Islam and International Order

July 22, 2015
Contents

Islam and the Islamic State

Contesting the Caliphate .................................................. 6
By Marc Lynch, George Washington University

The jihadi threat to international order .................................. 9
By Barak Mendelsohn, Haverford College

The Islamic State as an ordinary insurgency .......................... 13
By Reyko Huang, Texas A&M University

Why the Islamic State won't become a normal state .................... 16
By Lawrence Rubin, Georgia Institute of Technology

Islam in Political Science

How international relations got religion, and got it wrong .............. 20
By Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Northwestern University

What history says about the prospects for Islamic democracy ........... 23
By John M. Owen, IV, University of Virginia

Frames at play: Beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism ................ 25
By Nora Fisher Onar, University of Oxford and Transatlantic Academy

Why academics can't get beyond moderates and radicals .................. 29
By Jillian Schwedler, Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York

How the two big ideas of the post-Cold War era failed ..................... 34
By Amitav Acharya, American University

Why Tunasians (don't) vote for women .................................... 37
By Lindsay J. Benstead, Portland State University, Amaney Jamal, Princeton University, and Ellen Lust, Yale University

Islam, Identity and State

Rethinking religion and politics ........................................... 42
By Nathan J. Brown, George Washington University

Are Muslim countries really unreceptive to religious freedom? ............ 44
By Daniel Philpott, University of Notre Dame

Why ISIS is not all of political Islam and what it means for democracy .... 46
By Jocelyne Cesari, University of Birmingham and Georgetown University

How to interpret Iran’s Islamic rhetoric .................................... 49
By Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, Texas A&M University

Tracking Iranian cosmopolitan options: At home and abroad .............. 51
By Bruce B. Lawrence, Duke University and Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakif University, Istanbul

Islamist Movements

Five reforms the Muslim Brotherhood must undertake .................... 56
By Muqtedar Khan, University of Delaware

The rift between the AKP and Gulen movement in Turkey .................. 58
By Ramazan Kilinc, University of Nebraska at Omaha

What happens when Islamists lose an election? ............................ 61
By Rory McCarthy, University of Oxford
Online Article Index

http://pomeps.org/2015/05/15/islam-and-international-order-memos/


http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs.monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/04/why-tunisians-dont-vote-for-women/


http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs.monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/05/how-much-of-a-state-is-the-islamic-state/


The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.

The Transatlantic Academy

The Transatlantic Academy is a research institution devoted to creating common approaches to the long-term challenges facing Europe and North America. The Academy does this by each year bringing together scholars, policy experts, and authors from both sides of the Atlantic and from different disciplinary perspectives to research and analyze a distinct policy theme of transatlantic interest. The Academy was created in 2007 as a partnership between the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) and the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius. The Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation joined as full partners beginning in 2008, and the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung joined as a full partner in 2011. The Joachim Herz Stiftung and the Volkswagen Stiftung joined in providing additional support in 2013.
Islam has rarely been far from the center of the world’s political and security agenda in the decade and a half since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack against the United States. The range of issues to which Islam has been deemed central is staggering, from transnational terrorism and counterinsurgency in Iraq to the possibility of democracy in the Middle East. These long-running debates have been galvanized over the last few years by the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, shocking acts of terrorism from Paris to Tunisia, and the failure of the democratic experiment with Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt.

In April 2015 the Project on Middle East Political Science and the Transatlantic Academy hosted a workshop for a sustained discussion of emerging questions on Islam and international order. The two-day workshop brought together a broad, interdisciplinary group of scholars, including area specialists and generalists, from the fields of political science, religious studies and history. The workshop, part of the POMEPS Islam in a Changing Middle East initiative, built on the Transatlantic Academy’s 2015 theme of religion and foreign policy.

Peter Katzenstein of Cornell University, in his keynote address, put the question of Islam squarely within the racial and civilizational politics of a declining American imperium. This historical and global perspective provoked a wide-ranging discussion. Islam has played many roles in many different regional and global political orders, as Cemil Aydin, Bruce Lawrence and Jonathan Brown evocatively explained. And, as Amitav Acharya forcefully argued, Islam has routinely frustrated the expectations of popular grand theories of world order.

The workshop ranged widely over the question of how to think about Islam within global, regional and domestic political arenas, from a diverse range of empirical cases and theoretical literatures. Can Islam really be understood as an actor, with interests and a coherent identity? Is there something unique about Islam that prevents it from being treated theoretically like other cultural traditions such as nationalism, ethnicity or ideology? Should Islam be seen as a causal variable or as a context through which actors pursue their interests and fight their political battles? What are we doing, conceptually and politically, when we describe political thought as “Islamic political thought,” movements as “Islamic movements,” or democracy as “Islamic democracy”?

The essays prepared for this workshop are available here as POMEPS Studies 15. Several key themes ran through the discussions. First, several of the memos specifically focus on the emergence of the Islamic State. Marc Lynch surveys the central analytical arguments that have been deployed to explain the Islamic State Caliphate’s development, noting the very different policy responses each might elicit. Barak Mendelsohn and Reyko Huang evaluate the Islamic State in the history of jihadist groups and insurgencies, and Lawrence Rubin argues that ideational balancing will prevent the Islamic State from becoming a normal state.
Second, many of the authors explicitly consider how political science has – or has not – been able to explain the relationship between religion and politics. Contributions from Lynch, Nora Fisher Onar, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd and Jillian Schwedler highlight the importance of the context – or frames in Fisher Onar’s words – of how scholars discuss religion and governance.

Third, several of the authors look at the dynamic at play between Islam and the state. Nathan Brown urges scholars to rethink the state’s relationship to religion. Jocelyne Cesari lays out a sophisticated typology of the incorporation of Islam into state institutions, and Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar teases out the role of state Islamic rhetoric. John Owen compares the debate over the prospects for Islamic democracy to similar debates in European history, while Daniel Philpott makes a comparative analysis to demystify the notion that Muslim countries are un receptive to religious freedom.

Fourth, several authors focus on the experience of Islamist political movements in the region. Muqtedar Khan prescribes five reforms that Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood should undertake, and Rory McCarthy looks to Tunisia to answer, what happens when Islamists lose an election? Following on the heels of Turkey’s June election, Ramazan Kilinc focuses on the rifts between Turkish Islamists and the consequences for Turkish democracy.

Together, the essays collected in “Islam and International Order” offer a diverse, informed study that should help scholars, journalists, policymakers and the public evaluate the immense changes in the Islamist political scene.

Marc Lynch
Director, POMEPS

Nora Fisher Onar
2014-2015 Transatlantic Academy Fellow

Cortni Kerr
Assistant Editor, POMEPS
Introduction

Islam and the Islamic State
Contesting the Caliphate

By Marc Lynch, George Washington University

On June 29, 2014, Abu Bakr Baghdadi declared himself the Caliph, extending his position as the ruler of the Islamic State and claiming leadership of all Muslims. A remarkable range of media, pundits, analysts and politicians took this extraordinary claim by the little-known leader of an extremist violent insurgency at close to face value. The Caliphate argument became a proxy for a much broader debate over the last year about the relationship between Islam and the Islamic State that crystallized around Graeme Wood’s widely cited argument that “the Islamic State is Islamic. Very Islamic.”

While there have been many thoughtful and productive contributions to that debate, the overall discussion was somewhat frustrating. How would we know whether the Islamic State’s ideology resonated with Muslim publics or was authentically Islamic? How would we know whether such resonance mattered? What kind of evidence could (even in principle) prove or disprove such arguments? The participants in the public debate often seem to be talking past one another, with no clear distinction between causal arguments, policy recommendations and normative assertions. It is not simply that observers disagreed about the evidence; it was that they did not agree about what should count as evidence or even whether evidence was needed.

For some observers, the fact that the vast majority of Muslims reject Baghdadi’s claim is dispositive: of course his claims to the Caliphate are patently absurd, if not offensive. For others, the fact that the Islamic State consistently presents itself in Islamic terms, governs according to its view of Islamic law and manifestly inspires a small but intensely motivated number of Muslims is equally obviously decisive. For still others, what obviously matters is how close the Islamic State’s rhetoric and practice adheres to some authentic essence of true Islam, regardless of how others regard it.

What can political science contribute to resolving questions such as “how Islamic is the Islamic State” or “how legitimate is Baghdadi’s claim to the Caliphate”? Such questions should be placed within a much broader set of theoretical arguments about the role of ideas, identity and culture in politics. In April, the Project on Middle East Political Science and the Transatlantic Academy convened an interdisciplinary group of scholars, including academics from Middle East studies, political science, history and religious studies, to discuss how to think about the role of Islam in political order. The essays prepared for the workshop have now been published as a special issue in the POMEPS Studies series, available for free download here.

The essays in this collection suggest a wide array of methods and conceptual frameworks for evaluating Islam’s role in politics. Lindsay Benstead, Amaney Jamal and Ellen Lust use a survey experiment to assess how perceptions of religiosity affect Tunisian voting choices. Daniel Philpott examines the treatment of religious freedom by Muslim-majority countries in broad cross-national perspective, while Elizabeth Shakman Hurd challenges the conceptual foundations of the “religious freedom” policy agenda. Nathan Brown and Jocelyne Cesari look closely at how Arab states have incorporated Islam into their political systems, while John Owen distills the lessons of European history for Islamic democracy. Muqtedar Khan examines the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s political strategy, and Rory McCarthy explores how Tunisia’s Islamists responded to electoral defeat.

The diversity of these contributions highlights that there is no single political science perspective on the Islamic-ness of the Islamic State or Baghdadi’s Caliphate. Contributors to the symposium argue that the Islamic State should be seen as a fairly ordinary insurgency, that it should be seen as a radically new political phenomenon that fundamentally challenges international society, and that its ideology (whether or not sincere) represents a dramatic
new type of security threat to the states of the region. The contribution of political scientists should not be to provide a single answer but to better frame the questions and the right methods for evaluating the evidence offered in support of competing answers. There is no obvious reason that the ideology of the Islamic State should be impervious to research designs such as Tarek Masoud’s careful analysis of Egyptian voting behavior and Steven Brooke’s rigorous assessment of Islamist social service provision.

After surveying the large and growing literature on the Caliphate, I came up with at least nine different types of argument. These are not mutually exclusive, but they often rest on very different assumptions, require very different types of evidence and could lead to very different analytical conclusions and policy responses.

**Personal qualities:** One common claim is that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi makes for a plausible Caliph because he personally manifests some of the ideal qualities of past Caliphs, such as the ability to deliver speeches in fluent classical Arabic and to claim Qurayshi descent from the Prophet Mohammad. Presumably, these personal qualities give his claim greater resonance than one made by an individual who lacks such qualities. Killing or discrediting Baghdadi personally, then, would presumably have a major impact on the perceived legitimacy of the Caliphate independently of other variables such as the military fortunes of the Islamic State. This argument might be evaluated against the very mixed verdict of an increasingly well-developed literature about the impact of leadership decapitation on insurgencies.

**Material power:** Another common claim is a Realist one that the legitimacy of Baghdadi’s Caliphate derives from its temporal power rather than from its rhetoric or cultural claims. The Caliphate is attractive because it is successful at capturing and controlling territory and exercising institutional authority over a significant number of people. This Realist notion that the attractiveness of ideas derives from worldly success suggests that the resonance of the Islamic State’s ideology will largely be a function of military success and effective governance. If the Islamic State loses control over territory and its prospects of success dim, then the Baghdadi claim would be diminished regardless of his personal qualities or Islamic authenticity. A small, poor, fragile, universally shunned and near-failed state would not be a convincing Caliphate. Military victory over the Islamic State, then, would presumably also diminish its ideological appeal and legitimacy. While intuitively plausible, this argument might be weighed against the “Phoenix Effect,” where defeated insurgencies and movements rise from the ashes even stronger and better adapted than before; consider the resurgence of al-Qaeda after its crushing 2001 defeat in Afghanistan, or of the Islamic State after its setbacks in Iraq between 2007 and 2010.

**Organizational culture:** Another common claim is that the Islamicness of the Islamic State can be observed in its internal organization, discourse, norms and laws. The constructivist international relations tradition which crystallized around Peter Katzenstein’s “The Culture of National Security” laid out multiple causal pathways by which domestic norms and identity might shape political behavior. Whether or not sincerely held, the Islamic identity and norms of the Islamic State could well lead it to behave in ways the Realist would find irrational. Katzenstein’s carefully drawn distinctions between norms internalized into a logic of appropriateness and norms strategically deployed by cynical actors might help make sense of questions such as the role of former Baathists in the Islamic State or the likelihood of its being socialized into normal international affairs.

**Mass public support:** Another common argument is that the Islamic State’s power lies in its ability to command the support of a wide swathe of Muslim public opinion. This argument, familiar to studies of al-Qaeda in the previous decade or of mainstream Islamist movements more recently, would test the Caliphate’s legitimacy by reading surveys of the views of mainstream mass Muslim publics. This might be straightforward opinion polling about the movement’s popularity (a dangerous and likely misleading business in countries where admitting to sympathy with a terrorist group to a stranger would be unwise). Or it could mean indirect matching between public opinion and
Baghdadi’s claimed goals (imposing Islamic law, expelling Western influence), as Shadi Hamid attempted in an essay last year. Any reassurance derived from survey evidence of large-scale rejection of the Islamic State by mass publics might be weighed, however, against the possibility that mainstream public rejection might only increase the appeal of the jihadist group among alienated individuals primed to hate the status quo.

**Extremist mobilization:** Mass sympathy may be less important to the Islamic State than its ability to mobilize a small radical base into action, whether to travel to Syria or to join terrorist campaigns at home. If the decisive indicator of legitimacy is the ability to get small numbers of people to mobilize sufficiently to join the struggle, then the indicator should be the flow of foreign fighters into the Islamic State or the emergence of affiliated organizations in new places. The views of the majority would not especially matter, except perhaps in terms of creating an enabling environment. If this is what matters, then the appropriate course of action might be narrow Counter Violent Extremism programming designed to prevent the recruitment of at-risk individuals and disrupt recruitment networks. It should be weighed against the wide variety of individual-level motivations, which can drive an alienated, marginal individual to extreme behaviors.

**Affiliate groups:** Some consider the affiliation decisions of other jihadist groups to be the metric of influence that matters the most. Where in the previous decade local jihadist groups chose to brand themselves as al-Qaeda affiliates, today many choose to brand themselves as Islamic State provinces. Such declarations of loyalty by organizations, and the ability of those affiliates to carry out violent acts under its flag, could function independently of the fortunes of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, its mass popularity and the scholarly consensus. This metric might be weighed, as Dan Byman has argued, against the many potential burdens associated with such affiliates, including the loss of control and the provisional nature of such affiliations.

**Media presence:** It could be that the Islamic State’s appeal is shaped by its media portrayal, which might be only tangentially related to its real capabilities on the ground or to its genuine levels of support among mass publics or religious scholars. If the decisive indicator is media coverage, inflating an otherwise marginal figure into a major political force, then the indicator should be the amount of coverage – positive or negative – in a wide range of media platforms. The violent spectaculars for which the Islamic State has become famous would be net positive if they force coverage of the Caliphate, even if they drove revulsion among potential mass constituents. This metric would suggest pushing for less media attention to the Islamic State, with a media blackout and social media takedowns more effective than high-profile “wars of ideas” or public exposure of its many evils. This might be read against the robust jihadist media ecosystem capable of reaching potential supporters regardless of mainstream media coverage.

**Scholarly consensus:** For some, the decisive indicator of legitimacy is whether some group of scholars and Islamic authorities accepts Baghdadi’s claims. The indicator would not be the discourse among mass publics or foot soldiers but among a small set of influential religious authorities. Which authorities matter then becomes an obvious methodological question. Mainstream, state-affiliated Islamic authorities have consistently rejected Baghdadi’s claim, as have Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamists. His claim has more, but nowhere close to universal, support among the small set of jihadist authorities. If this consensus is what matters, then the appropriate course of action would be the mobilization of religious authorities to criticize Islamic State jurisprudence and Baghdadi’s religious claims. But given the skepticism with which many Arabs view regime-affiliated religious figures, such mobilization could well discredit the scholars as undermine the Islamic State.

**Authenticity:** Finally, many analysts propose to independently assess the legitimacy of the Caliphate through their own interpretive reading of Islamic texts and practice. It is difficult to assess personal beliefs that the Islamic State is the most authentic form of Islam,
and in practice the authenticity claim tends to dissolve into one of the behaviors discussed above (mass opinion, extremist mobilization, organizational affiliation, scholarly consensus, etc.). Authenticity arguments can lead to some especially dangerous policy proposals, such as the recurrent proposals that the United States lead efforts to reform Islam itself. If Islam is not in fact the problem, then such reform efforts could waste enormous resources to no benefit — or, even worse, actually help the Islamic State by revealing the inauthenticity of its mainstream critics.

This catalog of the types of arguments about the Islamic State does not tell us which is right, of course. The purpose of this exercise is less to advance an argument than to craft ways to devise more effective tests of the various propositions running through the public debate. I tend to see the Islamic State more as a fairly ordinary insurgency that has been unduly mystified and exoticized in the public discourse. But others have advanced sophisticated and compelling arguments about the importance of ideology which deserve attention.

Islam's political role, in the Islamic State or elsewhere, is not fundamentally different from the many other cultural, identity and ideational factors commonly analyzed by political scientists. Clearly, the Islamic State has been unusually effective at leveraging its military success and propaganda into success in other areas, especially in winning organizational affiliates, mobilizing small numbers of extremists and commanding the support of a small group of scholars. That can hardly be ignored. It matters when actors understand themselves to be acting on the basis of religion (or any other identity or set of cultural practices) or when they adapt their strategic calculations to their beliefs about the salience of Islam in the political realm — even if Elizabeth Shakman Hurd is right that it makes little sense to view Islam as an actor or as a direct cause of anything. The Islamic State may be a thoroughly strategic actor with little claim on mass religious authority, but it is still necessary to understand its conception of Islam in order to explain its strategic choices and their mobilizational appeal.

The jihadi threat to international order

By Barak Mendelsohn, Haverford College

All terrorist groups challenge state sovereignty and the international order. However, this challenge is usually of limited scope, with political objectives confined to such conventional goals as assuming power in a state or gaining independence. Their violence, however disruptive, still accepts the state-based international order as an organizing principle. One might even claim that by aspiring to eventually become recognized state authorities, most terrorist groups reaffirm and strengthen an international order that is based on states.

The challenge posed by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda is different. These groups have many more state enemies than most terrorist groups, and they challenge the practical sovereignty of their target states in more fundamental ways that constitute threats to the international society as a whole. They do not seek a limited fix to particular problems in the international system, but to overthrow the
state-based Westphalian order and establish an alternative order in its stead.

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are unusual not only in the landscape of terrorist entities: They are also unique among Islamist groups. In theory all religious armed groups must address the relationship between two competing sources of authority, state and God. But most religious terrorist groups strike a compromise by seeking to shape the particular identity and ruling system of the state they inhabit but accepting the state-based order, including its rules for conducting international relations. Armed Islamist groups in Egypt and Algeria in the 1990s waged deadly fights in the name of religion, but they focused on domestic change, prioritizing the establishment of sharia law in their countries over revolt against the state-based order.

