In mid-August 2011, the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs organized few meetings with some selected representatives from various Islamic movements. These meetings build upon and tie into recent and planned Pugwash activities in the region.

This report summarizes some of the main points raised in these meetings. It highlights areas for further exploration in a forthcoming series of meetings Pugwash will organize in Cairo. The future meetings will involve experts from other countries (including the US, Europe, Russia and possibly some other Middle Eastern countries) and selected representatives of the Islamic movements.

- *On the fracture between the Islamic world and the West.* There is considerable agreement that this fracture is a problem and that constructive dialogue and political engagement are needed. Attitudes differ. Some more than others stressed in the meetings that the primary responsibility of this fracture lies in the West. Islam, so the argument goes, is not against any culture or religion. Islamic values par excellence are “Peace and Justice.” There is no room for discrimination and oppression and violence. There is a perception that the West tends to impose its values and, as in the case of Israel and of the past Egyptian regime, to practice coercion. Moreover, some raised concerns about strong discrimination against Muslims in Europe and in the West. As an example the various anti-burqa (anti-nijab) laws have been mentioned. It was pointed out that the victims of such discrimination are mainly lower-class workers who are particularly needed in Europe.
• **On foreign policy perspectives.** It was felt that the attitude of the Islamic movements towards other countries and different cultures should be in general very constructive and forthcoming. Statements that any future Egyptian Government will cooperate with all other countries have been repeated many times. There are of course differences in the consideration given to different countries. Some made the point that Egypt should cooperate in particular with African and other Arab countries. Most expressed the view that relations with Iran should be seriously improved. On the contrary, attitudes towards Israel ranged between two poles. The first pole would be to modify the relations, to abandon the subservient attitude taken by the Mubarak regime, to take into account Egyptian interests (e.g. in the case of the economic agreements about natural gas), but still to maintain diplomatic relations and have an attitude that would stress regional coexistence, without giving up an increasingly strong support to the Palestinians. The second pole would be to cut diplomatic relations with Israel altogether. The relations towards the West are seen naturally with a much more positive attitude. Friendly European and Mediterranean countries are not a problem. As far as the US is concerned, the role of the US in the Middle Eastern region is resented and criticized. It was mentioned by one person in particular that the case of Palestine, the case of Iraq and, outside the Middle East, the cases of Afghanistan and Pakistan are all examples where US intervention, policy and dominance have created a disastrous situation. This is not encouraging others to have ‘overly friendly’ relations with the US. Some acknowledged that Obama’s Cairo speech was encouraging and positive, but then questioned what happened after that speech. In any case, as another person stressed, asserting the interests (including the economic interests) of Egypt will be the dominant criterion that will shape Egyptian foreign policy.

• **On civil law, sharia and tolerance towards other religions and secularism.** Participants pointed out that Islam is tolerant and has nothing inherently against other religions (in particular it is very respectful of the Christians and the Jews – who are Ahl-al-kitab – people of the book). Christians themselves are included even at the highest level in the “Freedom and Justice party” that originated from the Muslim Brotherhood. The laws and the future constitution should not define any dominance of any religion, as one important
leader pointed out during our meetings. The law will be always a civil law, decided by the Parliament and implemented by the proper civilian institutions. The source of such law “can be Islamic” (as much it has been pointed out that Christianity is the root of the laws existing in the Western world). But the constitution and the legal system should not be seen at all as a corollary of the Quran. The respect of all the rights of the minorities should be in any case guaranteed. The question was asked if people without religion, will be duly protected. Yes: it has been stated that it is of course one of the rights of the individual to have a religion or not. An interesting discussion arose at some point about the right to change religion and the hypothetical crime of “apostasy.” The approach of the senior leader in the discussion was that yes one has the right not only to change religion, but also to communicate his/her decision to others. This of course borders with the right of proselytizing, i.e. to try to persuade others to have the same change of religion. Another viewpoint expressed in the room was that trying to persuade others to abandon Islam in an Islamic society may create social disturbances and this should be punishable by the law. In principle, dialogue among different religions (dialogue among civilizations) should be in all ways supported, but clearly grey areas exist about how to manage/regulate the dominance of Islam in an Islamic society.

