain the rise of Da'esh, and part of that is a religious ideology.

But there are many other parts of it that are very much due to the current political malaise that Da'esh takes advantage of – whether that relates to the breakdown of the state in Iraq and Syria; incredible injustice and justifiable grievances; and the, as yet, inability of the modern Arab world to provide rooted alternatives to security states, radical Islamism, and other reactionary ideologies.

Nevertheless, I am cautious about using political and social factors alone in explaining what Da'esh is – it's too much of a cop-out, in my opinion. The same can be said for using only ideology to explain the group – these are cop-outs for different reasons, and different establishments. If we reduce the entire problem to one of ideology, then it means we don't need to address those other factors, which are often the responsibility of political establishments that don't want to take responsibility for such woes. If we reduce the entire problem to simply these sociological factors, we fail to appreciate that there is such a thing as ideational power – and that people do, indeed, become moved, motivated, and mobilised due to an adherence to an idea. Indeed – isn't that the case that we see throughout history – that ideas do actually matter, and that when they are good ideas, we see nobility and heroism? And that, on the contrary, when we see bad ideas take root, we also see the basest elements of human nature take over.

How do you relate to the Charlie Hebdo protests of beginning of this year? What does it say about Europe's relation with Muslim Europeans?

I'm not sure if the protests were about Europe's relationship with Muslim Europeans, as much as they were about Europe's quandary about coming to grips with itself in the 21st century. For centuries, Europe has accepted that it believes in a notion of the 'sacred' in the public sphere – but today, we, as Europeans, try to deny that we believe in such a notion. The truth of the matter is that, of course we do believe in a notion of the 'sacred' – but it is no longer spiritual or religious in value, in our highly secularised societies, despite the existence of religion. The protests brought two things to the fore, for me, beyond the obvious despicable criminality of those engaged in acts of vigilante violence and murder.

The first was that as Europeans, we've tended to buy into this myth that to be European is to believe in absolute freedom of speech. I say it is a myth, because we patently don't believe that at all. We do think certain types of speech are protected speech – and we do think that certain types of speech are *not* protected speech. In a number of European countries, we do not allow, for example, incitement to racial hatred – even when it does not lead to violence. In some countries, we privilege – correctly, in my opinion – the event of the Holocaust, which is a critical event in understanding our identities as Europeans in the 20th century. And the list continues – it was rather telling that only weeks after the Charlie Hebdo murders, an African-French figure was prosecuted in France for 'glorifying terrorism'. My antipathy vis-à-vis the fellow in question, who obviously had little or no taste, let alone decorum, his case shows clearly we don't believe in absolute freedom of speech. We've got to get our frames right, as we try to understand our contemporary context, rather than simply go to short-cuts by creating these myths.

The second is that as Europeans, we are, in the 21st century, faced with a real challenge. The Occidental reality of a Muslim presence of substantial proportions poses a number of critical questions to Western countries. Far too often, it seems that we are willing to tolerate Muslims in our midst – but they ought to, preferably, be invisible. We don't want them to be too obvious, or too different, or too… well, present. Not only is that scenario rather unlikely, but beyond simply being quite evidently Muslim, which means they are unwilling to subsume, or negate, their own religious commitments into the invisible background, it is often the case that Muslim Westerners pose questions of their own to the dominant hegemon. That relates to the autonomy of Muslims in other lands, particularly in Muslim majority countries where Western foreign policy has repercussions – particularly when it comes to the question of

Palestine – but it also has ramifications for Western notions of what it means to be a Westerner, in the West itself. If Muslim Westerners were willing to simply be 'temporary migrants' or 'guest workers', who can serve, contribute, but ultimately leave, then the tension would be far less. But Muslim Westerners are, indeed, Westerners – many of whom have personal histories in the West going back generations, and others who are re-engaging with their own identities and rooting themselves, culturally and historically, with the West – even while they maintain (and demand on maintaining) their religious commitments and orientations.

There is a lot that we will see, I think, from that interaction. Will Muslim Westerners prove to be, as some of their more inspiring intellectuals and scholars desire, 'creative minorities' within the West? (That phrase is from Arnold Toynbee, reflecting the power of the demographic minority to contribute to the overall positive change and enrichment of the majority). Or will Muslim Westerners simply be a 'minority', one which is demographically less significant, and in terms of contribution, similarly uninteresting? I'm not sure – but it will be important to see this unfold.

On the side of the majority, will Westerners in general truly accept that in the 21st century, Muslim Americans and their faith is as much a part of the American fabric as other faiths and faith communities? Will Europeans accept the same on their continent? Or are we looking forward to more destructive and combative politics, where the 'Muslim' is the perpetual 'Other', against which we define our own senses of identity? If so, we've many problems coming our way – because I doubt Muslim Westerners are going to either leave their religious orientations by the wayside en masse, or pick up and leave altogether. Initiatives like 'Our Shared Future' and 'Our Shared Europe', promulgated by the British Council some years ago, but regrettably no longer in operation, gave a great deal to understanding the genuine historical interchanges between Muslims and non-Muslims in the West – and we need more of them.