But global jihadism, epitomized by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, goes further by emphasizing what it sees as the incompatibility between religious and state-based logic. Consequently, it seeks more than change in particular countries, promoting as a central goal the destruction of the existing order and its substitution by a universal Islamic one, mirroring these groups’ particular, highly contested views of Islam.

This is why despite the word “State” in its name, the Islamic State is not an ordinary state and does not reinforce the norms of international order. It constitutes a fundamental threat to sovereignty because it rejects the central principles and institutions of the international society and outlines an alternative way of organizing the world that is not based on states. Thus, the empirical measures of statehood documented by Brigham Young University’s Quinn Mecham do not challenge this argument. MIT’s Richard Nielsen was on track when he suggested that the Islamic State is different because its ideology puts it at odds with the norms and rules of Westphalian sovereignty. When states are understood as members of an international society, bounded by norms and rules for interstate relations and appropriate state behavior, the Islamic State’s distinctiveness becomes evident.

Self-styled as a caliphate, the Islamic State is viewed by its supporters not as the odd one out, but as the only legitimate political entity. Its expansionism differs from that of other revisionary states that challenge the status quo in an attempt to increase their power and territorial possessions because the Islamic State aspires for more than power redistribution within the existing state system. When, with great fanfare, it destroyed a border crossing between Syria and Iraq, it did not seek only to abolish a particular arbitrary border and put it elsewhere, but to reject “the borders of Sykes-Picot” and by extension the notion of legitimate inter-state borders.

Al-Qaeda’s strategy, in contrast, postpones the establishment of the caliphate until after the defeat of the United States. That is only tactical, though. Its rejection of the international order is clear in its discourse and behavior. One indication that it does not view the world through a state-based map is the way in which it names its franchises, tying them to geographical anchors instead of the names of the states in which they operate (for example, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula instead of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia or Yemen; and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb instead of al-Qaeda in Algeria). It is striking that al-Qaeda avoids names that could be interpreted as granting legitimacy to the Westphalian system and to authorities in target states.

I see seven distinctive areas where we can observe the jihadist challenge to international society:

1. **Sovereignty and authority**: In the jihadi view, a system based on the division of the world into states is an inherently defective secular institution predicated on nonreligious precepts. The divine is the only legitimate source of authority, and world order must reflect God's will, not the choices made by mundane entities such as states and people. States are not sovereign; only God is sovereign, and any claims to sovereignty detached from the religious scriptures are attempts to subvert the divine authority. From this perspective, the anchoring of political order in territoriality cannot be legitimate because God's authority knows no boundaries.
That Muslims live in states, despite Islam’s universal mission, is seen by these jihadi groups as the product of non-Muslims’ designs to prevent the emergence of a just Islamic order. In their view, the state-based order, particularly in the Middle East, is a conspiracy of the Christian West, which divided the Muslim umma into separate states to sow discord among Muslims and to weaken the umma, so that Muslims will not realize their potential – rather, their destiny – to lead humanity.

2. State equality: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State oppose the fundamental role of the state-based order in promoting peace and stability between state actors of equal legal standing. According to the jihadis, there cannot be equality between Muslim and non-Muslim states, as there cannot be equality between Muslim and non-Muslim people. And peace and stability will be achieved only after the umma triumphs and a global Islamic order is established.

3. International law: The groups adhering to an ideology of global jihad also reject international law. Central to international order, international law was created as a way to regulate states’ behavior, reduce inter-state friction and mitigate war. In the jihadis’ view, however, man-made law subverts the principle of tawhid (God’s unity). Since they view legislation as the prerogative of God alone, international law formulated by humans and secular institutions (states and international organizations) defies tawhid. Moreover, emanating from the most powerful states, international law reflects the norms of the “Crusader West,” which are arguably foreign and hostile to Islam.

4. The United Nations: Although they often share other actors’ grievances about the performance of the United Nations, denouncing double standards in its actions and the privileged position of the powerful states, jihadis’ grievances cannot be addressed by reforming the U.N. in a way more compatible with the international body’s declared objectives. Their objection to the U.N. is based on their rejection of the international order and refusal to legitimize man-made law. In their opinion, Islamic principles dictate that no legitimate Islamic state would ever participate in the U.N. Recently the Islamic State went as far as challenging the Islamic credential of the Taliban rule over Afghanistan (1996-2001) because the Taliban allegedly sought to join the U.N.

5. Rules for war initiation (jus ad bellum): Whereas the international society allows states to fight in self-defense or under the authorization of the U.N. Security Council, jihadis emphasize Islamic rules for the initiation of violence. As Abu Yahya al-Libi asserted, when such criteria are met actors must fight, regardless of what international law may suggest or whether there is a broad international legitimacy for fighting. Moreover, while the Westphalian order empowers only state authorities to engage in interstate war, in an attempt to regulate and limit war, jihadis see it as their duty to appropriate state authority and launch jihad when Muslim rulers fail to do so. Thus, an aggression (which jihadis define very broadly) against Muslims requires a defensive jihad, in which even many of the Islamic restrictions on fighting are lifted. The Islamic State goes even further, promoting offensive jihad to expand the territory controlled by Islam, in complete contradiction to the rules of international society.

6. Restrictions on the application of force in warfare (jus in bello): Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State also ignore rules for wartime conduct. Their understanding of who may gain protection as a noncombatant is based on radical interpretation of the sharia. As such, they deem numerous people who should enjoy some immunity as legitimate targets. Jihadis’ sensitivity to human lives is particularly low when it comes to non-Muslims in the West. Osama bin Laden promoted a theory that civilians in democracies are not innocent noncombatants because, as voters and taxpayers, they are involved in their states’ affairs and can be held accountable for their governments’ “crimes.” Harsh criticism from Muslims that, despite all its claims to fight the Crusader West, al-Qaeda has killed primarily innocent Muslims led al-Qaeda to present a “human shield” ruling that allegedly legitimized the inadvertent killing of Muslims as a collateral damage. When criticism did not subside, al-Qaeda sought to recover its tarnished image by instructing its operatives to avoid attacking places where common Muslims gather.
The Islamic State also ignores international restrictions on the treatment of civilians but legitimizes its extreme violence by declaring all Shiite and even many Sunni Muslims who refuse to accept its authority as apostates whose blood is permissible. With no respect for international human rights laws, the Islamic State goes even further, taking noncombatant captives as war prizes and sex slaves in a blatant violation of international norms and universal human rights treaties. Adamant that it has the right to do so, it even offered Islamic justification for reviving the institution of slavery.

7. Independent foreign policy: In al-Qaeda’s view, Muslim states are not allowed to recognize (even indirectly) the independence of states, and Israel above all, in territories once under Muslim control. Muslim states are also prohibited from hosting Western bases and forces on their territory. This prohibition is directed in particular at Saudi Arabia, which hosted U.S. forces despite a decree from the prophet himself that non-Muslims should not reside in the land – understood very broadly by jihadis to include not only Mecca and Medina but the entire Arabian Peninsula. Jihadis further limit Muslim states’ freedom when, relying on the doctrine of “loyalty and disavowal,” they maintain that Muslims are forbidden from allying with non-Muslims. Al-Qaeda’s list of restrictions on states’ foreign policy is not limited to Muslim states. The restrictions are especially extensive when it comes to the United States, practically encompassing any action – even actions based on diplomacy – that could be construed as an attempt to influence Muslim states’ actions.

That’s what these jihadist groups want, but can they achieve it? Material power, including the possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and willingness to use them, is an indicator of the magnitude of the threat. This is also the factor that makes the Islamic State a graver danger to international order than al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda secured a fatwa authorizing the use of WMD from one of its prominent supporters in Saudi Arabia, Nasir al-Hamad al-Fahd. However, it never obtained WMD that it could use against its enemies. In the case of the Islamic State, there is a much greater threat that it could access chemical and biological weapons and little doubt that it wouldn’t hesitate to use them. Moreover, its threat to international order goes beyond WMDs; the Islamic State demonstrated its prowess by conquering a vast territory.

The level of threat the Islamic State and al-Qaeda pose is also a product of the specific circumstances in which they emerged and the way particular ideological commitments shaped their operational strategies. Al-Qaeda emerged against the background of U.S. primacy and prioritized fighting the United States before bringing about change to the Middle East and reintroducing the caliphate. As a result, al-Qaeda quickly found that it exaggerated its ability to promote its objectives, though by provoking the United States to overreach (in particular, the Iraq war and treatment of detainees) it indirectly contributed to undermining the international society.

The Islamic State, on the other hand, reached prominence in the chaotic aftermath of the Arab uprisings and at a time of great U.S. reluctance to intervene in the Middle East. It focused on gaining territory and establishing a caliphate as measures that would further increase its power as it attempts to remake the international system. The Islamic State also promoted a particularly radical ideology, genocidal toward Shiites and other Middle Eastern minorities and ruthless toward Sunnis who refuse to submit to its authority. As a result, not only does it manifest an even more expansive challenge to the international order, it is also better equipped to threaten this order.

Although this analysis paints an alarming picture, one must remember that the international society is highly resilient and that it has triumphed in the face of earlier challengers (e.g., universal Communism). Its socialization power is remarkable and puts it in a strong position to quell threats. Moreover, as both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have found, threatening entities must provide services to the people under their control. Al-Qaeda’s understanding of the magnitude of the task caused aversion to establishing emirates before it succeeds in bringing the United States down. The Islamic State, on the other hand, gambled...
on quick expansion as a way to overcome this problem. But this is based on the assumption that stateness could actually increase its power, and consequently its ability to overthrow the Westphalian order before the group is forced to dedicate the bulk of its resources to governance instead of territorial expansion.

Barak Mendelsohn is an associate professor of political science at Haverford College, a research fellow at Harvard University’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He is the author of “The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences” (Oxford University Press, forthcoming) and “Combating Jihadism: American Hegemony and Interstate Cooperation in the War on Terrorism” (University of Chicago Press, 2009). Follow him @BarakMendelsohn.

The Islamic State as an ordinary insurgency

By Reyko Huang, Texas A&M University

The attention heaped on the Islamic State in Western media and public debate has centered primarily on two issues: its religion and its violence. On both fronts, the group has left observers aghast with its extremism. Those analysts focusing on the religion try to make sense of the group’s distinctive brand of Islamic ideology as well as the “psychopaths” who choose to become its followers. Those fixated on the group’s violence posit that its seemingly unlimited capacity to brutalize and terrorize has few parallels among violent organizations, so much so that “even al-Qaeda,” as is repeatedly pointed out, has disavowed the group.

Nevertheless, as Marc Lynch recently argued in the Monkey Cage, putting the Islamic State in a broader comparative perspective shows that the group is hardly unique among armed non-state organizations. This in turn points to ways scholars and observers might most productively study and write about the group.

Much of the media coverage and popular discussion of the Islamic State has focused on the group’s atrocious acts of violence. In their orchestrated murders and in the savvyness with which they broadcast them to the world’s horrified viewers, they are perhaps unmatched in the present age. And yet, to portray the Islamic State as uniquely brutal or unrivaled in its savagery is to forget our unfortunate history – even recent history – that is filled with episodes of extreme violence against civilians committed in the name of some political goal. One would be hard pressed to argue that the Islamic State’s actions are more unconscionable than those of the Khmer Rouge who created the killing fields of Cambodia, or Renamo of Mozambique whose fighters specialized in the kidnapping, rape and mutilation of women, men and children, or the systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon in the Bosnian war; or that the group’s staged beheadings are any more appalling than the thousands of “forced disappearances” conducted behind the scenes in the Salvadoran conflict. The only difference between cases such as these and the Islamic State when it comes to violence is that the latter operates in the age of social media and uses it to the fullest for shock-and-awe effects.
Nor is the Islamic State unique in mobilizing its own interpretation of theology as part of an ideological-political campaign. The Darul Islam movement sought to found an Islamic state in Indonesia following independence from the Netherlands in 1948, and its fighters launched violent rebellions in various parts of the archipelago. The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) of Uganda and its predecessor, the Holy Spirit Movement, claimed as their goal the establishment of a theocracy based on the Ten Commandments; the LRA is now responsible for one of the longest running conflicts in Africa. Nor is the Islamic State unique in its transnational vision to create an Islamic state that rejects existing borders: Darul Islam reemerged in the 1990s in the form of Jemaah Islamiyah, which proclaimed a mission to create an Islamic state spanning Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and parts of Thailand and the Philippines.

The Islamic State certainly is not unique among violent organizations in developing networks of traffickers, dealers, and middlemen to secure enormous wealth from natural resources like oil, and the group is typical among rebel and terrorist organizations to capitalize on the political and institutional weaknesses of host states to launch military operations and take over territory. Neither does the Islamic State stand out for successfully creating its own civilian governance system in towns it secured. In places like Raqqa, Syria, it may have collected taxes, built infrastructure, posted traffic police at intersections and kept bakeries running while enforcing strict social codes with threats of severe punishment, including public execution, for deviant behavior. And so have many other militant non-state groups, as my ongoing research on rebel governance shows. In addition to creating sophisticated governance structures, the Naxalites of India ran their own banking system; the Eritrean rebels ran a pharmaceutical plant while operating a humanitarian wing that worked with international NGOs; their neighboring Tigrayan rebels conducted extensive land reform; and UNITA of Angola ran a mail system replete with its own internationally-recognized stamps, all in the midst of intense violent conflict against established states. Like the Islamic State, many groups, including Uganda’s National Resistance Army and Nepal’s Maoist insurgents, had a code of conduct for their fighters and laid out punishments for violations that included execution for the worst offenders.

Critics may charge that the Islamic State, far from ordinary, is in fact extraordinarily unique in its vision to fundamentally reconfigure the international political order itself as part of its all-encompassing goal to create an Islamic caliphate. There is no doubt this is a radical aspiration that surpasses other organizations in terms of its revolutionary zeal and global scale. It remains, however, just that – an aspiration – and again, the history of conflict has seen no shortage of aspirations that were deemed as threatening, revolutionary and fantastical in their own time. Talk is talk, and it is interesting and, as I argue below, indeed important to examine what groups claim about themselves. But putting explanatory stock into the ideologies without considering the instrumentalism behind them can do more to mislead than to inform.

The point here is not to downplay the threat posed by the Islamic State or to “normalize” its behavior by highlighting the group’s ordinariness among violent political groups. It is simply to stress that comparatively speaking, the group is not as exceptional as observers and the media have often characterized it. Putting the Islamic State into a broader theoretical and historical perspective – that is, beyond the frame of “Islamist terrorism” and beyond the post-9/11 period – is important because there are clear dangers in hyperbolizing the group’s own claims to exceptionalism. To unduly emphasize the Islamic State’s distinctiveness is to distort its threat, inadvertently boost its legitimacy, and worst of all, to directly play into its leaders’ hands. Whatever the Islamic State has achieved so far, history has seen much of it before in other contexts. Knowledge of these other contexts can therefore inform both scholarship and policy on this pressing issue.

That the Islamic State’s behavior is so consistent with that of so many other militant organizations – and this, despite all its efforts to establish itself as the only true vanguard of an Islamic State in the making – strongly suggests there
Islam and the Islamic State

is a strategic logic underlying the common behavior. This insight in turn suggests some scholarly approaches to understanding the group may prove more productive than others.

First, the banality of the Islamic State among violent political organizations suggests scholars should first and foremost treat the group as a political actor and seek to identify its political goals, capabilities, incentives and strategic calculations. In other words, scholars ought to engage in actor-centric analysis. Such an approach has reaped enormous benefits in conflict scholars’ collective efforts to understand phenomena such as insurgency, violence, rebel social service provision, war duration and termination, and foreign interventions in conflict. It is familiarity with this body of work that makes me not at all surprised that the Islamic State reportedly provides health services, taxes local residents, has an elaborate organizational structure (which looks not so dissimilar from the organigrams of other insurgent groups), enforces strict discipline among fighters and is selective in whom it kills. These are classic behavior on the part of strategic armed non-state actors with some amount of military strength.

All of this means, second, that religion-centric analysis may be less useful, even as regards a group that bases its raison d’être on a religious ideology and whose leaders claim to do everything in its name. The argument here is not that religion is unimportant – it clearly matters because it helps mobilize people around the group, attracts a stream of new recruits and threatens Islamophobic governments and people in the West in just the way the group might wish. Careful analysis of its religious ideology is worthwhile in the same way analysis of other war-fighting instruments, from violence, social service provision and propaganda, to alliance formation and compliance with international law, has been highly illuminating in making sense of rebel group behavior. But always, scholars examine these tools not as an end in and of themselves, but as part of a larger effort to understand how armed group pursue their wartime objectives, recognizing that battlefield fights are but one dimension of conflict. Likewise, any analysis of the Islamic State’s ideology that does not ask why the group chooses to formulate and propagate its ideology the way it does risks becoming, in spite of itself, detached from politics, and potentially serving as an uncritical endorsement of the group’s own claims.

An actor-centric analysis would have us asking not simply what the Islamic State does and says, but also why, or for what ends. It sees even extremist, seemingly fanatical leaderships like the one heading the Islamic State as rational and strategic, constantly making decisions based on an assessment of what course of action would best enable the group to achieve its objectives of increased military strength and control of territories, markets, ideas and people. After all, the Islamic State, when expedient, readily put ideology aside and made alliances with the remnants of Saddam Hussein’s Baath Party.

Critically, an actor-centric analysis has the Islamic State leaders exercising full agency over religion, whereas a religion-centric analysis would have religion driving the Islamic State leaders and their rank-and-file as if they were all but blind adherents – as if their ideology were in fact God-given rather than meticulously and tactfully crafted and propagated by the the Islamic State leadership itself.

Finally, conflict scholarship suggests it would be prudent to avoid making unfounded assumptions about why the Islamic State fighters do what they do, and instead allow for diverse motivations. Foot soldiers will all claim divine inspiration for their daily campaigns of killing and destruction – they can’t do otherwise if they wish to survive – but people may have joined the Islamic State for any number of reasons, including, certainly, religious conviction, but also adventurism, revenge, peer pressure, coercion, bribery and so on. To conclude that the source of their behavior is their religious devotion is to vastly underestimate human agency and strategic faculties and to baselessly buy into their propaganda.

Not only so, attributing actors’ behavior to their religious or other identities is to revert unproductively to primordialist thinking, which has long been abandoned
by the bulk of scholars who specialize in identity politics – in fact, the rejection of primordialism is arguably one of the few ideas around which there is now something of a scholarly consensus in this area of inquiry. People do not do what they do because they are Muslim or Christian or Serb or Hutu, or because Islam or Christianity or any ancient ethnic hatreds dictates them to; they do what they do because they think – note the agency – it helps them achieve specific objectives. Again, religion-centric analysis would lead us down theological rabbit holes while ignoring the counterfactual question of whether or not actors would, under the same circumstances, behave any differently if they adhered to a different religion or ideology. The many examples of the banality of the Islamic State suggest that for all the religious talk, the group’s behavior is familiar and even predictable.

Scholars now know much about how violent non-state groups behave. They – and policymakers – should use that knowledge to understand groups like the Islamic State and not be sidetracked by its extremism or by those observers who fall right into its propaganda traps by lending credence to the group’s own claims of exceptionalism.

Reyko Huang is an assistant professor of international affairs at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University.

