Evolving Methodologies in the Study of Islamism

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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.
In recent years there have been dramatic changes in the Islamist landscape as Islamist political parties have drastically transformed, violent new groups have burst on the scene, and the proliferation of new media has changed access to information. But have political scientists and other scholars taken the time to step back and examine how these seismic shifts have affected our research methods, priorities, and arguments? On January 29, 2016, scholars gathered for the Project on Middle East Political Science’s 3rd Annual workshop on Islamist politics as part of our Islam in a Changing Middle East initiative. This year’s workshop focused on the methodological and conceptual issues in the study of Islamism. What assumptions underlying our research need to be problematized? How should we deal with the vast outpouring of information and evidence about these movements now available on social media? What do we mean by the term “Islamist?”

Offering an incredibly rich set of reflections, the papers in this series challenge the utility of core concepts such as “moderation” and “radical Islam.” They investigate the operation of specific causal mechanisms such as repression, identity, and organizational structure. They consider how newly available sources of survey and social media data can change our research approaches and remind us of all we have learned.

The excellent essays in POMEPS Studies 17 Evolving Methodologies in the Study of Islamism take up these questions. While no one claims to have come up with a single answer, this collection is an important first step in grappling with the complex puzzle of “Islamism” today. This critical and reflective scholarship will be useful for the novice student and experienced analyst alike. Read all the essays for free here.
Thinking Big, Thinking New
Is the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization or a firewall against violent extremism?

By Marc Lynch, George Washington University

The House Judiciary Committee recently passed a resolution calling on the State Department to designate the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. This resolution resonates with the feverish anti-Islamic politics of the Republican primary, fueled across the spectrum by candidates from Donald Trump to Marco Rubio. The specific focus on the Muslim Brotherhood has long been a trope over the last decade of demonization of Islam.

The Congressional bill also fits trends in regional politics. The terrorist designation for the Muslim Brotherhood has been pushed forcefully for several years by regional players such as the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Since the July 2013 military coup, the Egyptian government has aggressively pushed to equate the Muslim Brotherhood with al-Qaeda and to blame it for a wide range of violent attacks in the country. Yesterday, Egypt accused the leadership of the Brotherhood with carrying out the June 2015 assassination of public prosecutor general Hisham Barakat. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia and several of its Gulf Cooperation Council partners designated the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.

The U.S. bill is unlikely to become law. Even if such a bill somehow made it through Congress, the mandated review would produce similar results as last year’s British investigation, which eventually concluded that Brotherhood membership might be associated with extremism but declined to label it a terrorist organization. Such a conclusion would be buttressed by an impressive body of academic literature developed over the past decade that did a very good job of explaining the Brotherhood’s organization, ideology, political strategy and place within the broader political and social context.

Academics have played a useful role in pushing back against a politicized terrorist designation. But they should not be overly reassured by their ability to interpret and explain the Brotherhood’s past behavior. The Brotherhood is not a terrorist organization, and there has long been a deeply significant divide between it and Salafi-jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda.

But the Brotherhood as examined and studied in this literature over the past several decades no longer really exists. The core characteristics that defined the Brotherhood’s internal organization and strategic environment, and which guided political science research about it, no longer operate.

The Muslim Brotherhood, at least in post-coup Egypt, no longer enjoys a strong presence in society with an elaborate network of social services and a tolerated public presence. Its patient strategy of long-term change through participation lies in ruins. Its organization has been shattered, with its leadership either in prison, exiled or dead and the survivors divided between multiple power centers inside Egypt and abroad. It is no longer deeply embedded in society or engaged in a patient strategy of Islamization of the political and cultural realms. It no longer has a robust internal organization, vast financial resources, a clearly defined ideology, or a tightly disciplined membership. It is neither shrouded in secrecy nor is it rigidly hierarchical.

This has important implications for long-standing hypotheses and assumptions about the Brotherhood and Islamist politics more broadly. Researchers should therefore admit to greater uncertainty about the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideology, organization and strategy than ever before. Arguments that held up well five years ago no longer necessarily apply.

Fortunately, political scientists have been actively engaged for several years in multiple, systematic and sustained efforts to rethink Islamist movements. The
Rethinking Islamist Politics series that I direct for the Project on Middle East Political Science has just published its third collection of essays by scholars revisiting earlier theories, methods, data, assumptions and conclusions. The papers for the earlier workshops can be read here (“Rethinking Islamist Politics”) and here (“Islamism in the IS Age”). This year’s collection has now been published as an open access PDF here.

Many long-standing debates about the Muslim Brotherhood are simply no longer relevant in an entirely new institutional and political context no longer marked by durable authoritarianism, tolerated but constrained Islamist movements in the role of permanent political opposition, and a clear distinction between mainstream Islamists and violent radical groups, such as al-Qaeda. The arguments about whether inclusion promotes moderation, for instance, was based on political institutions and opportunities which have radically changed.

Prior to the Arab uprising, I argued that mainstream Islamists served as a firewall against more violent extremists. The Brotherhood publicly articulated an ideology of nonviolence and democratic participation. It competed with al-Qaeda for recruits and for public influence, and kept its members tightly embedded within its institutional structures. The Brotherhood could compete with al-Qaeda and other extreme groups in ways that liberals and state elites could not.