Are the large numbers of foreign fighters inside Syria and Iraq a testament to how Western countries are failing in the way they approach radicalization among Muslim youth? What do you suggest governments should do?

This is a deeply political question, one that I alluded to before. I'm cautious about making everything about the Muslim community of the West a 'radicalisation issue' – we've already gone far too much in the wrong direction in that regard. I am also cautious about essentialising the radicalisation process – there is no single process, and it only serves political ends to continue to insist there is. That goes for those who argue it is all about politics, and it goes for those who demand its all about ideology.

I think the single largest thing all Western governments can do is to recognise that this is a multifaceted problem, and nothing should be off the table. Not ideology – as long as we are clear that we are talking about an ideology that cannot be reduced to simply being 'Islam' – nor political grievances or social morays. Everything needs to be discussed, investigated, and appropriately dealt with – regardless of how uncomfortable that makes people on the left who don't want to talk about the dangers of bad ideology, and certainly regardless of how uncomfortable governments feel about talking about the ramifications and unintended or intended consequences of awful foreign policy decisions.

Do you think Islamic religious thinking, and particularly sunni strands of it, need reform? Some have argued even for a liberation theology-esque movement in Islam.

I've written on this elsewhere, but in short, I'm extremely wary of thinking that 'reformation' or 'liberation theology' frames of thinking should be applied to Islam. For one thing, a reformation exercise has already taken place, in large parts, within Sunni Islam – and the result was the ultra-conservative Salafi movement of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, often pejoratively described as 'Wahabi'. So, I'm not sure if that is what we ought to be looking for. As for liberation theology – a number of Muslim scholars, such as Abdal Hakim Murad of Cambridge University, have argued Islam already has 'liberation theology' built into it, along with a multiplicity of expressions around political engagement and social justice.

The question is – can Muslims rejuvenate Islam, and engage in a process of revival from within the Islamic tradition,

as has historically been the case with the likes of al-Ghazali and others? Keeping in mind that the 21st century is probably the most dismal time in historical terms when it comes to the state of Muslim educational institutions and their quality assurance. There are signs of resilience – but a massive amount of work needs to be done.

One thing is very unlikely, though – and that is that any process of sustainable renewal will take place at the hands of governments and officialdom. Muslim educational institutions need independence and genuine efforts to re-engage with their traditions and the contemporary world – and no ruler, despotic or otherwise, is going to substitute that.

You have significant experience advising governments, how is this different from purely academic work? How do you balance ties to governments with academic independence?

I've thought a great deal about the question in my career, but in practical terms, I've never had to quite subject myself to the ramifications of it. I have, indeed, advised a number of different governments, at varying levels and degrees of influence, including at ministerial level in Europe, the Arab world, and North America, as well as elsewhere. No-one has ever been obliged to take my views on board and follow them accordingly – i.e., my advice may have been requested, but I've no power over whether or not they follow that advice. Moreover, I have never been a civil servant or paid employee of any government, where my independence has been curtailed as a condition of my job. So, I've had close relations with governments – but my academic independence has generally not been something I've had to worry about.

Having said that, while there are those who would look askance at the notion of the academic or scholar getting involved with government in a closer fashion than I have previously, I'm not sure I would look at it in quite the same way. Governments need good advice, and I think the academic community has a lot of good advice to give. There may be some who decide that they want to pursue a career in government, to give that advice – and I think they can completely maintain their integrity in doing so. That is possible – if they remain true to themselves. Does that mean they might find themselves challenged – of course, but that is probably true in any line of work that one finds oneself in. And if all the people who actually know what is happening on the ground, and are fully informed about the world, all reject involvement in government, then those we elect to represent and govern us are going to be painfully ignorant at the best of times. And ignorance can lead to some really awful policy decisions.

The question, I think, is about integrity. If you are asked a question – whether as an employee in the civil service, or an academic in a university, are you going to answer it truthfully and with full awareness of the repercussions? If you can say 'yes', then I think that's what counts. What government then decides to do with that is not your responsibility.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Two things. The first is rootedness. I know I keep coming back to this, but the single biggest deficit within the IR arena is, to my mind, the lack of empathy of students and scholars with those whom they are studying. These are not simply objects of research – they are living, breathing human beings, with histories and narratives of their own. Their narratives and stories are not worth any less than your own – and they're invariably a lot more important, because they actually live their stories, whereas you're trying to write those stories. Recognise them as autonomous agents in their own right, and try to understand how they are rooted in their realities, as you are rooted in your own. Try to account for the biases in your 'rootedness' – and learn more about theirs.

And secondly: power. Learn what power means; who has it; and who doesn't. That will teach you, in turn, two things – first, how a system (or lack thereof) functions. And second, it will teach you who needs to be held to account more. The powerful, regardless of who or what they are, are always far more in need of being held to account than the powerless. That will always be our job, as scholars. That's how we ensure our own academic commitment is rooted – speaking truth to power.

—

This interview was conducted by Tom Cassauwers. Tom is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.

Interview - H.A. Hellyer

Written by E-International Relations