---

**Why the Islamic State won’t become a normal state**

*By Lawrence Rubin, Georgia Institute of Technology*

There has been a recent surge of interest in what type of impact the Islamic State might potentially have on the international system. Most provocatively, in a recent Foreign Policy article Stephen Walt suggests that should the Islamic State win (i.e. survive), the U.S. should “live with it” and rely on a policy of containment. Over time, he suggests, the international community might come to accept the Islamic State into the community of civilized nations as it has accepted other revolutionary and expansionist states in the past, because the pressures of the international system would force it to change its barbaric behavior to survive as a recognized state. Walt’s argument challenges the conventional wisdom that the Islamic State would continue expanding territorially through violence to maintain its survival and to reestablish the Caliphate in pursuit of its ideological goals.

This realist account of the socializing power of the international system on actors even as radical as the Islamic State misses a crucial piece of this puzzle. It assumes that as states interact, they learn more about each other’s capabilities and intentions, decreasing the chances of armed conflict due to misperception. Moreover, as Walt claims in his book, “Revolution and War,” revolutionary states are likely to modify their short-term behavior with this new information. But what if learning more about your adversary is destabilizing rather than reassuring? As Barak Mendelsohn argues, the Islamic State’s goal is the destruction of the international order, yet Walt proposes that this very system should socialize states. The likely impact of the Islamic State’s survival as a revolutionary state in the Middle East is better understood not by realism but through a theoretical lens that takes seriously the effects of ideas and ideology both across states and inside them.
Realism tends to focus on external military threats to state. But this is not the most important security challenge in today’s Middle East, where ruling regimes are preoccupied with threats to their survival that are primarily ideological in nature and domestic in impact. Were the Islamic State to become a permanent political reality in the form of a recognized state, my research suggests that it would be destabilizing for the region, though not for the reasons most people may assume.

An internationally recognized Islamic State would create an ideational security dilemma with its neighbors in which ideological power, not military power, would be the primary trigger of threat perception and policy. Even if IS did want to become a legitimate state, the internal threat it poses through the potential recruitment and mobilization of the citizens of Sunni Arab states would make its socialization within the Middle Eastern order extremely difficult and unlikely. Neighboring states’ perception of threat is unlikely to decline if they fear their own population may be attracted to the ideology and symbols of the revolutionary regime. And the revolutionary regime may even be encouraged by this prospect. For example, the recent attacks by IS supporters in Tunisia, Egypt, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are manifestations of the Islamic State’s challenge to the political legitimacy and authority of neighboring regimes. It is precisely these domestic and systemic challenges, even absent a balance of power threat, that could lead to outbidding wars, domestic instability and even armed conflict.

What is an ideational security dilemma? Although it is similar to a traditional security dilemma, an ideational security dilemma has a different context and currency of power. A security dilemma, at the heart of international relations, is a structural condition in which one state’s moves to acquire security, which may very well be defensive, are interpreted as threatening by other states. A purely defensive action taken out of self-interest may be interpreted by another state as intent to prepare for a future aggression, and this perceived escalation could trigger arms-racing or armed conflict. Today, this means that the efforts taken by anxious regimes to counter IS ideas and recruitment might only accelerate the spiral of conflict, especially if efforts include internal repression that drives alienated mainstream Islamists into the hands of IS or sectarianism that pushes Shiite citizens away from the state.

This is why the call for a war of ideas against IS led by Arab regimes is likely to cause more instability and conflict, not less. Consider the history of the 1950s and 1960s, the so-called Arab Cold War. The Egyptian president at the time, Gamal Abdel Nasser, sought to control the meaning of Arabism as the foundation of both his regional power and his domestic legitimacy. As Michael Barnett points out in his book on the topic, the ensuing competition over the meaning of Arabism led to conflict between and within states. This was an important feature of the Arab Cold War, as was the competition between two Baathist socialist Arab republics Iraq and Syria from the 1960s onward. Ideas, in the form of political ideology, were the sticks and stones that buttressed political tensions. Today, similar to the pan-Arabism of that earlier era, the Islamic State draws strength from a set of ideas that may not be specifically embraced by most Muslims in the region but whose concepts about political and social order have broad resonance and, in some cases such as Saudi Arabia, are central to domestic legitimacy.

Should IS become a recognized state, this aspect of the region’s history would likely repeat itself. During the current period of societal crises, many political actors appear to understand that they may stand to reap bigger domestic and international payoffs by invoking transnational identities. Moreover, the security motivation to project ideational power stemming from domestic pressure to shore up the regime’s legitimacy may have international implications. Revolutionary regimes often face pressure to legitimize themselves, and they may look outward especially when the ideology that drives the revolution has a universal component (consider the humanist principles of the French Revolution, the internationalist ambitions of the Bolsheviks or the social-revolutionary appeal of the Islamic revolution).
As I argue in “Islam in the Balance,” this might take the form of attacking the legitimacy of neighboring regimes for not adhering to what they deem authentic Islamic practices and beliefs. These types of ideological appeals are evident in IS propaganda, and it is reasonable to assume it would be part of any possible domestic legitimation efforts as well. IS leaders have attacked the legitimacy of the Hashemite monarchy, the Saud dynasty, Hamas and even al-Qaeda.

The Islamic State’s effort to project this ideological power will almost certainly trigger defensive reactions from threatened regimes that play out in the religious public space. Neighboring states would likely respond the way they already have but with increased intensity in the ideological sphere through ideational balancing. This non-military response aims to mitigate the communicative power of an ideational threat through resource mobilization and counter-framing. Both domestic and foreign policies will then increasingly focus on bolstering beliefs about a targeted regime’s legitimacy, defending against rhetorical attacks or undermining the credibility of the source of the ideational threat. However, by arguing on Islamic terms against an Islamist threat, these regimes will continuously move the terms of combat further and more deeply onto the Islamic State’s preferred battlefield.

The Islamic State has already triggered some of this type of balancing. Jordan has gone so far as to change its flag, incorporating Koranic verses so as to solidify its Islamic identity and promote its image of Islam that expects political loyalty. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi’s directives to state sponsored religious institutions have a similar goal in mind, which have instituted many changes—from implementing strict supervision of public sermons (khutbah), to calling on clerics to “correct” flawed understanding of Islam, to closing down unofficial mosques outright. Most recently, al-Azhar has launched a cyberspace offensive called the online observatory, which attempts to correct misinformation about Islam circulating online and to respond to extremist interpretations of the religion. These programs are part of Sissi’s goals to “revolutionize Islam” and employ religious institutions to balance against the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood domestically and to combat ongoing and future confrontations with extremist ideas in general.

What does this mean for U.S. foreign policy? Why does this matter? It is critical to have a nuanced understanding of threat perception, both who and what drives it, that takes into account the regional players. This includes an assessment of how non-military forms of power, such as ideology, can not only trigger military conflicts but also constitute threats themselves. The United States neither has the tools to engage in these types of conflicts nor should it try. While military assistance is certainly important, and at times vital for the survival of allies, policy makers should recognize that military power has limitations, especially when the most destabilizing elements are not sticks and stones but words.

Lawrence Rubin (@lprubin73) is an assistant professor in the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at the Georgia Institute of Technology. He is the author of “Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics” (Stanford University Press, 2014).
How international relations got religion, and got it wrong

By Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Northwestern University

Twenty years ago, most scholars of international relations viewed religion as private and irrelevant to global politics. Today, that has profoundly changed. Everyone seems to be measuring, analyzing and alternately promoting and constraining religion in all manner of forms. Policymakers seek out representatives of moderate religion to create peaceable partnerships, while co-opting or sidelining their rivals. Scholars and advocacy networks model relations between religion and democracy, religion and peacebuilding, and religion and economic growth.

This new attention to religion is, at its base, predominantly about Islam. From 9/11 to the rise of the Islamic State, the “problem” that Islam is said to represent has led to a moral panic in Western democracies.

Islam is portrayed as the religion that is most recalcitrant and most resistant to Western-style modernity. It is seen as an agent that — like other religions, only more so — needs careful management to prevent it from igniting into violence.

Scholars and experts in the United States and abroad have built careers around reiterating the mantra that Islam must be reformed in the interest of world peace.

Islam is also seen as its own potential solution, as long as moderation is institutionalized, extremists marginalized and the tradition’s benevolent tendencies harnessed for the public good. “Good” forms of Islam are celebrated as sources of morality, community and discipline, while “bad” ones are criticized as the root of all global instability and insecurity. As Andrew Shyrock puts it, “Muslims and particular forms of Islam are understood, with varying degrees of anxiety and affection, as problems that must be solved, or as solutions to problems.”

Efforts by scholars to engage with the public discourse surrounding Islam have proven frustrating. As Jillian Schwedler observed earlier this year, the perceived need to defend the “moderation” of Islam in the public policy debate can leave scholars trapped within unsophisticated and corrosive categories. The sterility of debates such as whether inclusion of Islamists moderates them or whether the Islamic State is truly Islamic, led Schwedler to argue for the need to “make explicit the ways in which certain categories have dominated our analyses and think through whether or not there is more insight to be gained by refining or by abandoning them.” The same stance should now be adopted by those engaged with the public arguments over religious freedom and calls to reform Islam.

Religious freedom, particularly with regard to Islam, has evolved into a major policy arena. In the United States, this logic is institutionalized in the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom and the Office of Religion and Global Affairs, with a supporting cast of nongovernmental initiatives, memos and conferences dedicated to supporting moderation, religious freedom, and toleration while countering violent extremism at home and abroad. The latter is especially prevalent since the rise of the Islamic State.

Last week, Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Tex.) introduced the Countering Violent Extremism Act to create a federal Office of Coordination for Countering Violent Extremism at the Department of Homeland Security. The bill defines violent extremism as “ideologically motivated terrorist activities.”

This agenda is also intensifying in Canada and in Europe, reflecting a growing global consensus that extremist “bad” religion is the problem and moderate “good” religion the solution. President François Hollande announced an increase in defense spending of nearly 4 billion euros between 2016 and 2020 to confront extremist threats at home and overseas. The European Parliament and the Canadian government have created offices—such as the Canadian Office of International Religious Freedom and the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance — to conduct
outreach to religious leaders, protect religious minorities, promote tolerant religion and counter extremism.

The problem is that the understanding of religion underlying these efforts is deeply flawed. Religion, law and politics have always intermingled — and it cannot be otherwise. As Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabar argues in this series, religious interpretations are often an outcome of politics. Religion cannot be disembodied and isolated from the broader social and political fields in which it is entangled. It also cannot be divided between good and bad. There are no untouched religions waiting to be recovered from political irrelevance or reformed into peaceable governing partners.

Religions, including Islam, do not cause violence. Nor do they cause peace. Religion is better understood as are other intersected categories such as gender, race and class: it is deeply enmeshed with legal forms of collective governance in complex and context-specific formations. The religious-secular opposition is itself unstable, shaped by social forces, institutions and practices that cannot be reduced to either of the two sides of the binary. Religion occupies different spaces under modern regimes of governance, some of which are often described as “secular.”

My new book, “Beyond Religious Freedom,” proposes a new vocabulary for the study of religion and governance. Distinguishing between “expert religion,” “official religion,” and “lived religion,” it disaggregates religion in order to access a richer field of religio-political realities. Taking Islam as an example, “lived” Islam would refer to the practices of ordinary Muslims as they interact with religious authorities, rituals, texts and institutions as they seek to navigate and make sense of their lives, connections with others and place in the world. It identifies a diverse field of human activity, relations, investments and beliefs that may or may not be captured in the set of human goings-on identified as “Islamic” for the purposes of law and governance. “Governed” or “official” Islam, on the other hand, is religion as construed by those in positions of political and religious power, including the state and various forms of law. Examples include the official Islam of state institutions — such as the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs, the Turkish Diyanet, the French foreign ministry, and the Egyptian state—as well as the official Isals of various supranational institutions — including the International Criminal Court, the European Union and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Finally, “expert” Islam refers to Islam as construed by those who generate knowledge about Islam including scholars, policy experts, religious authorities and government officials.

Disaggregating Islam into these three categories reveals that expert and official construals of Islam do not and cannot exhaust the field of contemporary Muslim religiosities. Lived Islam does not align with an understanding of Islam as a singular, bounded cause of political behavior. It often diverges from Islam as construed by the Turkish, Egyptian, French, Saudi — or American — state. The practices and traditions of lived Islam often dissent from orthodox, elite or official understandings of what Islam is or should be.

Neither “Islam” nor “Muslim political actors” are singular, agnetive forces that can be analyzed, quantified, engaged, celebrated, condemned, or divided between good and bad. References to “Muslim political behavior” should be met with skepticism. To rely for policy purposes on the category of an Islamic actor or Islamic state, as does the U.S. initiative on Countering Violent Extremism, mistakenly presumes a form of actor-ship motivated by Islam. This is sociologically untenable.

There is no singular Islam, just as there is no single Christianity or Hinduism. As anthropologist Samuli Schielke explains, “Islam, like any major faith, is not simply something — it is a part of people’s lives, thoughts, acts, societies, histories and more. Consequently, it can be many different things — a moral idiom, a practice of self-care, a discursive tradition, an aesthetic sensibility, a political ideology, a mystical quest, a source of hope, a cause of anxiety, an identity, an enemy — you name it.”

Singling out Islam as a cause of political behavior and a platform for conducting foreign policy obscures the broader and always entangled economic, historical,
geographic, political and religious contexts in which discrimination, violence and coexistence occur. We lose sight of the bigger picture. Social tensions and conflicts that have roots in multiple contributing factors are depoliticized, their causes explained away through reference to intolerant theologies.

The recent debate over whether the Islamic State is Islamic is one example. As Anver Emon explains, the moral panic surrounding the Islamic State arises out of a context in which the “Islamic” is being rendered as an ideology to respond to a broader history of political, economic and social frustration and dispossession. Emon posits: “suppose instead of asking whether ISIS is Islamic, we were to say that ISIS is as much Islamic as it is a product of broken promises at the end of the British and French mandates; ISIS is as much Islamic as it is a product of the American interventions in Iraq; ISIS’s brutality is as Islamic as the Ku Klux Klan’s lynching of Black Americans was Christian, both Islam and Christianity having been used to justify violent brutality.”

Disaggregating religion highlights the gaps between the constructs of religious governance — such as religious freedom, religious outreach and interfaith dialogue — authorized by experts, states and other authorities, and the lived experiences of the individuals and communities they aspire to govern.

Differentiating between expert, governed and lived religion also highlights a dangerous trend of tying “expert religion” to state power in the age of the so-called war on extremism.

Today, on a scale not seen since the height of the Cold War, expert religion is being mobilized in the service of governed religion — and the aims of the state. A new partnership between the State Department and the American Academy of Religion (AAR), for example, announces that State is “keenly interested in drawing upon the insight of scholars of religion to help formulate and implement US foreign policy. In support of this vital effort, … [t]hese fellowships provide a wonderful opportunity to offer your expertise toward reducing violent conflict, improving regional security and protecting human rights.”

Experts who study religion have an important role to play in educating students and informing the public. Informed public engagement and writing on these issues is critical inside Washington and beyond. However, there is an important distinction to be made here. Peddling scholarly wares in the service of the state is not equivalent to writing and speaking in an effort to inform public debates. The former, as in the AAR-State partnership, inevitably involves pressuring that power’s case. The latter, as in Schwedler’s analysis mentioned earlier, does not.

In a recent article in Foreign Affairs, Charles King wrote that “democratic societies depend on having a cadre of informed professionals outside government—people in universities, think tanks, museums, and research institutes who cultivate expertise protected from the pressures of the state.” No more is restraint, reflection and understanding protected from the immediate interests of the state more urgently needed today than at the intersection of religion and global politics.

From academic institutions to government bureaucracies, our understandings of law, politics, history and more need to pay careful attention to religion, but it cannot be imagined as a variable, or as an agent segregated from other dimensions of human sociality.

Bureaucracies do not need independent offices predicated on the notion that religions are entities set apart from the world requiring special treatment. To presume that religion is a stable category of law and governance decreases our capacity to understand complex conflicts. It favors forms of religion authorized by those in power, and it excludes other ways of being and belonging.

What history says about the prospects for Islamic democracy

By John M. Owen, IV, University of Virginia

Scholars, pundits and journalists often look to Western history for analogies to help us understand ongoing dynamics in the Middle East: Jihadi terrorists are like European anarchists a century ago; the Arab Spring was like the European Revolutions of 1848; the spread of the Islamic State and the deepening Saudi-Iranian rivalry means that the region is entering its own version of the miserable Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648); and so on. As Yuen Foong Khong has written, analogies can be misleading, sometimes tragically so. However, when used judiciously they can be helpful, and my recently published book, “Confronting Political Islam,” is built around several such analogies. One particularly telling comparison concerns the prospects for Islamic democracy in the Middle East.

Opinion polls routinely show that a majority of the region’s inhabitants want democracy. The popular demonstrations and movements of 2011, the Arab Spring, suggest that they mean it. Yet in most Middle Eastern countries, majorities also say Islam plays a strong role in politics. Islamic democracy seems, on its face, inherently contradictory. How can people govern themselves and also live under Islamic law? Surely Arabs (and Persians and Turks and Pashtuns and others) must choose one or the other.

Here is where historical analogy can be useful. There was a time when many in the West also believed strongly that liberal democracy (the marriage of individual freedom and democracy) was an oxymoron. What if the majority wants to curtail individual rights? What gives way? Who decides? This contradiction vexed many European and American thinkers in the 18th and 19th centuries. Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher of the Enlightenment, made clear that his law-governed state could not be a democracy, because in a democracy there is no check on the popular will. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French social theorist whose “Democracy in America” (1835) remains a masterpiece, feared that democracy tended toward an egalitarian “tyranny of the majority” over the individual. John Stuart Mill, the English philosopher, was impressed with Tocqueville’s conclusion and argued that government should be elected by all but run by the enlightened few.

What Mill was doing, of course, was one version of what Britain, the United States and dozens of other countries did over time: finding ways to join individual rights with majority rule in a stable regime. In a liberal democracy, neither liberty nor majority rule is maximized. Liberal democracies have institutions that manage this kind of conflict, typically a legislature, a system of courts and a constitution defining the powers of each. Under these institutions, each generation in a country decides how much popular sovereignty to trade for how much individual freedom. In dozens of countries, this hybrid regime has proved not only sustainable but, to its citizens, normal and natural. Liberal democracy, once viewed as self-evidently impossible, is now broadly seen as normal, unexceptional and desirable.

Can Islamic democracy also come to seem normal and natural? The tension here is similar but different: What if the majority wants a law that contradicts sharia? In principle, institutions could do for Islamic democracy what they do for liberal democracy by empowering jurists (clergy), or interpreters of sharia, at some expense to the majority. Suppose an Islamic democracy had a freely elected legislature and a high court of Islamic jurists, with a majority of parliament wanting to relax divorce laws but a majority of the court believing that would violate sharia. The two bodies would need to have rules, tacit or explicit, designed to produce an outcome that would maintain the regime’s legitimacy in the eyes of a majority of citizens. Each generation would need to agree to these rules or renegotiate them. In this way, the supposed contradictions between religion and democracy could be managed, just as they are for liberalism and democracy.
Unfortunately, analogies from Western history offer less hope for Islamic democracy in terms of existing conditions in the Muslim majority world today. The West’s past suggest that, for a hybrid form of government to spread and flourish in a region, it must take hold in a large and influential country that interacts significantly with that region and is manifestly stable, secure and prosperous over time. In the late 19th century, British elites continued to fear the effects of democracy on liberty, particularly as socialism became increasingly popular. They saw a hopeful exemplar of liberal democracy across the Atlantic. A. V. Dicey, a British constitutional scholar, wrote in 1887, “The plain truth is, that educated Englishmen are slowly learning that the American Republic affords the best example of a conservative Democracy,” by which he meant a democracy that respects individual property rights. The British began to expand the franchise to include the laboring classes, just as the United States had done several decades earlier.