- **On the Islamic movements.** It appears likely that in the forthcoming Parliamentary elections the collection of Islamic movements/parties will take well over half of the popular votes. But the Islamic movements gave rise to various parties, some of them are in the process of being formed now and some of them are not necessarily on good terms with each other. Together with the Freedom and Justice Party (a direct offspring of the Muslim Brotherhood) and the Alwasat (New Center) Party, are the Salafist parties that are not in good terms with previous parties and others. Moreover in Egypt there is a large Sufi population (a few million and expanding) and a new Sufi party is being built that is antagonistic to both the Muslim Brotherhood and, even more, to the Salafists and Wahabis. There are rumors that also the Christians (Copts) want to have their own party. One should notice at this point that even if Egypt forbids the establishment of parties that are direct expressions of religions and religious sects, there are many ways to get around this prohibition (e.g. by giving neutral names to parties that are promoted by religious
movements but formally not controlled by them). The (young) liberals who gave birth to the Egyptian revolutions are also having their own party (parties) and also the people who came out of the NDP (Mubarak party) are getting organized. It is however true that the only group that has proven to be organized for a long time and that has shown to be able to bear the weight of the organized opposition during the Mubarak period is the Muslim Brotherhood and this gives the MB an obvious edge. The set of alliances that could be formed in this patchwork of political parties is not easy to predict. The stated goal of the MB is to gain a relevant weight in the Parliament and possibly (together with some allies) the majority of the Parliament. The election of the Parliament, expected to be in November-December, will come before the election of the President. The MB has decided not to present its own presidential candidate, but one of its former high-level exponents is running for that office.

Few Concluding remarks:

Contrary to the impression expressed by many people after the beginning of the so called Arab spring, the Islamic movements have not been ruled out and have not been replaced by liberal western-like ‘democratic’ movements or parties. It is true that, in many cases (and particularly in Egypt) some young professionals, possibly western-educated and western-sympathizers have acted as sparks for the “revolutions”. The role of the modern means of communications (internet, facebook, twitter, text messages, etc) should certainly not be underestimated. It is also true that, at the beginning of the revolution, the Islamic movements (and the MB in particular) were having a prudent approach and waited a while before being involved. Nevertheless now the Islamic movements are fully and openly involved in the political debate and in the political competition and have still a great leverage on the population as a whole. The west and other countries should be aware of the exact nature of the developments that happened and are underway in a significant part of the Arab world and should be ready to understand, engage and cooperate with the Islamic movements. Many things are yet unclear. What will be the foreign and internal policies (economic, social, in terms of human and democratic rights, etc) of governments where the Islamic movements and parties will be very relevant if not dominant) is
certainly yet to be understood. A temptation that should be absolutely avoided by the west is to see all the developments, particularly in Egypt, through the deforming lens of “what appears to be more useful for the security of Israel”. Ending the occupation, respecting the democratic rights of the Palestinian people, implementing a real 2-state solution (if this is what people want) are the conditions that will be in the medium and long range more useful for the security of Israel than a not-so-covert support given by a dictator (such as Mubarak) who has lost since long time the credibility and the support of his own people. It is finally worth pointing out that in the Arab world all the regimes that, one way or the other, have been based on “socialist” or “secular-nationalist” ideas (such as Algeria-Tunisia-Lybia-Egypt-Syria-Iraq) have been under severe strains and many of these regimes have been dissolved. As for the alternatives to these socialist-nationalist ideas, the capitalist-western vision has been too much associated with foreign imposition and domination and particularly with the a-critical support of Israel and so had no chances to be considered with sympathy by the large masses of the Arab world. Maybe the time is ripe for a revival of the Islamic political vision where some important adjustments in terms of human rights, respect of minorities and of dissent, interaction on equal footing with other parties and, in the international scene, with other countries, may be essential for stability and development in the forthcoming period. The debate on these issues is just beginning and Pugwash wants to support dialogue and constructive exchange of ideas on these issues.

1 Following standard Pugwash protocol, the participants spoke as individuals, specific comments cannot be attributed to any participant, and there was no attempt to achieve consensus in the meetings. As the majority of the participants were from the Islamic movements, this is reflected in the report.