The competing view held that the Brotherhood was a facilitator of violent extremism, serving not as barrier but as a step along the path toward radicalization. This “conveyor belt” theory suggests that even if the Brotherhood itself did not sanction violence, it set individuals on the path toward extremism and thus increased the net volume of potential terrorists. They pointed to inconsistencies in the Brotherhood’s rejection of violence, such as the continuing place of jihadist thinkers, such as Sayid Qutb, in their literature or their support for violence in arenas such as Palestine or Iraq.

Which of these has proven more accurate?

Many Brotherhood critics point to its erratic or violent behavior during the Egyptian, Tunisian or Libyan transitions to discredit the firewall thesis. But this is unconvincing. Some Brotherhood members behaved badly during Egypt’s transition, as did virtually everyone else. Brotherhood members violently attacked protestors outside Cairo’s Ittihadiya presidential palace on Dec. 5, 2012, while their opponents burned down Brotherhood party headquarters a few months later. Many Brotherhood took up arms in Libya and Syria, as did virtually everyone else.

Context matters more than ideology in those troubled transitions. Despite post-coup propaganda and arrests by the Egyptian regime, there is very little to substantiate the charge that the Brotherhood behaved like a terrorist organization during Egypt’s transition or embraced violence either ideologically or strategically.

Instead, the most striking trend is that the Islamic State’s upsurge and al-Qaeda’s revival coincides with the crushing of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and the broader regional crackdown on the organization.

The breaching of the Brotherhood firewall does seem to have coincided with a dramatic escalation in violent extremism. There are other factors, of course, but Egypt’s spiraling violence suggests that the military coup and subsequent violent repression of the Brotherhood did indeed open the space for more violent and radical actors.

What might explain the changing effectiveness of a Brotherhood firewall? There are three key mechanisms by which the firewall might operate: strategy, organization and socialization. Each has undergone severe tests over the last few years.
First, the Brotherhood might have been an effective firewall against al-Qaeda’s extremism and violence because it could demonstrate the organization’s strategic goals. This would not require any ideological conviction, nor deep buy-in from the membership — only a rational calculation by the leadership that such a stance serves their self-interest. Positioning the Brotherhood as a moderate counterweight to al-Qaeda helped to preserve the organization’s public presence, reassure a skeptical West, and win support within broad Islamist publics.

This positioning worked well in the decade following 9/11, but today it is a far less obvious strategic choice for what remains of the Brotherhood.

As Mokhtar Awad and Mostafa Hashem have carefully documented, the Brotherhood’s leadership has attempted to reaffirm its nonviolent commitments. But this stance has proved a difficult sell in the face of Egypt’s violent repression and the cancellation of any opportunity for meaningful democratic participation. Nonviolence seems less strategically effective given massive state repression and less in alignment with a new identity narrative centered around the August 2013 Rabaa massacre.

The Brotherhood has clearly struggled to articulate any effective strategic response to Egypt’s coup or to offer a compelling ideological rejoinder to those calling for more radical measures. It is difficult to occupy the center ground in a radically polarized environment, to preach the virtues of democratic participation following a military coup, or to preach restraint in the face of mass arrests and rampant unaccountable state violence.

The rise of the Islamic State has also changed the strategic calculus for the organization. Rather than being positioned as the successful mainstream avatar of Islamist politics, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is now competing with more extreme Islamist rivals from a relatively ineffectual and inarticulate position. The Syrian insurgency has been dominated by a wide range of salafi-jihadist factions that enjoy strong support from regional powers and a prominent media presence. Syria has blurred the distinctions between Islamist groups and pushed the “center” of Islamist politics toward violent jihad.

Islamist politics have moved sharply to the right and the mainstream center largely vanished, leaving the once mainstream organization isolated on a shrinking moderate flank. To the extent that the firewall was a strategic policy choice by the Brotherhood’s leadership, then, that has clearly been challenged and potentially undermined by the changing political context.

A second mechanism by which the Brotherhood might be an effective firewall has been through its organizational capacity.

The Muslim Brotherhood has traditionally been characterized by an exceptionally tight organizational structure, with a rigid hierarchy and extremely effective command and control. The Muslim Brotherhood’s internal discipline has been critical to its electoral success and its ability to survive bouts of state repression.

This organizational capacity is also a key mechanism for the firewall thesis. A strong organization gave the Brotherhood’s leadership the ability to enforce its decisions from the top down, prevent significant factional splits and exercise tight control over its membership. Those members who might have been tempted by al-Qaeda’s extremism found no space to advance those ideas or to pull the organization in a more violent direction.

The current Egyptian and regional crackdown has taken an extreme toll on this organizational capacity. Thousands of its members have been imprisoned, the assets of its leading members confiscated and the lines of internal communication disrupted. The leadership of this shattered organization is unable to maintain effective control in the face of radical reactions of youth cadres and incitement from leaders and members abroad.