Looking at the Middle East and its borderlands, it is difficult to find an exemplar of Islamic democracy. Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh are all majority Muslim democracies, but their interactions with Middle Eastern states are too slight to qualify them as exemplars. Iran boasts of its Islamic republic but clearly is not democratic enough for many of its young citizens. Egyptian democracy looked so promising in 2011 but lies in tatters today. Turkey, in its first few years under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) governance, appeared the best model of Islamic democracy, but President Erdogan has been wrenching the country toward authoritarianism for the past two years. Only Tunisia qualifies as an Islamic democracy; but it is too small, and its democracy too precarious, to qualify as an exemplar worthy of imitation by larger states in the region.

The good news from Western history is that Islamic democracy may well be a viable regime in the Middle East at some point. The bad news is that this point may yet be far in the future, as it must await the durable success of Islamic democracy in an Egypt, a Turkey, a Syria, an Iraq or an Iran. Today, the outlook for such a state appears bleak; and the main burden for improving those prospects lies not on the world’s liberal democracies— which, after all, worked out their own hybrid regime in decades past—but on Muslim-majority societies themselves.

John M. Owen IV is the Ambassador Henry J. and Mrs. Marion R. Taylor professor of politics and a faculty fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. His latest book is “Confronting Political Islam: Six Lessons from the West’s Past” (Princeton University Press, 2014).
Frames at play: Beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism

By Nora Fisher Onar, University of Oxford and Transatlantic Academy

The following condenses parts of the theoretical section of my monograph-in-progress entitled Acts of State. It aims to help open the fields of comparative politics and international relations to insights from the performative turn in the humanities and humanistic social sciences via Turkish and Middle Eastern studies.

The Middle East is in turmoil. This fact raises a multitude of questions: Why is the region so conflicted? Why do – indeed why should – we in the West care? And why do our responses so often prove not only inadequate but also counterproductive?

We can begin to answer this complex set of questions via the notion of frames. Frames, as Goffman showed us, are a set of concepts and theoretical perspectives that “organize experiences and guide the actions of individuals, groups, and societies.” Frames serve at least four functions: (i) furnishing our basic assumptions about the world; (ii) helping us to filter and organize vast amounts of information; frames thus (iii) shape our tools for action; and, as such, (iv) are not mere rhetorical devices but determine outcomes. Frame analysis has been fruitfully deployed across the social and management sciences: psychology, organizational behavior, media and communication studies, sociology, and politics. The study of frames – and the conceptual apparatus from which they emanate – has considerable purchase in comparative politics (CP) and international relations (IR), but it is often only employed implicitly.

Orientalism and Occidentalism are among the most pervasive and enduring frames in the governance – and contestation – of world affairs. They derive from interactions over at least a dozen generations between peoples who, broadly speaking, originate from the northwestern peninsula of Eurasia and those who originate from the rest of the Eurasian continent. The Orientalist repertoire predates but also co-evolved with many principles of international order. These include notions like sovereignty and self-determination, civilization and progress, modernity and territoriality to name but a few. As Said and others have shown, the Orient in general and Islam in particular served as a constitutive Other of Western modernity. Orientalism persists despite half a century of post-colonial critique and activism. It shape-shifts to fit the needs of diverse religious and secular, state and societal actors. Orientalist frames also evolve in response to changes in the regional and global balance of power.

Occidentalism arose in response to the encroachment of an expansive West. It builds on the same culturalist frame as Orientalism but assigns different values and hierarchies. Its strategies include inverse binaries, cherry-picking and selective synthesis (for example the adoption of Western modes of production but the rejection of Western ethical and political systems). Societies are inevitably transformed by such processes, such that both Occidentalists and Orientalists have become eminently modern in outlook and toolkits. However, a leitmotif of Occidentalism is the lauding of an authentic and spiritual East over a soulless

1 These four functions correspond to the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and praxis dimensions of social scientific inquiry.


and materialist West. Occidentalism too comes in religious and secularized, literary and political permutations. Recent expressions include the civilizationist populism of Turkey’s Erdogan and Russia’s Putin. In some strands of Islamist and Orthodox Occidentalism there are eschatological overtones: a clash of universalisms vis-à-vis the West. In extreme variants, the moral claim to manifest destiny is used to rationalize violence. Coercion, more often than not, is directed at vulnerable groups such as religious or sexual minorities within the societies rather than the still powerful West. Paradoxically then, Occidentalism can reproduce Orientalist denial of Eastern agency.

At a time of Western retrenchment driven by material as well as ideational factors, Orientalist and Occidentalist frames that are blinded to the “grey zones” are doing their four-fold work, that is, furnishing the assumptions, filters, and tools with which we act in the world. Groups like the Islamic State, for one, have masterfully “keyed” radical Occidentalism to the register of a hypermediatized era. In so doing, they have spurred the liberal secular West and its Christian doppelganger to vilify the Islamic world yet again. Dissonant information is filtered: atrocities committed by Christian or secular Westerners are seen as aberrant, while jihadist violence is portrayed as the core of Islam. Such readings, in turn, shape Western tools of response. Examples include the ramping up of assimilationist laicism in France after the Charlie Hebdo attacks and the unleashing of a military-bureaucratic juggernaut to combat violent extremism. This response has concrete consequences. American-Muslim innocents are murdered in a small college town; the United States re-engages militarily in the Middle East. As Charles King notes: “In this framework, the Boston Marathon bombing becomes a national security problem, whereas the Sandy Hook massacre remains a matter for the police and psychologists – a distinction that is both absurd as social science and troubling as public policy.”

Frames then, at an admittedly high level of abstraction, account for why there is turbulence in the Middle East, why we care, and why our answers all too often exacerbate problems. However, there is one thing that Orientalism and Occidentalism fail to do: capture the lived realities of billions of ordinary people and their leaders. Their experiences, I argue, are an unplumbed resource for the study and practice of international relations.

**Politics at Play and the Eastern Question(s)**

A robust body of social psychology research tells us that most people in most places do not embrace total social identities most of the time. Our identities are works-in-progress—plural, overlapping and contingent. We can capture this complexity by recognizing that frames are not just forms, but acts, special acts that “do things.”

Spectacle, after all, is among the earliest forms of

---


9 On the de facto coalition between the “new atheists” and neo-conservatives see Muqtadah Khan, “New Atheists and the Same Old Islamophobia” *Islamic Monthly* (Fall/Winter) 2014.

10 Arguably, with sufficient data in cases like the Chapel Hill killings, one could use methods like source triangulation and process tracing to claim a causal relationship between Orientalist and Islamophobic frames in the media and the actions of a lone wolf racist. The point, however, is not to claim a mono-causal relationship between Orientalism/Occidentalism and a given outcome, but to show how frames define the parameters in which actions are imaginable.


12 J.L. Austin coined the term. Although my work is driven by Goffman and the performance studies approach to performativity, it perforce engages (post-)structuralist views on the notion associated with the linguistic and psychoanalytic readings of Austin, Foucault, and Lacan. I am nevertheless wary, among other things, of their tendency to trivialize agency.
governance (indeed theoria before Plato was the task of the mendicant thinker reporting back to his city on public pageantry observed abroad).  

The act of play is a promising point of departure, because it is universal – an intrinsic feature of the human condition that precedes culture – yet it complicates universalism – a culturally-infused view from somewhere extrapolated to everywhere. Play, as such, is valorized across ethical traditions. As Huizinga put it: "You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play."

Play is nonetheless constitutive of ritual, culture and the social construction of meaning. In his seminal work Homo Ludens (from Latin ludere – "to play; to mimic; to mock; to deceive"), Huizinga suggested that play requires a separate sphere with its own rules into which players voluntarily enter. This enables, for the duration of the act, a new order in which extent frames and hierarchies can be contested and transformed. Turner envisaged such space as liminal, a realm of "betwixt and between," where hierarchical frames are inversed or leveled, and where hybrid and transgressive forms can be flaunted.

In tandem with its expressive dimension, play has pedagogic and strategic functions. It enables learning as well as forgetting, self-defense as well as self-release. Goffman recognized this when he parlayed his everyday performances—with their intertwined emotional and calculated character—into the notion of strategic interaction. For example, on the stage of pan-Arab politics, as Barnett has shown, the symbolic resources of Arabism were channeled by self-interested leaders to achieve legitimacy and check one another’s authority. Homo Ludens underpins game as well as performance theory. It holistically bridges interpretive and rationalist approaches to politics.

On this basis, Acts of State proposes a theoretical framework for understanding the interplay between the political actor, audience, setting, scenario, and the mode of propagation. Actors and audiences are front-stage: the success of any political spectacle hinges upon their encounter. In the wings, but also key to understanding aspirations and interests, are producers and writers, choreographers and critics.

Structural features of performance inflect upon the picture. Settings – from specific stage (like parliamentary pulpit or diplomatic summit) to the theaters in which they are nested (like electoral politics or foreign policy) – determine the protocol of political displays. In our time of mass media and politics, the television set as well as the “street” – not to mention squares – are political stages.

This is as true in Ramallah as on Wall Street, of Tahrir and Taksim as of Ukraine’s Maidan. Actors with acumen mobilize these structural elements toward kairos: that “propitious moment” in time “when an opening appears which must be driven through with force.”


14 For a sweeping overview see Bellah, 2011.


18 In this regard, Acts of State seeks to expand space for rigorous, analytically eclectic scholarship. See Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein. Beyond Paradigms: Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

19 See, for example, Todd Gitlin, The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left. (Berkley: Univ of California Press, 1980).

20 Oxford English Dictionary.

A gas-masked protestor interpreting the dance of of Sufi whirling dervishes (sema) during Turkey’s Gezi Park demonstrations of 2013.

For a kairotic political performance to endure, however, it must be absorbed into chronos: historical time. Turning to the literature on collective memory, Acts of State shows how (re)enactments of iconic performances over time engender enduring imagery and tropes. These are propagated via multiple media by state and social actors. In the Middle East, for instance, notions like “nation” and “civilization,” “Europe” and “Islam” form a collective repertoire of adjacent and frictious yet overlapping meanings available for appropriation in familiar – but by no means fixed – configurations.

There is no monopoly on the uses and abuses of such scenarios. They may be deployed by political elites to inculcate social roles and hierarchies. Authoritative leaders like Peter the Great, Victoria and her viceroy and the Meiji emperor – not to mention Ataturk and the Assads – have scripted, starred in and paid for extravagant spectacle.

However, the performances of ordinary people, as Bayat has shown, also can create a cascade, impelling change from below. Recognizing acts like veiling and the qat chew as political (among other things) helps to register the acts of those denied a formal place in national and world affairs. Extraordinary displays by ordinary people, such as Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation, can ignite revolutions, reminding us of the power of performance as a “sensational force that disrupts, [and] redirects…form.” Indeed, the performative prism can help shed light on the multiple masculinities – youthful and vulnerable as well as paternalistic and powerful – and the rare femininities that infuse Middle Eastern and international politics alike.

Moreover, marginalized perspectives are gaining traction in an era of new media. Political acts are choreographed for YouTube and Instagram to reach wider audiences than more traditional displays in D.C. or Davos. Scholarship that neglects this trend runs the risk of redundancy. It

22 E.g. Halbwachs, Nora, Foucault, Connerton and the literature inspired by their anti-foundationalist approaches to history.


24 Asef Bayat, Life as Politics, How Ordinary People Change the Middle East, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009).


was those who saw that the internet was enabling a new “Arab public sphere” who were equipped to account for the Arab uprisings and their consequences. Savvy “marketing of rebellion” helps explain the ISIS phenomenon. By staging a handful of horrific executions the group has garnered continuous coverage and goaded an otherwise isolationist U.S. president and public into re-entering the Middle Eastern fray. Acts of State accordingly traces evolving media and dissemination technologies and strategies vis-à-vis the Eastern Question(s) from the late nineteenth century (the Crimean War was arguably the first mass mediatized spectacle) to the present. In so doing, it explores the impact on international politics of evolving modes of propagating political performance.


In short, if we take as our starting point not Homo Orientalis or Homo Occidentalis but Homo Ludens – man and woman as player – we wield an epistemology and methodology that enables a different praxis. The quite recent turn from History with a capital “H” to multiple historiographies has established a precedent: the power of frames notwithstanding, it is possible to systematize knowledge using pluralistic and mutable categories.

Nora Fisher Onar is a research associate of the Centre for International Studies at the University of Oxford and 2014-2015 Transatlantic Academy Fellow.

---

Why academics can’t get beyond moderates and radicals

By Jillian Schwedler, Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York

For much of the past decade, analyses of Islamist groups have been organized around a distinction between moderates and radicals. Analysts and scholars have never agreed on precise definitions of either, but the distinction has largely been used as a point of departure. In the post-Arab-uprisings Middle East, with sectarianism increasingly salient and the Islamic State (also called ISIS) altering the landscape of jihadism, scholars should ask whether these categories continue to provide the kind of analytic traction that made them valuable in the past. The constant pressure on scholars of Middle East politics to respond to a growing wave of Islamophobia has complicated efforts to rethink these categories. Public engagement is a vital part of the academic mission, but has our need to constantly reiterate in public that all Muslims are not Islamists and that most Islamists are moderate constrained our scholarly analyses by forcing us to retreat into the language of moderates and radicals?
Much of my own work on Islamists has embraced the idea that the distinction between moderates and radicals is both analytically useful and empirically accurate. In 1996, during an early stage of my research for “Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen,” a member of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood expressed exasperation with then-recent “regulations” promulgated by the Taliban in Afghanistan, including a law that a man must have a beard at least a fist in length. I hadn’t raised the topic, but he conveyed that he had been speaking with colleagues about the Taliban earlier that day, and he said to me, “Well I guess this means that I’m not a good Muslim!” Indeed, by that standard, most male members of the Muslim Brotherhood – for whom a mustache seemed to be a favored aesthetic choice for facial hair – were not “good” Muslims. For the whole of my period of field research in the mid- and late-1990s, moderate Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood and radical Islamists like the Taliban and al-Qaeda, were easily distinguishable and also highly antagonistic toward the other.

Hamas and Hezbollah raised a small conceptual bump: Critics who opposed describing them as moderate were quick to point to their use of violence, which therefore must put them into the radical category; others, myself included, noted that they were largely moderate in their domestic context and used violence only (at that time) against an external occupier (Israel). (In recent years, Hezbollah has turned increasingly toward using violence against domestic challengers.) Conceptually, most groups could still be situated fairly easily in the moderate-radical binary that held currently in the literature.

These concepts were then put to use in a range of analyses about moderate and radical Islamists. But many of the “puzzles” that animated that larger research agenda actually resulted from of the construction of the concepts themselves. By this I mean that once we (as scholars) settled on a common-sense distinction between moderates and radicals, a whole set of research questions flowed forth, largely about the morphing, transition or evolution from one to the other. Moderates and radicals were no longer concepts that facilitated understanding. They were empirical categories, and our scholarship focused on a range of questions stemming from that distinction. We examined the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, the exclusion-radicalization hypothesis, the exclusion-moderation hypothesis, auto-reform, the conveyor belt, the firewall, de-radicalization and so on. Each of these was primarily concerned with explaining either a group’s characterization and/or its movement from one position to another. My April 2011 review essay in World Politics underlined the staying power of this paradigm in scholarly literature, and the mass of manuscripts sent to me for review by journals and publishers suggests these debates are still thriving.

Great stuff, to be sure. But I have always felt uneasy with those categories and debates – even as I participated actively in them – because the empirical reality felt more like a complex spread of positions across multiple issues than a single continuum with moderate at one end and radical at the other. But because these analyses also spoke to policy concerns as well as liberal anxieties about “them” – anxieties sometimes held by scholars as much as policymakers and publics – the language of moderates and radicals thrived. At the very least, it worked well to distinguish groups that posed threats (to us or our beliefs, whatever that means) and groups that did not.

Along the way, of course, other concepts emerged, some taking a cue from how Islamists described themselves and others were devised more exclusively by scholars. Of the former, for example, we started employing the concept of jihadis (rather than radicals or extremists) for groups that prioritized a particular interpretation of jihad – some self-described as jihadi while others did not. Concepts like Asef Bayat’s use of “post-Islamism” emerged to capture what he argued was a significant change in Islamist politics in Iran: a form of political Islam that differed significantly from conventional definitions of Islamism as political actors who frame their projects in terms of the implementation of sharia in all aspects of life, including at the government level. Instead, Bayat saw a public that wanted religion to play a central role in public life but that embraced an Islam of pluralism and individuality rather than obedience.
and duties. When our existing concepts were not doing the heavy lifting, if you will, in capturing particular phenomena, we tried out new ones: quietist, Salafi-jihadi, quiescent jihadi, Wahhabi, Ikhwani, literalist, contextualist, accommodationist, non-accommodationist, centrist, wasati, reformist, revolutionary, conservative, traditional, pro-regime conservative, Islamo-liberal, state Islamism, official Islam, post-Islamism and so on. But despite all this conceptual innovation, the moderate-radical conceptual universe still dominates the discourse.

So why have these concepts stuck? In part, they have enabled us to produce an important and interesting set of debates, and they continue to make good sense analytically. But their persistence is also affected by the Islamophobia spreading rapidly if largely outside of the academy – on conservative news and talks shows, by certain think tanks and among a public aware (if not watching) the spectacles of fellow nationals being beheaded. (Beheadings, like many punishments adopted by the Islamic State, are also carried out by the regime of Saudi Arabia, a point not lost on academics but systematically overlooked in the mainstream U.S. media, as if posting a video of the event makes the act itself less barbaric.)

When people see the Islamic State they see “Islam,” and they are afraid. In response, we feel rightly compelled to use our positions in the academy and as published professors as platforms to fight the demonization of an entire faith due to the horrific acts of a tiny minority. Ethically, it is right that we should do so, and perhaps it is even our responsibility. But when I speak against Islamophobia to media, at public events, in student forums and so on, I find myself pretty consistently falling into the language of moderates and radicals, noting (correctly) that most Muslims are not Islamists and that most Islamists are moderate and not radical. It makes me sad and exhausted to even need to assert, yet again, that the vast majority of Muslims reject jihadi extremism – just as the vast majority of people of any faith reject similar violence done in the name of their faith. But extremist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have been a game-changer in terms of public debate, and we may sadly need to speak against Islamophobia for years to come.

Have the ways in which we frequently seek to respond to Islamophobia – that is, by reasserting the distinction between moderates and radicals – also unintentionally ensured the dominance of that framework in our scholarship? Put plainly, do the best terms for engaging as public intellectuals also provide the most promising frameworks for advancing scholarly analysis? I think probably not. Scholars already overwhelmingly agree that jihadi views are accepted by only a tiny portion of all Muslims, so we do not need to reassert that point in our scholarship. I have previously argued that we should stop citing Islamophobic arguments as if they reflect legitimate and respectable arguments put forth by serious scholars. Although it still has currency in some circles outside of academia, Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations,” for example, is a sloppy piece of scholarship that has been taken to pieces in numerous reviews for its innumerable historical inaccuracies and its spurious causal assertions about clashing civilizations. When scholars cite such works in our scholarship, we elevate its status by treating it as if it demands a serious scholarly engagement. We need to stop allowing our responses to Islamophobia to hold back our scholarly work.

If we can put aside Islamophobia and have a conversation among scholars (who are not limited to those employed in academia or think tanks, or even to those with advanced degrees), where do we start? I see much happening in the region for which I do not find our existing frameworks and concepts entirely satisfying. In no particular order, here are some issues with which I think we need to contend:

The Islamic State: I am confident in labeling the Islamic State a radical and extremist organization. But there seem to be important distinctions among groups in the radical category that we want to attend to in our analyses. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are at odds with each other, so is “jihadi” still the right category? Should we speak of “caliphi jihadis” for IS and its followers and “non-caliphi jihadis” for al-Qaeda? Or should we just note that IS sparked a division among many jihadis around questions
relating to shura and the caliphate? To pose a familiar but extremely useful research question, “What is IS a case of?”

Public support for the Islamic State: What do we make of the public opinion from the region that a non-trivial percentage of “ordinary” (non-Islamist) Muslims do not view the Islamic State as a terrorist organization? While scholars largely reject “terrorist” as a category of actors and speak instead of political violence as something certain actors do, we should not overlook the data itself. Do our existing frameworks really help us understand complex positions of public opinion? We might fall back on explanations of how terrible U.S. foreign policy decisions have played a role in the growth of certain such groups – a connection that is pretty unquestionable. But those arguments do not really advance our understanding of what is happening now.

Salafi political parties: One striking development during the Arab uprisings that began in 2010-2011 was the organization of Salafi groups into political parties, notably in Tunisia and Egypt. But as formerly quiescent groups that do not espouse the use of political violence, I am not sure how to categorize them other than as simply “Salafi political parties.” They meet the criteria for “moderate” of most if not all of the definitions, but it hardly feels right to put them into the same analytic cluster as the Muslim Brotherhood. Do we need new categories, or just more adjectives?

Internal Muslim Brotherhood dynamics: We have long known that the Muslim Brotherhood groups in different countries do not constitute a monolith, but all of them have been characterized as moderate. Scholars who follow the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have long asserted the need to distinguish between different generations or trends within the Brotherhood; scholars of the group in Jordan have written about the tensions and internal battles between Hawks and Doves. Do these internal dynamics render the overall term moderate less useful? As these groups are pulled in different directions, are different categories needed? If many of the wasati (centrist) and progressive members have left the Egyptian and Jordanian branches of the group, for example, is the remainder still “moderate” in the same way?

State-led Islamic politics: Numerous scholars have written about state-led Islamization, but this literature has not yet cohered into a larger set of propositions. How might we think of Islamist politics internal to states? For example, does it make sense to compare strong state Islamism (e.g., Iran, Saudi Arabia), weak state Islamism (e.g., Morocco, Turkey, Jordan) and the Islamic State’s attempt to actually create a new Islamist state? That sentence took me about 30 minutes to write because I was struggling with how to categorize different kinds of state-led “Islamist” projects. I am not sure that my categorization is adequate, but I think some intellectual effort in thinking this through could be very exciting and fruitful.

Official Anti-Muslim Brotherhoodism: What are we to make of the vilification of the Muslim Brotherhood by so many regimes in the region? With Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates branding the group as a terrorist organization and supporting the violent repression of the Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan’s Brotherhood is struggling to hold itself together and maintain a “positive” relationship with the regime – a relationship that has never really been good since King Abdullah II took the throne. Following the burning to death of a Jordanian pilot in a cage by the Islamic State, the king may well find good reason to keep the Brotherhood closer in order to marginalize Islamic State supporters as threats to the regime. But the longstanding tolerance of the Brotherhood by some regimes is definitely breaking down. Does it still make sense to think of oppositional Islamist groups separate from the analysis of state-led Islamist projects? Can we speak of Islamized state repression?

Sectarianism: Sectarianism is on the rise and not going anywhere soon, sadly. Here is a hypothesis: States play as large a role in the production of sectarian tensions (think Saudi Arabia and Iran) as do non-state actors. Is that assertion correct? We have largely bracketed the discussion of sectarianism (e.g., studies of Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain) from discussions of political Islam, focusing instead on
power rivalries (at the state and non-state level) and the impact of institutional arrangements in exacerbating sectarian tensions (the structure of parliament and other governing institutions, for example, in Lebanon and Iraq). Is it a mistake to drop the discussion of political Islam from discussions of sectarianism?

*Tribal conservatism:* I was always uncomfortable distinguishing “Islamist” and “tribal” branches of the Islah party in Yemen because many “Islamists” have tribal connections and many tribal members, hold highly conservative religious views. With the discussion of tribes growing due to events in Libya, Yemen, Jordan and Iraq, should we think more about the relationship between tribal and Islamist politics? As the Houthis take control of the Yemeni government, is this a case of competing power groups? Of contending visions of Islam in politics? Tribal politics? All of the above? None of the above?

*Repression:* The literature on repression and radicalism tells us to expect that President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi’s extreme repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt will likely lead to the emergence of a radicalized and militant underground Islamist movement over the next several years. Perhaps it might result from members who break away from the group, as it did in the 1970s with the Islamic Jihad groups departing from the Brotherhood’s moderate commitments to gradual reform. Or perhaps it will emerge from entirely outside of the Brotherhood. The collective wisdom of decades of scholarship on exclusion and radicalism tells us, however, that some kind of extremist movement will emerge. Is an end to state repression the only way to stop this process? What specific mechanisms might push trends in the other direction?

*Beyond groups:* The focus in the scholarship on groups and how they compare has produced important insights but also obscured many other processes. Here I want to reiterate a point that I have made previously: We should not exclusively make groups and movements the object of our studies of Islamist politics. It is certainly useful to distinguish differences between, for example, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State, but if we really want to shake up our assumptions, categories and theories – and thus generate the kinds of new insights that we can use to build and test new theories and propositions – we would do well to not only explore new typologies for Islamist groups, but to instead make different kinds of practices and processes as our objects of analyses. For example, we might study protests in general and allow the role of Islamists to emerge more organically in our analyses. We could examine questions of gender, neoliberal reforms and the spread of social media and see when and how Islamist groups or Islamist politics emerge into our analyses, rather than study Islamist views on gender, Islamist views on neoliberal reforms or Islamist use of social media.

I am not sure that our concepts and propositions should be abandoned entirely, nor am I arguing that no one should ever make groups and movements the focus of their analyses. Rather, I am hoping we can make explicit the ways in which certain categories have dominated our analyses and think through whether or not there is more insight to be gained by refining or by abandoning them. The uprisings have provided fascinating cases to advance the existing set of debates, but they have also afforded us an opportunity to shake up our approaches and, in particular, to ask whether many of the common-sense distinctions and concepts that structure our analytic frameworks should be revised or even retired. At the very least, we can weaken the effects of Islamophobia on our scholarship, even if we are forced to contend with it in other realms.

Jillian Schwedler is a professor of political science at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York. She is author of “Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen” (Cambridge University Press, 2006), editor of “Understanding the Contemporary Middle East” (Lynne Rienner, 2013) and co-editor of “Policing and Prisons in the Middle East: Formations of Coercion” (Hurst, 2010).
How the two big ideas of the post-Cold War era failed

By Amitav Acharya, American University

Two major prophecies about international order emerged as the Cold War ended. One was Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis, first outlined in an article in the National Interest in 1989 then elaborated in a book published in 1992. It pronounced total victory for Western capitalism and liberal democracy over all other competing ideologies and even predicted a boring future of peace and tranquility. The other was Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis, first presented in a Foreign Affairs article in 1993 and then in a book published in 1996. He was decidedly pessimistic, predicting that the end of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry would be followed by a new wave of conflict fueled by civilizational competition and animosity.

Both Fukuyama and Huntington might claim vindication in the recent turn of events. Many have interpreted the emergence of the Islamic State as evidence of the truth of Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis. On the other hand, in an article last year in the Wall Street Journal and in his book, “Political Order and Political Decay” Fukuyama who foresaw the end of great power rivalry but continued strife in the Third World, claims that his “end of history” thesis remains “essentially correct” even as he acknowledges that liberal democracies and civil liberties might suffer from “decay,” as may be happening in the United States. In a 2002 op-ed for the International Herald Tribune, now the Global New York Times, I challenged the Fukuyama thesis by arguing that liberal democracy in the United States and the West could be in “retreat” due to the attack on civil liberties in the name of the war on terror.

Despite my respect for the intellect of their protagonists, I argue that the two big ideas of the post-Cold War era have been proven to be not only mostly wrong, but also wrong-headed. Islam and the Islamic world have played a significant role in disproving and discrediting these ideas and not necessarily in the most predictable ways.

Let’s start with Fukuyama. The original end of history article pointed to the “unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism,” and claimed that the “triumph of the West, of the Western idea is evident in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism.” This was an ironic claim, since the defeated alternatives to Western liberalism, namely fascism and communism, were still Western ideas. So the end of history was really the victory by one set of Western ideas over another.

Fukuyama also predicted greater geopolitical stability in the world. For him, only “large states still caught in the grip of history” can produce and sustain big ideologies to challenge Western liberalism and thereby cause “large-scale conflict” in the international system. The only candidates for offering such a challenge after the end of the Cold War would be Russia and China, but both were embracing Western-style markets and even, to some degree, political openness, thus moving out of said grips of history.

Yet Russia and China might signal the “return of geopolitics” in the international system. What about the Islamic world? Fukuyama dismissed the potential of Islam to offer a political alternative to either liberalism or communism. Certainly Islam, without a large or great power in its ranks, could pose no traditional Realpolitik challenge to liberalism. Yet history does not begin or end with the big ideas of big powers. The Islamic world is a massive demographic entity. There are 49 Muslim majority countries in the world, about one fourth of the total U.N. membership. The world’s Muslim population, at 1.6 billion, constitutes 23 percent of the total world population, with significant growth among its youth. Indeed, these demographic facts feature prominently in Huntington’s list of reasons for the clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. Adding China’s 1.35 billion to the equation means that about a third of the world’s population theoretically remain outside of the West’s triumphant ideology. Even an ardent believer
in democracy, such as this author, finds Fukuyama’s claims that there are no “real alternatives” (what constitutes real?) to Western style liberal democracy and that “we should have no doubt as to what kind of society lies at the end of History” too sweeping, arrogant and deterministic.

Did the Arab Spring vindicate the Fukuyama thesis promoted by the neo-con ideologues of the George W. Bush administration, whose invasion of Iraq was legitimized as a means to promote democracy in the Arab world? No. The impetus for the Arab Spring came mainly from within Arab societies and had little to do with Western help. There is no direct link between the downfall of Saddam Hussein and the Arab Spring. By now, it is also clear that the Arab uprisings were more of a protest against corrupt and repressive regimes than a call for the establishment of Western style liberal democratic institutions. If they were, they have certainly failed in most places except Tunisia.

While it would be wrong to say that a single or consistent Islamic world view runs through Muslim states and societies, it is equally wrong to assume that they simply identify with or adopt Western liberalism. This should not be confused with an acceptance of the Huntingtonian clash of civilizations. The vast majority of Muslims and Muslim nations who do not accept Western liberalism similarly have no sympathy for al-Qaeda or the Islamic State or other form of Islamic extremism. In fact, several are themselves targets of the terrorist groups.

Huntington’s clash of civilizations has gained support in recent years as the new paradigm of global conflict replacing the Cold War and identifying the threat against which the US and the West could focus and mobilize its strategic response. It reinforced the fear of Islam and might have offered an implicit justification for the United States invasion of Iraq. However, like Fukuyama’s, Huntington’s thesis has flunked its test in the Islamic world and elsewhere. Much of the Islamic world rallied to the United States after 9/11. Islamic states were far more critical and uncooperative when the United States under the George W. Bush presidency invaded Iraq in 2003, but this was because the invasion flouted international norms and disdained the UN Security Council. Now, some of the most prominent Islamic countries have joined hands with the United State to fight the Islamic State and other terrorist groups in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. At the very least, as I had argued in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, Huntington’s thesis underestimated the power of national interest, regime security and resilience of state sovereignty over civilizational affinities.

While some point to the conflicts in Middle East and Ukraine as proof of Huntington’s pessimism—and bearing in mind that Fukuyama too believed that conflicts other than those among the great powers would persist—recent and long-term trends in violence may come as a surprise. The 2013 Human Security Report finds that between the early 1990s (when both ideas emerged) until now, “overall conflict numbers have dropped by some 40 percent, while the deadliest conflicts, those that kill at least 1,000 people a year, have declined by more than half.” The Armed Conflict Survey conducted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) paints a more negative picture, estimating a rise in the number of fatalities from major conflicts from 56,000 in 2008 to 180,000 in 2014. Interestingly enough, only two countries, Iraq and Syria, take up about half of deaths: approximately 88,000 of 180,000 in 2014. Even if one assumes that these two conflicts are civilizational in nature—rather than social, economic or political causes like repression—the evidence of a world on fire caused by a clash of civilizations is still limited at best. The IISS survey also confirmed that the overall conflict numbers in the world is still going down, from 63 in 2008 to 42 today.

More damning for the Huntington thesis is the fact that the overwhelming majority of the targets and victims of violence perpetrated by Islamic extremist groups are Muslims. According to the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database, between 2004 and 2013, about half of all terrorist attacks and 60 percent of fatalities caused by terrorist attacks took place in just three countries: Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, all with Muslim-majority
populations and epicenters of the War on Terror. A 2011 report from the U.S. government’s National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC) estimates that “in cases where the religious affiliation of terrorism casualties could be determined, Muslims suffered between 82 and 97 percent of terrorism related fatalities over the past five years.” Contrary to Huntington’s thesis, the violence that occurs in the Islamic world is mainly a clash within a civilization. The above also applies to Ukraine. Here is a striking example. Huntington had predicted in his 1996 book, “If civilization is what counts, violence between Ukrainians and Russians is unlikely.” Obviously it does not.

Some of the long-term causes of international stability, according to the Human Security Report, include the end of colonialism and the Cold War, international norms against the use of military force except in self-defense or authorized by the UN, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and “peacemaking” operations to prevent and stop wars, enhanced state capacity in securing resources to promote economic development and address grievances in the Third World, and growing economic interdependence among nations. One other factor identified by the Report is “inclusive democratization” in previously authoritarian countries that contributes to non-violent conflict resolution and hence internal stability within these states.

It is clear that many of these factors, which are unlikely to disappear, cut across civilizational fault lines. They are not uniquely the result of Western ideologies and leadership but are actively supported by both Western and non-Western states and societies. For example, China and other authoritarian nations of East Asia led the way in building state capacity and economic growth and fostering economic interdependence. Countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia are among the world’s largest contributors to UN peacekeeping. Peace in today’s world is possible because civilizations can and do learn from each other and cooperate. This is a lesson of history that will never end. The only history that is rapidly ending is that of the relatively short period of Western dominance in the long march of civilization.

Amitav Acharya is a professor at American University’s School of International Service, the UNESCO Chair in Transnational Challenges and Governance and Chair of the ASEAN Studies Center. He is the author of “The End of American World Order” (Polity Press, 2014).
Why Tunisians (don’t) vote for women

By Lindsay J. Benstead, Portland State University, Amaney Jamal, Princeton University, and Ellen Lust, Yale University

Women’s under-representation in political leadership is a longstanding problem that exists at a nearly universal level, despite progress toward gender equality in some countries. A recent U.N. report on women offers staggering evidence of gender inequality, demonstrating that no country in the world has reached parity. And, even in the United States, one need only witness the debate over Hillary Clinton’s potential presidential candidacy to realize that even where female representation is promoted, gender stereotypes and biases are widespread.

The problem is particularly apparent in the Arab world. Government officials, activists and scholars warn that gender inequality in this region violates fundamental human rights, thwarts development and fosters instability. Most attempts to explain gender gaps in the Middle East and North Africa are based on cultural and modernization theories, with a particular focus on how oil or Islam shape preferences and practices. Yet, these explanations neglect the reality of gender inequality as a universal problem, evident in societies with different religions and levels of socioeconomic development, and draw attention away from a broader theory that can explain gender inequality in the Arab world and beyond.

In our recent article in Perspectives on Politics – which is temporarily ungated – we put forth a theory of electoral bias that goes beyond the Arab world and applies to biases based on gender and other traits, including religiosity. Drawn from social psychology, role congruity theory was developed by Alice Eagly and her colleagues based on their work uncovering the “wonderful women effect.” This research shows that although women were seen as extremely capable in arenas such as child rearing and hosting and often viewed as superior to men with regards to traits such as honesty and kindness, they were not seen as having qualities associated with effective leadership (e.g., decisiveness, strength). As a result of this mismatch, people frequently undervalue women as potential and actual leaders because they attribute different stereotypical traits to men and women, based on gender roles stemming from sex differentiation in the labor force. Moreover, they hold established notions of a “good leader” that are often at odds with these stereotyped traits of women. This means that equally qualified women will be less likely to be chosen for leadership roles and, when they are, their performance will be discounted vis-à-vis equally performing leaders from the dominant group (i.e., males). We argue that the extent to which voters view gender and another salient trait, religiosity, as signaling capable leadership depends largely on preconceptions about characteristics of good leaders and the stereotypes they hold about people with these traits.

We demonstrate the existence of electoral bias against female and religious candidates and the strength of role congruity theory in explaining it through a survey experiment of 1,202 Tunisians conducted in October and November 2012. The experiment presented respondents with photographs of potential candidates (male and female, apparently religious or non-religious) and asked how likely they would be to vote for them as shown in Figure 1. By examining the extent to which people say that they would be willing to vote for different candidates, based solely on pictures, we can begin to understand the extent to which they hold biases.

![Figure 1: Questions and Photos in the Survey Experiment](image-url)
The experiment uncovered evidence of biases against female and religious candidates in Tunisia (see Figure 2). In general, respondents were more likely to say that they would vote for an apparently secular male – the candidate who looks most like the typical leader in Tunisia (and many other places worldwide) – than any of the other three candidates. And, voters’ perceptions regarding the congruence between group characteristics and leadership were the most powerful predictors of attitudes toward potential candidates, not respondents’ religious views or levels of socioeconomic development. People who saw women and leadership and/or religion and leadership as more congruent were less likely to hold biases against the other three candidates. However, while those candidates drew support from largely one segment of the population – such as voters who support equal rights for women preferring secular female candidate – the secular male was equally electable among all sections of society, regardless of voters’ views on religion and politics or women’s rights (see Figure 3). This shows how “looking the part” gives candidates from the dominant group a leg up in elections. The religious appearing female and male, in contrast, tended to face negative biases among people who see religion and leadership as incongruent.

Figure 2: Support by Candidate Gender and Religious Dress

Figure 3: Support for Candidates by Religious and Gender Role Congruity

Our study contributes a new theoretical framework for the cross-regional study of women, religion and politics. Substantial literature regarding women and politics in the United States highlights the role of trait, competency and issue stereotypes in explaining why so few women attain elected higher office. But, this literature does not explicitly draw on role congruity theory, which emphasizes the mismatch between these stereotyped traits and traits of good leaders.

The study prompts scholars, analysts and policymakers to rethink explanations for women’s disempowerment in the Arab world. As discussed above, existing literature focuses narrowly on the often-polemical debate between Islam and structural conditions, such as oil and economic modernization. This debate not only views the Arab world as exceptional, but it also sees unalterable conditions as the foundation of gender bias in the region. In contrast, recognizing the more general mechanisms of role congruity theory that underpin gender bias in the Arab world points to potentially powerful policy interventions.

The theory suggests that there are two ways then to reduce political bias against disadvantaged groups: first, by altering views of traits held by women, minorities, religious or other groups, and second, by expanding views of traits associated with effective leaders. Policymakers should establish institutions that help assure representation of...
gender, religious minorities or others. Quotas and other policies that bring women and minorities in the public sphere can reshape stereotypes of women and religious candidates as leaders, while fostering more diverse conceptualizations of effective leadership, independently of social or economic changes associated with modernization. Similarly, greater turnover in leadership and, potentially, changes in leadership styles may foster appreciation of a wider range of leadership styles and skills.

Lindsay J. Benstead is an assistant professor of political science at the Mark O. Hatfield School of Government, Portland State University. Amaney A. Jamal is the Edwards S. Sanford Professor of Politics at Princeton University and the director of the Mamdouha S. Bobst Center for Peace and Justice and of the Workshop on Arab Political Development. Ellen Lust is a professor of political science and founding director of the Program on Governance and Local Development, Yale University.
Islam, Identity and State
Rethinking religion and politics: Where the fault lines lie in the Arab world

By Nathan J. Brown, George Washington University

In analyzing the relationship between religion and politics in the Arab world – and where the zones of contention are and where they may recur and even become endemic – scholars may be looking in the wrong places because our concepts are grounded in the wrong history.

Looking in the right places may depend in part in recasting our understanding of what “religion” is and considering diverse historical experiences, especially with state formation, that have cast the issues in different ways. International relations scholars have taken to criticizing themselves for overlooking religion. Whether such a criticism is fair or not, I think the deeper problem is that when we approach the relationship between religion and politics, we do so in categories and questions we have inherited from modern European history. Generally we lean on two sets of concepts and questions generated from our understanding of the 17th century and two more from the 20th century.

From the early modern era, we get our basic understanding of religion as a matter of individual faith and a privatized set of beliefs; we also get an understanding of the relationship of religion and politics as being of one between “Church” and “state.” From the 20th century we get two more ways religion and politics intersect: Religion can be a source of identity, operating like ethnicity and nation to lay claim to loyalties and motivate group behavior. And we also get religion as a mobilizer, for elections (through religiously-based parties) or social movements.

These relationships, while developed in specific European experiences, travel well. They are not at all rigid. Nor do they lack richness. As someone who has written on Islamist movements and parties, I am hardly the one to call for abandoning interest in them. The categories do not need to be replaced, but they need to be supplemented.

Let us begin with one of the central terms that arise when we speak of religion and politics in the Arab world: the sharia. The Islamic sharia is commonly defined simply as Islamic law. But it is also much more: Sharia is ethics, ritual, moral guidance and family relationships. And it is much less: Seemingly important spheres lie, as some sharia scholars suggest, beneath the dignity of the Islamic sharia, such as traffic law or even much of routing governance and regulation. Such omissions and vagueness, however, include not only whether human beings may turn right on a red light. Also much of what we would consider constitutional law is not included in the Islamic sharia.

It may make sense to translate the phrase that is most often used in the Arab world – “the Islamic sharia” – a bit more literally as “the Islamic way of doing things.” Seen this way, Islam and the sharia become virtually coterminous (as they are often seen). And more broadly, this kind of re-translation directs our attention to a different way of defining religion – not only as faith, ritual and text, but also – and more critically for politics – as a set of practices and structures that shape or even govern the ethics of interpersonal behavior.

When it comes to politics and religion, what matters in such a conception is not always what resides in the heart, but how people act in public or interact with each other. Apostasy may be repugnant to God in the view of almost all Muslims, but many sharia authorities suggest that God will know best how to deal with the offense and the matter can be left to Him. Public apostasy – that is, proudly renouncing Islam and mocking it rather than simply quietly abandoning it – is a threat to the social fabric however, and society must respond by punishing the offender.

Religion is not merely something intrinsic to the individual but also a language for people to communicate with each
other and a set of institutions. In other societies, many may detach discussions of justice, morality and political and social behavior from those of faith and the divine. But in many discussions in the Arab world, religion provides an important anchor for such discussions. I do not mean to say there are no Arabs who will make a point of detaching religion from ethics – I have met many. But they rarely do so explicitly in public – and that is the point. To do so would be to talk in a language that would not make a lot of sense or even be alienating, as if divine guidance and ultimate values have no role in social life.

Religion is above all a public matter and therefore woven into the structure of the modern state: Ministries of education write religious textbooks; ministries of religious affairs administer mosques; state muftis offer interpretations of religious law; courts of personal status guide husband and wife and parent and child to conduct their interactions the Islamic way. Jocelyne Cesari has found that this is not a phenomenon of the Arab world but probed it more broadly – and noted some very significant variations – in the Muslim world.

Of course, some of these features may be traceable back to Islamic doctrine, the experience of the early community of Muslims and core beliefs derived from sacred texts. But in their particularities – and even in many of their most general features – these features are rooted much more in the process of modern state formation. State muftis are largely a 19th and 20th century innovation. Ministries of religions affairs, the nationalization of waqfs (endowments) and zakat (alms) are as well. The entire category of “personal status” law – perhaps the most essential element of the sharia as Islamic law for many adherents – simply does not exist as a distinct body before the 19th century.

There is no doctrinal base for states to claim that conducting marital relations in an Islamic manner is more important to God than trading goods in an Islamic way. Yet, marriage, divorce and inheritance emerged in the colonial era as the one area of law where states tread most carefully. States take special care to introduce measures that can be more easily expressed in the terms of older Islamic jurisprudence – increasing women’s rights, for instance, is generally pursued (when it is) by drawing on existing if previously ignored interpretations or implementing older concepts in newer ways rather than repudiating them.

Moreover, sectarianism as a political force has emerged with such viciousness in recent years not because of doctrinal divisions but because of the way certain states (such as Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Bahrain) were built and others broke down or were destroyed (such as Iraq and Syria).

We need not stop asking whether Islamists will win the next election or whether Islam as a political force will bring down the international order, but we need to shift our attention to important religio-political developments that we might otherwise overlook or underemphasize.

But I have made things sound too simple for Muslims and the states where they live. Defining religion in the alternative way I offer makes matters clearer but not less contentious. By describing religion as a set of practices and structures that shape or even govern the ethics of interpersonal behavior; by directing our attention to religion as specific behaviors, a set of institutions and a language for discussion, I do not mean to suggest consensus were none exists. I have most significantly passed over how the nature of proper behavior is debated. I have elided over how the authority claimed by institutions engenders not only controversy over their structure, operation and power. The use of religion as a language neither prevents misunderstanding nor resolves all disputes.

As students of politics, we should focus our attention on the set of controversies that have resulted from the way religion has been structured, practiced and understood. These controversies should provoke lines of questioning such as: Why many of the important disputes in the Arab world over religion will not be just over what religion teaches but over whose voice should be heard; why such debates will not simply be about doctrine but also about politics. Indeed, why the line between doctrine and politics can sometimes be blurry; why public matters become
political matters so easily; why liberalism in the political sense (and its tendency to privatize important elements of religion and morality) might be weak but also why economic liberalism (with its suspicion of attempts to moralize and to impose obligations on society) sparks little resonance. Or why Danish cartoons provoke not simply a desire to turn the page but also to require a political response, and why religious freedom is often defined in communal as much as individual terms.

To reuse an analogy I have drawn on before, the relationship between religion and state may owe far less to Jean Bodin or other theorists of sovereignty and more to Antoine St. Exupery whose pilot in the “The Little Prince” as a child drew a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. By folding religion into itself, it is not clear whether the state is dominating religion, whether it is the other way around, or whether what has been produced is something else entirely that requires great imagination to understand.

Nathan J. Brown is a professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, where he is the director of the Institute for Middle East Studies. He is the president of the Middle East Studies Association and a nonresident senior associate at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

---

Are Muslim countries really unreceptive to religious freedom?

By Daniel Philpott, University of Notre Dame

The West’s cultural war over Islam has entered an intense new phase since the rise of the Islamic State. The debates are familiar: Is Islam inherently violent and intolerant, or is it peaceful, diverse and often the victim of Western domination? A good criterion for answering the question is religious freedom – the civic right of persons and religious communities to practice, express, change, renounce and spread their religion. Whether the adherents of one religion can respect the beliefs and practices of another, or whether they respond to this otherness by violence or discrimination, is at the heart of these debates.

Whereas some scholars view religious freedom as a Western value derived from Western history, the principle has a claim to universal validity. For one thing, it is ensconced in the major international human rights conventions. It can also be derived from the value of religion itself, in which people across an enormous variety of times and places have sought fulfillment. Considering that religion is at its most authentic when it is freely chosen, the conclusion that the state ought to guarantee the right to pursue that fulfillment unimpeded follows naturally.

Islam is often portrayed as inherently hostile to religious freedom. Incidents of Islam’s alleged intolerance have dominated global headlines at least since Sept. 11, 2001 – for example, the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim in fall 2004, the protests over Danish cartoons mocking the Prophet Mohammed published in 2005 and the deadly shooting at the offices of Charlie Hebdo newspaper in France. For critics like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, this religious intolerance represents the very essence of Islam and requires nothing less than a forceful reformation of the religion to make it compatible with liberal values.

Is it true that Islam is uniquely unreceptive to religious freedom? Comparative political science can offer some
helpful perspective. An aggregate, satellite view does indeed show a dearth of religious freedom in Islam. A comparison between the world’s 47 or so Muslim-majority countries and the rest of the world – derived from measurements developed by sociologists Brian Grim and Roger Finke and undergirding the Pew Forum’s rankings on religious freedom – shows that Islam clearly has considerably lower levels of religious freedom than the rest of the world and Christian-majority countries. In their 2011 book published on the same data – “The Price of Religious Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century” – Grim and Finke show that 78 percent of Muslim-majority countries have high levels of government restrictions on religious freedom, compared with 43 percent of all other countries and 10 percent of Christian countries.

Grim and Finke’s measurement of religious freedom captures two sorts of curtailments of religious freedom. The first is the Government Restrictions Index, which looks at constitutions, laws and policies carried out by regimes. The second is the Social Hostilities Index, which looks at religious freedom violations carried out by actors outside the government – terrorists, for instance. Grim and Finke deploy 20 indicators to measure government restrictions and 13 to measure social hostilities. On this basis, they give scores for both indices to 198 countries. To avoid “shooting at a moving target” given the rapid changes underway in the Middle East, I am assessing these countries as they stood in 2009, prior to the Arab Spring and dramatic changes in countries like Turkey.

Do these aggregate scores prove that Islam is indeed generally inhospitable to religious freedom, then? No. Zooming in from a satellite view to a more fine-grained view reveals far greater diversity. First, it shows that 12 out of 47 Muslim-majority states fall into the category of “low restrictions on religious freedom,” meaning that they are essentially religiously free. Even among the other 35 Muslim-majority states, which have moderate, high or very high levels of restriction, there are significantly different patterns of repression, which yield different conclusions about Islam. There are two patterns in particular, namely “Islamist,” which represent 21 of these countries, and “secular repressive,” which represent 14 of these countries.

The Islamist pattern represents those Muslim-majority states that deny religious freedom by using the state’s laws, policies and coercive power to promote and enforce a highly restrictive and traditional form of sharia, or Islamic law, in all areas of life – economy, culture, religious practice, education, family life, dress and many others. Such states include Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council members, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq and the Sudan, but also (beyond the Middle East) Malaysia, Indonesia and Nigeria. Iran and Saudi Arabia arguably deserve the status of standard-bearers due to how widely they are emulated and how actively they seek to spread their version of Islam.

Islamist countries offer the strongest evidence against Islam’s openness to religious freedom. But they are not the only sort of Muslim-majority countries that deny religious freedom. Of the repressive Muslim-majority countries, 40 percent fall into a “secular repressive” pattern. Examples of such countries, which repress religious freedom in the name of secular authoritarian regimes, include Uzbekistan, pre-Arab Spring Egypt, pre-AKP Turkey, Algeria and pre-revolutionary Tunisia. If the Iranian Revolution is the inspiration for Islamist states, the French Revolution is the model for this pattern. Here, the power of government is also used to manage religion, but on behalf of an agenda of modernity involving social equality, nationalism and economic development along Western lines. Secular repressive regimes deny religious freedom by heavily restricting the activities of Muslims and often minority religions, too. The roots of this denial are not traditional Islam, which such regimes seek to contain and privatize, but not to promote. The standard bearer of restrictive secular regimes is the Republic of Turkey, founded by Kemal Ataturk in 1924. After World War II, many Arab states followed this model as well.

Finally, the Muslim world also contains religiously free regimes, adding even further complexity to the negative judgment of the satellite view. Examples of such regimes
include Kosovo, Djibouti, Albania, Mali, Senegal and Sierra Leone - most of them noticeably outside the Arab world. These regimes – about one-quarter of Muslim-majority countries – show that the denial of religious freedom is far from the whole story in the Muslim world. There may be no systematic explanation for why these countries are religiously free. For some, the roots of freedom may lie in a particular form of Islamic theology or culture that embodies tolerance. In others, freedom may have arisen through a modus vivendi between Islam and other religions at some point in the country’s history. All of these cases, though, show that Muslim populations can, under certain circumstances, prove hospitable to religious freedom.

While Islam may suffer a dearth of religious freedom in the aggregate, Islam is not necessarily the reason behind this dearth. Secular repressive governments are a widespread source of repression in the Muslim world. Even Islamist regimes often have their origin in historical circumstances that belie an easy linkage of Islamic teachings with religious repression. The Iranian Revolution of 1979, for instance, cannot be understood apart from the severe secular repression of Shah Reza Pahlavi’s secular repressive regime of the mid-twentieth century. This, combined with the presence of religiously free countries in Islam, points to the possibility that religious freedom in the Muslim world might expand.

Daniel Philpott is a professor in the department of political science and Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. He is also director of Notre Dame’s Center for Civil and Human Rights. He is the author of “Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Political Reconciliation” (Oxford University Press, 2012).

Why ISIS is not all of political Islam and what it means for democracy

By Jocelyne Cesari, University of Birmingham and Georgetown University

The rise of ISIS has triggered coalitions among Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia to fight against “political Islam.” One issue with such initiatives is their tendency to lump together ISIS with other forms of political Islam like political parties and social movements and to label them terrorists, with the ultimate goal of legitimizing existing authoritarian rulers. For example, since the removal of President Mohamed Morsi from power in 2013, Egypt’s military regime has attempted to root out the Muslim Brotherhood by killing protesters, jailing the group’s leaders and activists, declaring the movement a terrorist organization and freezing its assets. The military justified the banning of the Muslim Brotherhood as a way to stop the Islamicization of Egypt.

However, references to Islam as the religion of the state and to sharia as a source of legislation that existed under the Sadat and Mubarak regimes still remain in the 2013 constitution adopted by the military regime. It would be then misleading to envision the current turmoil in the Middle East as a fight between “secular” regimes and “Islamic” opponents. The ideological vision of the caliphate propagated by ISIS has little to do with the caliphates of Islamic history. It is instead a transnational version of the hegemonic Islam built by the postcolonial nation-states.

In most Muslim-majority countries, Islamic parties do not have a monopoly on political Islam; rather it is a foundational element of the nation-states. Although most of the founders
of Muslim-majority countries were indeed westernized, they nevertheless included Islam in the state apparatus, spurring its politicization by turning it into a modern national ideology and operating as a common denominator for all political forces, secular or otherwise. As such, political Islam should be understood in a broader context that goes beyond Islamist political ideology or Islamic parties.

In my recent book, “The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity and the State,” I argue that both the state and the Islamists have been instrumental in politicizing Islam. In this broader sense, political Islam includes the nationalization of Islamic institutions and personnel under state ministries and the use of Islamic references in law and national education. More specifically, the adoption of the nation-state by Muslim-majority countries after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 has been the decisive political change leading to the reshaping of Islamic values and institutions. These changes have translated into a brand new status of the religion that I call the hegemonic status of Islam.

First, it is important to note the difference between a dominant religion, an established religion and a hegemonic religion. A religion is dominant when it is the religion of the majority of a given country. In such cases, the dominant religion continues to impart historical and cultural references considered “natural” and “legitimate.” Religious symbols and rituals become embedded in the public culture and the country. Examples of such dominant religions include Protestantism in the United States or Catholicism in France and Poland. An established religion is one recognized by law as the religion of the country or the state and sometimes financially supported by the state, like the Church of Denmark. Usually, the existence of an established church is not incompatible with the legal protection of religious minorities and freedom of speech. A religion becomes hegemonic, however, when the state grants a certain religious group exclusive legal, economic or political rights denied to other religions. In other words, religious hegemony refers to legal and political privileges granted to a specific religious group, which in most, but not all, cases is the dominant religion.

Second, hegemonic religion and states’ regulations of religion are not the same. The latter may assume several forms, with legal neutrality on one end of the spectrum, legal privilege on the other end and many nuances between the two. Legal neutrality, as understood and codified in most secular democracies, entails recognition and legal protection of all religions. Separation of religion and state is not a necessary prerequisite for legal neutrality, which can be implemented even when there is state cooperation with religions (e.g., most European democracies). It is worth noting that legal neutrality does not mean that the practice of law is always neutral. Frequently, the dominant religious group serves as an implicit standard for the legal work concerning other religious groups. Most importantly, legal neutrality has been continuously challenged throughout history by discriminatory political practices. One of the most recent examples is the increase since 9/11 of restrictions on Muslim minorities in Western European democracies.

The unexpected and often unseen consequences of legal privilege are state restrictions and controls over the activities of the official religion and usually involve:

- a ministry of religious affairs and administration to manage the official religion;
- government regulation of the use of religious symbols or activities;
- state laws and policies that limit freedom of expression (apostasy laws);
- penalties for the defamation of the official religion (blasphemy laws); and
- government interference with worship.

The other side of legal privilege is the tacit or explicit discrimination of religious groups not recognized as the official religion.
To summarize, the hegemonic status of a religion is a combination of two or more of the following characteristics: nationalization of institutions, clerics and places of worship of one religion; insertion of the doctrine of that religion in the public school curriculum; and legal restrictions on freedom of speech and expression as well as women’s rights (including marriage, divorce and abortion) based on the prescriptions of that religion. Most Muslim-majority countries, including Turkey, possess two or three of these features. The only exceptions are Lebanon, Senegal and Indonesia. Although discriminatory practices do still exist in these countries, they are interestingly the only ones that qualify as democracies, according to the Freedom House index.

While democracy can accommodate some forms of state involvement into religions, the hegemonic status granted to one religion can challenge democratic life or the transition to democracy. Hegemonic Islam is usually correlated with higher levels of violence among citizens and a lack of democracy. Hegemonic religious traits, especially in combination, are strongly and statistically significantly associated with lower levels of democracy. Thus states that give exclusive, rights, privileges, status and benefits to a single religion are significantly less likely to be democratic. Muslim majority states, especially in the Middle East, are more likely to have hegemonic traits, though these traits are by no means exclusive to these states.

These hegemonic forms of Islam have been decisive in the framing and evolution of Islamic movements and their leaders from Hassan Al Banna to Zuwahiri and Bagdadi. Unlike what Islamist actors promote, their vision of Islam vis-à-vis citizenship, law, political community does not “go back” to the pre-modern theological discussions on these topics, but is actually an amplification of the modern forms of Islam built by the secular nationalist rulers.

Contradicting most modernization theories, the exportation of the Western secular project to new Muslim nations led to a counter secularization of sorts even in the most secularly oriented states like Turkey, Egypt, Iraq and Tunisia. In other words, the confessionalization of Islam led to its politicization. Religious identity and belonging have become embedded in nationality and regimes of citizenship, thereby influencing the definition of religious minority and the conditions for apostasy and conversion. As a result, Islam as a modern religion has become more far-reaching and controlling on the religious self than it was in pre-modern Muslim polities. Thus, the problem is not that “Islam needs to be reformed or modernized” as we often hear in political or even scholarly circles. The problem is that this reform and modernization became part and parcel of nation-state building and led to an unprecedented politicization of Islam through the conflation of national and Islamic belonging. As a consequence, Islamic parties and Islamic movements are an amplification of political Islam. In the same vein, the globalization of this vision by Al Qaida and ISIS is another iteration of the collusion between religious and political belonging, while invalidating the national identity to give priority to the ummah (community of believers) expressed as a combatant community.

Jocelyne Cesari is a professor of religion and politics at the University of Birmingham and a senior research fellow at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Politics at Georgetown University.
How to interpret Iran’s Islamic rhetoric

By Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, Texas A&M University

The impending deadline for negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program has focused attention on competing interpretations of the role of religion in Iranian foreign policy. The Islamic Republic of Iran is often portrayed as a uniquely ideological creature. For the Princeton historian Bernard Lewis, Iran’s Islamist ideology entails an apocalyptic force that converts mutually assured destruction from a deterrent to an “inducement” for Iranian “religious fanatics.” According to such scholars, a nuclear-armed Iran would be likely to use those weapons in ways different from any other state in history because of its extreme eschatological worldview, making it impossible to trust Iran to adhere to any negotiated agreement, no matter how rational it might appear. Are they right? Does Islamic ideology overwhelm pragmatic considerations in Iranian foreign policy?

A close reading of the role of Islam in Iranian politics suggests that it’s not so simple. Islamic ideology was constructed and institutionalized strategically by elites to deal with changing opportunities and threat perceptions. That is not to say that religion does not matter. Religious ideas and ideologies play a critical role in generating mass mobilization and elite cohesion, especially in a political system defined and legitimated by said ideology. This does not, of course, mean that religion is infinitely malleable. Religious actors have to innovatively overcome doctrinal and institutional constraints before they can deploy new religious narratives. However, political actors within such a system are not passive pawns of ideology. They are highly aware of its strategic functions and work intensely to develop and deploy religious ideologies to advance their interests.

Analysis of Islam and foreign policy often begins by tracing the ways in which religion informs identity and defines interests. This approach risks missing the extent to which religious interpretations can be the outcome of politics—whether elections, violence or the battle over state institutions—rather than its cause. In my research, I trace half a century of doctrinal changes in Iran against the background of domestic and international politics. This micro-level analysis of the empirical evidence reveals that religious narratives can change, change rapidly and change frequently in accordance with levels of elite competition to capture the state.

This instrumental use of Islamic ideas dates back to before the revolution. In the 1960s, the French-educated sociologist Ali Shariati turned a quietist Shiite theology into a revolutionary ideology by reinventing Islamic history in terms of the popular ideology of the day, Marxism. With this deft move, Shariati turned an anomaly in Shiism, namely the revolt of only one Imam out of 12, into a rule, and proposed what he called the “Red Islam.” Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini similarly appalled the entire clerical establishment in Qom and Najaf by proposing a Shiite theory of state. Instead of waiting for the return of the Hidden Imam, as the vast majority of Shiite scholars did, he vigorously made a case for an “Islamic Government” and then led it a decade later. Thus, it was not Shariati’s revolutionary Islam or Khomeini’s Velayat-e Faqih (Rule of the Jurist) that propelled the Islamic Revolution of 1979, but rather it was the desire for a revolution that led both figures to reconstruct the history of Islam accordingly. In other words, revolution came first and “Islam” followed. Simply studying Shiite theology would never have predicted or even explained the subsequent revolutionary uses to which it was put.

This perspective forces us to rethink many of the key moments in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy. The seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran was not driven by the Islamist’s inherent anti-Americanism, as I have argued elsewhere, but by the Islamists’ internal competition to outbid the Marxists and the nationalists. The Iranian government did not sustain
the devastating Iran-Iraq War for eight years because of an essential culture of martyrdom in Shiite Islam, but because the Islamic government ingeniously employed a variety of religious narratives and doctrines to prolong the war in order to achieve its internal and regional political objectives. The Salman Rushdie fatwa was not the result of Khomeini's fixed fanaticism, but of a rhetorical gambit to restore his credibility in the aftermath of a demoralizing war with Iraq, the embarrassment of the Iran-Contra affair and growing reactions to “The Satanic Verses” in the Muslim world.

Iran’s most recent “pragmatic turn” and the resulting nuclear negotiations did not take place because of the return to the fore of moderate views or Ayatollah Khamenei’s purported nuclear fatwa. Rather, both appeared precisely to gain regime cohesion and help the subsequent nuclear negotiations or what Khamenei called “heroic leniency.” As Khamenei himself acknowledged in a recent speech, these negotiations began before the June 2013 presidential election only to gain momentum with Hassan Rouhani’s victory. The fact that the conservative leadership did not meddle in the election to the extent that it did during the Green Movement in 2009 signaled its resignation to a slight pragmatic shift in the face of popular pressure.

Similarly, Khamenei’s nuclear fatwa (regardless of its sincerity) is a deliberate confidence building measure issued to manage perceived threats. The conservatives’ frustration with the P5+1 for not paying enough attention to the fatwa signifies it was crafted precisely to be paid attention to. This religious decree does not automatically deprive Iran’s military doctrine of the nuclear option, as Iranian officials argue. Nor does it conceal the Iranian government’s “true” apocalyptic goals, as some U.S. conservatives claim. It does not make Tehran any less or more rational than other players. Iran’s development and deployment of religious ideology is meticulously tailored around regime security and factional interests. “Sharia” is a means to control the state not the goal of the state.

Those who see religious ideology as directly causing political behavior therefore get the connection perilously backward. As the Iranian case shows, the closer we examine the evolution of religious narratives, the more we detect a strategic logic behind it. The arguments over religion are a form of political competition, which allow observation of how competing groups ridicule and undermine each other’s ideological integrity. These rivals often expose each other’s hypocrisy and claim that everyone else is a user of God’s message for worldly goals. If carefully examined, such arguments will demonstrate the actors’ threat perceptions, open a window into their strategic thinking and point to the balance of power between the competing sides. Close reading of religious rhetoric can offer strategic insights into Islamist behavior, but only if analysts understand when apocalyptic language is a power move within the religious politics game rather than a genuine invocation of the apocalypse.

The instrumental use of Islamism allows actors to signal commitment to their stated goals. It is this very intention to project an additional level of credibility that should be the focus of observers, not any theological “essence” that might be contained in the religious language.

Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabar is an assistant professor of international affairs at Texas A&M University and a current fellow at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy. He is also a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C.
Tracking Iranian cosmopolitan options: At home and abroad

By Bruce B. Lawrence, Duke University and Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakif University, Istanbul

* This essay has been republished for the “Islam and International Order” workshop with the gracious permission of SCTIW Review.

A Review Essay of


On the eve of Iranian-American negotiations about nuclear options for the Islamic Republic of Iran, it might seem strange to look at Iranian cosmopolitanism, but here are two recent books on the theme of cosmopolitanism, and the authors/contributors for both are mostly Iranian. Since Iranian identity figures in the title of one, Islam in the title of the other, the unsuspecting reader might reasonably expect some convergence in the subject matter. At the very least, one would anticipate a significant overlap in the issues raised, sources cited, outcomes charted, and actions favored.

Yet none of the above happens. The disparities between Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism and Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism inform not only the contentious nature of the key word they share—cosmopolitanism—but also the difficulty of having even an academic discussion about what are cosmopolitan options in the real world, in the everyday life of citizens whether in the Middle East, specifically Iran, or in North America, specifically the United States but also Canada.

Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism has numerous contributors. They represent a broad spectrum of Iranian intellectuals who have immigrated to North America. Their disciplines include history, political science, comparative literature, philosophy, and religious studies. The chapters are wide ranging in topics, from citizenship and democracy to dissidence and martyrdom. Women as well as minorities find their voices among these contributors, and the volume as a whole lives up to the hope articulated by the editor, Lucian Stone, in the Introduction: “to critically examine cosmopolitanism with specific reference to the Iranian nation-state, Iranian history and culture, and the lived experience of Iranians” (15).

But what does it mean to be a hyphenated Iranian, that is, an Iranian-American? And what does it mean for different generations of Iranian-Americans, not just those who migrated in the late ’70s on the cusp of 1979 Iranian Revolution, but for their children, the next generation of Iranian-Americans? One contributor takes up this challenge frontally. Farhang Erfani, a specialist on Ricoeur who teaches Philosophy at American University, provides an extended meditation that he titles, tongue in cheek: “Cosmopolitanism: Neither for, Nor Against, to the Contrary.” It is a brilliant satire on the conceits and dead ends of contemporary philosophy, but it also conveys a heavy dose of self-criticism, even and especially leveled at the title of the volume “Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism.” There is no single, monolithic iraniyyat (notion of Iranianness) either at home or abroad. While “the younger generation is thrilled by anyone advocating for Iranian-Americans,” seeing the hyphen as “a cultural passport to being an official minority,” Erfani locates himself “at the bottom edge of the previous disintegrated generation that is suspicious of the dash and considers it a cultural surrender. Not at home [in the US], this older generation has no hyphens, no center, and is suspicious of all messages”(156).

And that suspicion extends beyond labels to the agency of those who claim to be Iranian exponents of cosmopolitanism. Far from being confident critics of
Western triumphalism, neo-colonialism, and unbridled capitalist hegemony, Iranians in North America are compromised by their location. Their energy and efforts pale next to those of Iranians at home, those staying and resisting in the Islamic Republic of Iran. “We cosmopolitans, the Iranian community abroad—our situation is nothing in comparison to the courage of our fellow protesters.” Efrani argues, “The Green Movement and the Arab Spring are better ‘Events’ than anything Badiou fathomed and are more democratic than any neocon imagined. They are however fragile given our impoverished vocabulary. They have made it clear they do not seek to emulate the West and for the most part do not want fundamentalism. Yet, past that, there is little to no vocabulary to address their concerns” (153).

The central tension is between belonging and longing. All who identify as Iranian claim a past that embraces nearly three millennia. It was Persians who challenged Greeks, conquered most of the Mediterranean world, endured the Arab conquest, and then created an Iranian epic, the Shahnameh, as well as Iranian Shi’ism. They forged a series of empires that endured until the modern period of first European, then American global hegemony. Traces of that past shape the linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversities that inform several essays, but there are three further essays—Chapters 4, 5, and 6—that provide the core of the counter thesis to counterfeit cosmopolitanism in Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism. Each seems to point beyond the dilemmas of identity and definition that are finely etched yet never resolved in the essays mentioned above. Each holds up a notion of cosmopolitan longing: the negative or feminine cosmopolitan in Shahla Talebi’s essay, the tragic poet as renovated cosmopolitan in Jason Mohaghegh’s chapter, and the obstinate Armenian as the underside of cosmopolitan Iran in Nasrin Rahimieh’s meditation. All three authors provide literary tropes that harness analytical insight to performative power.

Especially defiant of the status quo, and the state that enforces it, are poets like Shamlu who confront violence with violence. Motivated by “impenetrable rapture in the will to demolition,” the contemporary Iranian poet becomes “the last unequivocal administrator of urban violence (heralding extinction itself)” (116). It is to be sure, according to Mohaghegh, an apocalyptic calling, one that seeks through destruction to “purge the mania of several centuries” (118). The pushback against this necrophilic longing is the daily intensity of wrestling with memories and histories that both converge and collide from a shared Armenian/Iranian background of two literary figures, one, Rahimieh, an Iranian-American professor of literature, the other, Zoya Pirzad, an Armenian-Iranian writer of fiction. Instead of Shamlu’s cataclysmic end, this is more a tale of sutures, trying to make sense of Armenian minority identity over five centuries, with special accent on the heightened level of suspicion directed to Iranian-American scholars, artists, and intellectuals since the June 2009 uprising (the so-called Velvet or Green Revolution), which preceded the December 2010 (Jasmine Revolution) in Tunisia and its sequels elsewhere in the Arab world, and arguably also in Turkey (Taksim Square in June 2013).

In sum, there is no coherence about the meaning of cosmopolitanism as a project or an identity within the essays of Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism, but its several contributors do raise similar issues: who defines cosmopolitanism, what are its prospects, as well as its limits? And it is the hyphen or the dash – Iranian-American, at once Iranian and American - that signals how no single political form or physical location can preempt the tension that Iranians feel both at home and abroad.

It is precisely the absence of the hyphen or dash in the second volume, Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism, which makes it so much less compelling as a contribution to cosmopolitanism studies than Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism. Even though Mirsepassi is an Iranian-American sociologist teaching at NYU, Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism seldom mentions Iran. It would be the height of neo-Orientalist essentialist logic to suggest that every Iranian intellectual must write about his own country. I am not making that claim. There are, after all, more Iranian doctors and engineers than there are intellectuals in Western Europe and North America, and most of them do not address their national or cultural
legacy in their professional labor. But Mirsepassi is not just an Iranian-American sociologist who deals with Iran; his most recent monograph, prior to Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism, was titled: Democracy in Iran: Islam, Culture, and Political Change. The name “Iran” drops out of the present volume, but the key concepts of Islam and democracy are both retained, and so one would expect some link, if only tangential, to Iranian evidence and actors, events and issues in Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism. They are hardly visible, and certainly not central, to the book.

“Islam” itself appears as an empty signifier, a notion without substance, in Mirsepassi’s approach. His is a meta-theoretical endeavor to chart what he claims will be a methodological breakthrough in Islamic studies: to “comparatively juxtapose three prevailing theoretical discourses that have profoundly affected contemporary concepts of tradition, cosmopolitanism, and democracy in Islamic countries today” (6).

When we are at last told what Islam is, it is through the translation into English from the introduction to a French dictionary on the Qur’an. In what amounts to reductionist malfeasance, we are given the following as though it is shockingly new information: “The fact that only 15% of the world’s Muslims are Arab, ... that half of the world’s Muslim population is in the Indian subcontinent... that none of these countries are familiar with the Arab language [sic] or culture. The immense majority of the world’s faithful are illiterate, with even the literate minority not necessarily understanding Qur’anic Arabic... Islam is in reality the many and contradictory worlds that Muslims experience through a linguistic and cultural multiverse in the course of living their Islam” (88).

The above boilerplate redaction of ground level obstacles to Muslim cosmopolitanism comes only after we have already been told what is the solution to the problems of the Muslim world. They reside in the genius and the labor of one immigrant scholar. He is the Algerian-French linguistic philosopher and Islamic theorist, Mohammed Arkoun. Mirsepassi introduces Arkoun as “the late Algerian thinker” who “followed the pluralistic line of thought opened up by Tagore” (31). Because Arkoun was “a decidedly cosmopolitan thinker,” with “a passionate issue [sic] of responsibility in everyday speech,” it is he who provides the model “to open a critical space grounded in commitment to democratic practices, flexibly anchored within the ethics of the everyday, and linked to immanent problems of cosmopolitanism and justice, without being framed in terms of absolute priorities” (33).

Mirsepassi rules out both the hyphens in Arkoun (he was a French-Algerian intellectual) as well as his close link to the Iranian philosopher, Abdelkarim Soroush. Instead, we are told, that despite the geopolitical, educational and social hurdles confronting actual Muslim societies, the leadership of Arkoun can herald a new day for all high-minded Muslim scholars and activists, wherever they live, whatever their local challenges. If one places society before the state and emphasizes “the creative powers of the everyday lifeworld” (31), one can perceive how Arkoun charts an emergent paradigm, first “articulated by Dewey and Sen and practiced by Gandhi” (35). It marries moral virtue with the everyday, the indispensable building blocks “to form the basis for any popular democratic movement in contemporary societies” (35, emphasis mine).

But how does this vision relate to the circumstances of today, the disparities and despairs of 2015? The image is there for all to see, announces Mirsepassi. It “has also been the most positive and revitalizing image to be spread to the entire world through its experience of the Jasmine Revolutions”(35). The Jasmine Revolutions? Otherwise known as the Arab Spring, the Jasmine Revolutions, like the Green Movement in Iran, pepper the general prescriptions offered in Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism but are never scrutinized. One must go elsewhere to find out about the stakeholders in those revolutions (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria), or the players or the timelines, but also the shifting outcomes. In short, while Mirsepassi calls for attention to the everyday, and to the everyday lifeworld of Muslim societies, he is long on Euro-American theoretical approaches and short on the local details and issues that
inform each of these—and other—societies throughout Asia and Africa.

But the greatest disappointment of *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism* is its conclusion. Even after lauding Arkoun, Mirsepassi announces that in the end “this new cosmopolitanism is [nothing less than] an extension of specific elements of nationalism” (207). What is needed, we are told, is “to embrace the more discursive-practical ideals of home in a more positive form of nationalism,” that is, to “imagine belonging as combining the virtue of citizenship and a wider global community, while extending democratic and nonviolent forms of ethical politics” (208). In short, nationalism becomes the carrier and the crowning achievement of cosmopolitan belonging.

The failure of Mirsepassi’s work is both theoretical and practical. He leaves out all the native intellectuals on behalf of whom he is claiming to speak, and he provides a solution that reverts to state over society, even while claiming that everyday citizenship involves “extending democratic and nonviolent forms of ethical politics.”

It is in the fractured elements of the often-clashing voices in *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism* that we find an actual echo of the pragmatic problems of imagining, then living, then surviving in everyday life worlds.

Cosmopolitanism remains an ideal rather than a reality, a process not a product, in contemporary global exchanges. Its Iranian accents are at once multiply displayed and openly fractious. They relate to North America as well as to Iran. The hyphen endures.

Bruce B. Lawrence is a professor of Islamic studies emeritus at Duke University and an adjunct professor at Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakif University, Istanbul. He is the author of several books, most recently “Who is Allah?” (The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

© 2015: Bruce B. Lawrence

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information


ISSN: 2374-9288
Islamist Movements
Five reforms the Muslim Brotherhood must undertake: lessons from the Egyptian Spring

By Muqtedar Khan, University of Delaware

Muslim Brotherhood leaders sentenced to death. Elections postponed. Thousands imprisoned. The headlines from Egypt are increasingly vexing for those who had hoped that the Arab Spring would bring democracy not just to Egypt but also to the entire region. The speed and savageness with which democracy, and perhaps even the hope for democracy, is being squashed in Egypt is harrowing to watch. The current crisis may cast a long shadow on how Egyptian and regional polities negotiate with endemic authoritarianism. It will also profoundly impact how political Islam, especially in the Arab World, evolves.

Some commentators are forecasting the end of political Islam, but although it has been damaged by recent events in Egypt, political Islam may yet return if it can undergo reforms.

The experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has engendered intense animosity towards political Islam and has mobilized secular and liberal movements to confront political Islam elsewhere, as in Tunisia. However, Muslim appetite for Islam in the public sphere has not diminished. A heightened sense of victimhood and the perception that the world is against Islam will strengthen support and desire for political Islamic movements in many areas of the Muslim world. While the situation appears to be desperate for the Brotherhood, this is an excellent opportunity for a generational change in personnel and ideas. The Egyptian campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood is forcing a change in leadership, which may provide a useful chance for the movement to reconsider some of its ideas as well.

After the explosion of the Arab Spring, democracy was the only option people chose in the countries that experienced complete (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya) or partial (Morocco) change. Political legitimacy is now under the exclusive sovereignty of the concept of democracy; the aspirations of political Islamists for an Islamic state or caliphate have no currency with the masses whatsoever.

Therefore, the first major conceptual shift that Islamists must make is recognition of this reality. What people want is democracy; that much was clear from the early days of the Arab spring. The manner in which the Muslim Brotherhoods approached politics in Egypt made many observers question their sincerity. It appeared that they were committed to democracy only as long as it served their goal to acquire power. The Muslim Brotherhood seemed to be committed to a procedural form of democracy that enabled majoritarian rule without fully accepting political and religious pluralism.

Embracing democracy as a necessary inconvenience en route to power will only lead to political disaster, as witnessed in Egypt. Islamists need to recognize the global appeal of democracy and listen to the arguments of liberal Islamic thinkers, who have been contending that democracy is not only compatible with but also necessary to the establishment of healthy Islamic societies. Without embracing democracy in substance, recognizing its normative worth and integrating political ambitions with democratic principles that respect the rights and equality of all, political Islam may not find its way back into the circles of power.

The second shift that Islamists need to make is one from “Islamic identity” to “Islamic values.” For decades, Islam has been used to legitimize certain political and ideological choices. Islamic state, Islamic economy, Islamic identity and Islamic society have become catchwords to advance and promote a modern interpretation of Islam whose central goal is neither spiritual revival nor ethical struggle, but power. As Muslims coped with the devastating consequences of colonization and European imperialism, political Islam emerged to unite Muslims against both the West and an authoritarian and westernized ruling elite. One of the consequences of this development has been the reduction of the faith to an identity and an ideology. Rather than a set of values that constrain human choices, Islam is
Islamist Movements

seen as a political ideology that unites a group in pursuit of power.

The power-centered nature of political Islam was unequivocally manifest in the post-Arab Spring politics of Egypt. The ease with which the Brotherhood abandoned its long-cherished goal of establishing an Islamic state in exchange for a leading role in a liberal democratic arrangement suggests that the group was more interested in power than principle. The desire for power was too tempting to be restrained by their long-held notions of Islam and sharia. These hypocritical maneuvers have not escaped notice. In order to regain their credibility as moral actors who wish to govern for the sake of justice rather than power, political Islamists need to once again understand that Islam is a faith and a reservoir of values, not an identity ready-made for political mobilization.

The third reform Islamists need to make is in their philosophical approach to the concept of the sharia and how they define an Islamic society. Early Muslim Brotherhood ideologues made the application of sharia a litmus test for an Islamic state. This idea was enshrined by the constitution passed by the Morsi regime in 2012 in a sectarian article that privileged the Sunni concept of fiqh (jurisprudence) over all other sources of law. It will be both organic and beneficial if Islamists seek to redevelop the corpus of Islamic law from all available Islamic sources in light of the needs of contemporary society, rather than merely putting in place a centuries-old understanding of these laws. A commitment to modernizing the body of fiqh literature that recognizes the importance of ijtihad and incorporates it in the structure of the polity will go a long way in convincing Muslims that Islamists are serious about living their faith rather than merely using it as a means to garner and mobilize support. Ijtihad is a tool in Islamic legal tradition that allows Muslims to advance independent thinking and judgment about issues on which Islamic sacred sources are silent. As Muslims confront new challenges they must exercise more ijtihad to keep Islamic values and historical realities in synch.

The fourth change that Islamists may have to make is towards pragmatism and away from ideological dogmatism. The removal of Mohamed Morsi as president and subsequent events demonstrated that a wide array of political forces, both domestic and international, are aligned against the Muslim Brotherhood. If playing the victim is the only response that the Brotherhood offers to the current situation, the future of both political Islam and democracy in Egypt is bleak. However, if the Brotherhood reforms and replaces its leadership (much of which is in prison) with a younger generation more interested in the future than the past, rather than just protesting, then perhaps there is hope for both political Islam and democracy. There is an enduring demand for Islam to play a role in the public sphere; the only issue that remains is whether it will happen in concert or in conflict with democracy. Authoritarianism has no future. The current military government will have to transition eventually to some form of democracy, probably a hybrid authoritarian-democratic model. The Muslim Brothers can resist or facilitate this change: the choice is theirs.

The fifth change they need to make is to move away from sacred symbolism to ordinary outcomes. Islamists, in general, and the Brotherhood in Egypt, in particular, rely heavily on cultural jingoism and anti-Western sloganeering to gain support. One of the unpleasant outcomes of this identity-based appeal is the necessary demonization of the West, generating fear and often-proscriptive countermeasures. The marginalization and even harassment of religious minorities is the other natural outcome of identity-based jingoism. Lip service to sharia in speeches, manifestos and even constitutions is advanced as proof of new governance and success, while failure to rectify the economy or generate jobs is often blamed on a “foreign hand.” Islamist parties must realize that governance is about such mundane issues as jobs, the economy, traffic and educational institutions, not grandiose battles between good and evil. When Islamists start to garner support for providing good governance and not grand slogans, the chasm between the Islamist supporters and the rest will diminish, as it has in Turkey.

Finally, the Islamists need to work on their credibility, which the Muslim Brothers seemed to squander in a very short time in Egypt. Although their support remains robust
in some quarters, they are unable to convince many that they are good for the people. Acting as an obstructionist force may only give the military justification to prolong authoritarian rule. From 2011 to 2013, the Brotherhood broke many of its political promises. They said they would not run a candidate for the post of president but then reneged on their promise. They vowed to build an inclusive government but then proceeded to consolidate power in various public institutions. They promised to respect democratic norms, but Morsi tried to place himself above checks and balances. The army exploited the fear that democracy was already lost in early July 2013 to further dismantle democracy.

While the scenario in Egypt today and much of the Arab World looks bleak, all is not lost. There is still hope for democratization, and political Islam will have to play an important role in facilitating it. However, in order to precipitate political reforms, Islamists themselves must first undergo change.

Muqtedar Khan is associate professor of political science at the University of Delaware.

The rift between the AKP and Gulen movement in Turkey

By Ramazan Kilinc, University of Nebraska at Omaha

On May 29, 2015, the Turkish government seized Bank Asya, an Islamic bank that was founded by the followers of the Gulen movement. This seizure, which came just a week before the parliamentary elections, was part of an 18-month-long political feud between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and the Gulen movement, a social Islamic movement led by US-based Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gulen.

When prosecutors initiated a corruption probe that rocked the AKP government and led the resignation of four ministers in December 2013, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused the prosecutors, whom he thought were affiliated with the Gulen movement, of staging a coup against the government in collaboration with international powers, particularly the US and Israel. Since then, the government has implemented a number of repressive policies to weaken social and economic basis of the Gulen movement.

Although there had been previous ideological differences between the AKP and the Gulen movement, nobody expected that the dispute between them would go this far. Historically, the Gulen movement focused its attention on education and charity and distanced itself from politics. The movement denounced political Islam and supported the center right parties throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

In the 2000s, however, the movement supported the AKP for two reasons. First, by denouncing political Islam and coming up with the ideology of conservative democracy, the AKP offered itself as a center-right political party. Second, the military intervention in 1997 threatened both groups, and the prospect of weakening a common enemy brought these ideologically different Islamic groups together.

Once the AKP consolidated its power through three consecutive parliamentary elections in 2002, 2007 and
2011, the relationship between the two actors started to deteriorate. After 2011, the AKP focused its attention to change the system to a Turkish-style presidential system that would give the president expansive powers. Erdogan ambitiously sought to rule the country without having to find a consensus with other political and civil actors.

Especially after the Gezi protests which started in the summer of 2013 as a backlash against government’s plan to construct a shopping mall in a city park in Istanbul, Erdogan increasingly turned to authoritarianism and grew contemptuous toward any criticism of his government. The government’s increasing intolerance toward critical viewpoints brought to surface the differences and tension between the AKP and the Gulen movement.

Erdogan’s repressive policies against the Gulen movement rested on four pillars. First, the party used its control of business and media to discredit the movement. The businessmen who financed the movement faced several government tax audits. The AKP used pro-government media, formed through monetary contributions from the cronies that received big businesses from the state, to discredit the movement. Media controlled by the Gulen movement has faced government intimidations through police raids, the arrest of journalists and accusations of terrorism and treason.

Second, the government had a witch-hunt against the movement. Arguing that the Gulen-affiliated bureaucrats constituted a parallel state within the state and had staged a coup against the government in December 2013, the state reassigned or dismissed thousands of bureaucrats. The government went even further to close down the Turkish Police Academy with the assumption that many graduates were affiliated with the Gulen movement.

The AKP government also stigmatized Gulen-affiliated schools in Turkey. Erdogan asked his electorate to withdraw their children from these schools. The decade-old Turkish language competition programs that the movement organized with the support of the Turkish parliament had to change its venue from Turkey to other countries just because Erdogan did not allow the competition to be performed in Turkey. Erdogan even lobbied against the movement in his foreign visits and pressured countries to close down Turkish schools abroad run by the movement.

Third, the government passed new bills to increase its oversight over the judiciary in an effort to invalidate corruption charges against the government and to discredit the Gulen movement through judicial activism. The government amended the law on the constitution of Higher Council on Judges and Prosecutors and formed a new council composed mostly of the members closer to the government. The government, through newly-instituted courts with pro-government judges and prosecutors, started new investigations against the Gulen affiliated journalists accusing them of being part of a terrorist organization. The government declared Gulen a terrorist and requested that the US deport him.

Finally, the AKP government employed the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) to justify its policies and to demonize the Gulen movement. Through the use of state resources and benefits, the government got the loyalty of other Islamic communities. Right before local elections of 2014, presidential elections of 2014 and parliamentary elections of 2015, the pro-government religious groups ran full-page ads in the newspapers supporting the government. Similarly, thanks to its control over the mosques in Turkey, the Diyanet gave sermons during Friday prayers that supported the political positions taken by the government. This cooperation between the government and other Islamic communities increased isolation of the Gulen movement within the conservative circles in Turkey.

The new alliance between the state and other Islamic communities shifted the priorities of the AKP government as well. While the AKP justified its policies in reference to conservative democracy in the first decade of 2000s, its focus has shifted toward populist Islamism in the recent years. In contrast to its strong support to the EU membership in the past, the AKP leadership and their
media supporters have employed a new discourse that emphasizes the importance of Erdogan and Turkey for the Muslim world.

Populist Islamism had two basic tenets to persuade its supporters. First, the AKP pointed out how the party brought religious freedoms such as the removal of the headscarf ban in public offices. By highlighting these freedoms, the party threatened the electorate of a return to the past when there were limitations for the manifestation of religious beliefs in the public sphere if the party lost its public support. Second, the party emphasized its pro-Islamic foreign policy, such as helping Syrian refugees, supporting Palestinians and increasing the discourse around pan-Islamism. In addition, supporters of the government used conspiracy theories and portrayed any critical actor against the government as a traitor and collaborator with the international powers. In this regard, the Gulen movement was portrayed as the Trojan horse for the US and Israel to undermine the increasing presence of the Islamic discourse in Turkey and beyond.

How does the rift between the AKP and the Gulen movement influence democracy in Turkey? The events in the last two years ended the alliance between Islamic groups but opened an opportunity for further dialogue between secularists, Kurds, Islamic social movements and some liberals. This contributed to a pluralist democracy that Turkish people aspire to have.

What brought the AKP to power in the early 2000s was a social coalition that gathered around the party to counter bureaucratic authoritarian institutions. Turkey experienced several reform packages and became closer to the EU membership. However, the 2010s brought another crisis for democracy. This time, Erdogan, by increasing executive control over judiciary and legislative, attempted to create a new authoritarianism around his own personality. In the wake of the June 7 elections, a new social coalition seems to have emerged to stop the new tide of authoritarianism and the rift between the AKP and the Gulen movement has contributed to the fermenting of this coalition across religious and secular lines.

Ramazan Kilinc is an assistant professor of political science and director of the Islamic Studies Program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.
What happens when Islamists lose an election?

By Rory McCarthy, University of Oxford

After its defeat in Tunisia’s parliamentary elections last October, the Islamist movement Ennahda has seemed much diminished. It has avoided the political spotlight except to repeat its commitment to the democratic transition and to the new coalition government, in which it holds a small, symbolic role.

The transition from dictatorship to fledgling democracy still looks like a success four years on from the first Arab Spring uprising. Despite real economic and security challenges, Tunisia has so far avoided the violence and repression now so familiar elsewhere in the region. Ennahda has played no small part in that achievement. It governed in coalition with secular parties after winning the 2011 elections and then compromised its Islamizing ambitions to draft a new, widely supported constitution. Early in 2014, it relinquished power to a technocratic government after acknowledging popular frustration over its Islamization project. How should the movement reconcile its commitment to a civil political program that refrains from proposing sharia law with its historic Islamization project? How can it mitigate the damage of elite-level political concessions on grassroots social activism? The culmination of this debate will be Ennahda’s decision to either continue as a simultaneously political and religious organization or instead divide itself in two for the first time in its history and become a political party and a separate religious social movement.

The defeat should not have been a surprise. Opinion polls, both in the Tunisian media and in private surveys conducted by Ennahda itself, showed that the Islamist movement had lost support since its victory in Tunisia’s first free elections in October 2011. Ennahda members themselves admitted they suffered from their experience in government, when, even though a new constitution was written, not enough was done to solve Tunisia’s pressing socio-economic and security challenges. In Sousse, a historic coastal city where I have spent most of the past 18 months researching Ennahda, voters were critical about the slow pace of economic change and continued high unemployment. A recent nationwide study of exit polling showed that voters wanted to balance civil liberties and security concerns.

Many in Ennahda were frustrated that the movement’s leadership chose not to endorse a candidate in the presidential elections last year against their rival Beji Caid Essebsi, who went on to win. They were disappointed a second time when the leadership accepted a role inside the coalition government led by Essebsi’s Nidaa Tounes party, which had won the parliamentary vote on a strongly anti-Islamist campaign. Ennahda’s most senior advisory body, the Shura Council, was initially reluctant to endorse entry into the coalition and Abdelhamid Jelassi, a senior leader, even briefly stepped down in protest.

Among the movement’s lower ranks there is still much discomfort today. It would have been better, they say, to go into opposition rather than form an alliance with a party like Nidaa Tounes, with its awkward mix of leftist and former regime elements. “We could have been in the opposition and presented a model of a constructive opposition,” said one Ennahda member, who resigned his position as a local bureau leader because he did not agree with the movement’s entry into the coalition. “That would have allowed us to restructure the movement, to rebuild it on a correct basis.”
Ennahda’s leaders wanted to retain a voice in government, but they were also driven by fear. They saw a risk of another campaign against the Islamists similar to former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s repression of Ennahda in the early 1990s or President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi’s recent crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. One member of Ennahda’s Shura Council judged that joining the coalition would prevent an alliance of leftist parties with Nidaa, which he feared would lead only to repression. “Their strategy would be to eradicate Ennahda and to go back to the scenario of the 1990s and 2000s in which Ennahda returns to prison,” he said.

Now the movement is preparing for a congress to discuss whether to remain both political party and religious movement or to divide itself in two, what the movement calls “the ways of managing the project” (subul tasrif al-mashru’) or simply “joining or splitting” (al-wasl aw al-fasl). The decision will be informed first by a major internal evaluation of Ennahda’s actions from the clash with Ben Ali in the late 1980s until the present day. Many in the movement now accept that mistakes were made: they pushed too hard in confronting the Ben Ali regime and failed to secure political allies when they were most needed. Political overreach came at the cost of their Islamization project and ultimately led to the dismantling of the movement for two decades and the imprisonment of tens of thousands of their members.

Those in favor of a split argue that because Ennahda is no longer an underground movement resisting a dictatorship it needs to become a modern, technocratic, conservative political party that offers policies aimed at both Islamist and non-Islamist voters. They contend that the party would still have Islam as a moral guide but, in line with Ennahda’s current position, would not seek to implement sharia as a strict code of law, instead focusing on the broader objectives of the sharia (maqasid al-shari’a) such as freedom, rights, civility and equality. Preaching and social outreach would then be assigned to a separate movement running mosque classes and local charitable associations, in which preachers could distance themselves from the political concessions of party leaders.

However, others in the movement warn that splitting Ennahda would leave a weakened political party that would become isolated from its societal base. “If you separate us from our Islamic roots it’s a risk,” said one local Ennahda leader. “We should specialize in our preferred area of work but under one name. We are both a party and a movement.” Such leaders argue that separation would undermine the comprehensive nature of the Islamist project, which, since the founding of the Islamic Tendency Movement, the forerunner of Ennahda, in 1981, has always sought to unite both the religious and the political. One Ennahda local bureau leader said separation carried negative connotations and would leave individuals unclear about what part of their work was politics and what part was preaching (da’wa). “There are members within Ennahda who can’t understand why we should have this separation of our character and this schizophrenia,” he said.

It is not yet clear which argument will win out. Until recently it seemed that separation was the most likely possibility, but several guest speakers from Tunisia and abroad at recent internal Ennahda discussions have advised the movement against separation. The decision is due at a much-delayed congress later this year, perhaps in October, but may be postponed further if a clear choice does not emerge. Many within Ennahda feel that the debates and discussions have yet to resolve the problem of what precisely it means to be a conservative political party inspired by an Islamic reference in a new democracy. “All these debates haven’t answered the questions inside the movement,” said the Ennahda bureau leader who resigned his post. “They haven’t given the members of the movement a clear vision or project that we can market to society.” Ennahda still needs a major rethinking of its ideology and political vision before it can recover from last year’s electoral defeat.

Rory McCarthy is a doctoral candidate in oriental studies at the University of Oxford and a former Middle East correspondent for the Guardian.
The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.

The Transatlantic Academy

The Transatlantic Academy is a research institution devoted to creating common approaches to the long-term challenges facing Europe and North America. The Academy does this by each year bringing together scholars, policy experts, and authors from both sides of the Atlantic and from different disciplinary perspectives to research and analyze a distinct policy theme of transatlantic interest. The Academy was created in 2007 as a partnership between the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) and the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius. The Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation joined as full partners beginning in 2008, and the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung joined as a full partner in 2011. The Joachim Herz Stiftung and the Volkswagen Stiftung joined in providing additional support in 2013.