To the extent that organizational capacity sustained the firewall, this, too, has been massively eroded.
Third, and finally, the firewall might have been sustained through socialization. Brotherhood members perhaps internalized the organization’s norms and ideas so fully that they would adhere to them even if strategic context or organizational conditions changed.

There are reasons to believe that the Brotherhood was especially likely to produce such deep socialization. Scholars such as Hazem Kandil and Eric Trager had focused attention on the deeply constitutive power of the Brotherhood’s cell structure, rigid hierarchy and intense indoctrination. Some went so far as to argue that this deep organizational control rendered Brotherhood members virtually incapable of independent thought or action — the so-called cultists, sheep or robots of popular anti-Brotherhood Egyptian discourse.

For the firewall thesis, this would be a very strong mechanism indeed: a full internalization of organizational norms would in principle lead Brotherhood members to sustain their ideological commitments even with the organization shattered, the political strategy failed and the context radically changed.

This thesis of Brothers as overly socialized dupes has fared poorly since Egypt’s military coup. Its members have reacted in wildly divergent ways to the new challenges. Rather than responding to the same stimuli in similar ways, different Brotherhood members have chosen dramatically different paths.

The Egyptian Brotherhood today is being battered by internal factional conflicts, challenges by the youth to a failed senior leadership and a broad rejection of hierarchical authority. Some Brothers have turned to violence, while others have reaffirmed the commitment to nonviolence. Accounts by perceptive observers, such as Abdelrahman Ayyash and Ibrahim Houdaiby, suggest a far less coherent and uniform Brotherhood adaptation to the new politics of Islamism.

In other words, Muslim Brotherhood members have turned out to be quite capable of independent thought and ideological disagreement after all.

At this point, however, we lack sufficiently fine-grained data to determine whether the proportion of Brotherhood members who adhered to their indoctrination and refused to embrace violence is greater than might be expected from a more “normal” organization. Nor do we yet know whether Brotherhood members were more or less likely than expected to join more extremist organizations than others in their demographic group. These will likely prove fine topics for future research.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s firewall against extremism, therefore, was a very real thing in the decade following 9/11. It was sustained by the seeming success of the strategic choices by the leadership, a robust organizational structure able to enforce internal discipline and the socialization of its members into the organization’s norms.

All three of the key mechanisms by which the firewall operated have now dramatically eroded.

This does not mean that the Brotherhood has been or is becoming a terrorist organization. It does mean that earlier assessments of its ability to play a role as a firewall against violent extremism need to be updated. And that is just what the scholars systematically rethinking the new Islamist politics for the Rethinking Islamist Politics project are doing.

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Facing the Cruel Palindrome: Moving beyond Sauve Qui Peut

By Nathan J. Brown, George Washington University

In the past five years, an infant academic industry approaching Islamism – which I have defined as a set of movements and approaches dedicated to increasing the role of Islam in general and the Islamic sharia specifically in public life – would seem to have come into crisis and perhaps even a full stop. The problem is not that the industry operated inefficiently; it worked well with impressive intellectual production. But the political ground on which its foundations were built has shifted radically.

We will have to rebuild and retool.

The Arab world seems to have passed from an era of stultifying (but far from totalitarian) semiauthoritarianism to one in which its residents face what I have called elsewhere (inspired by Jonathan Brown) a cruel palindrome: either Sisi or Isis. The center of debate for many Islamists has shifted from how many seats to contest in parliamentary elections to how to cope with a ferocious authoritarianism, state collapse, and the flourishing of a formerly fringe approaches.

However, we need not abandon all we learned and engage in full scholarly retreat. There is still much that we can collectively save.

Two generations of scholarship on Islamism

When it gradually became a subject of social science attention in the 1980s, studies of Islamism tended to focus on doctrine (and tilted toward ideological exegesis of some of the more radical thinkers in works by scholars like Giles Keppel, Emmanuel Sivan, and Johannes J. G. Jansen, some of whom were anchored more in the humanities) or on sociology (with scholars like Saad Eddin Ibrahim exploring the social roots and origins of Islamists).

But in the 1990s and early 2000s, with works like those by Carrie Wickham and Jillian Schwedler, social science scholarship broadened and deepened, shifting focus in some subtle ways. Doctrine, ideology, and sociology were hardly forgotten. But scholars turned more attention to the political process, toward more mainstream groups, and toward formal organizations. No longer did Sadat's assassins seem the centerpiece of scholarly attention.

While the earlier focus on radicals, doctrine, and sociology did not disappear, the Muslim Brotherhood, its political activity, and the way the group and its political activity changed in response to social and political conditions moved to the center of the scholarly agenda.

Great progress was made. Research was easy to conduct: the movements were loquacious and legal (or tolerated); the states were stable and the regimes relatively permissive of field work; and scholars based in institutions in the United States and Europe and those based in the Arab world forged some useful bonds.

Since 2011 many of those conditions seem to have changed quickly. States have decayed or collapsed; regimes behave much more fiercely toward the movements and harass (and even arrest) some of those who write about them; field work is more fraught; the Brotherhood seems less central; Islamists in most countries have moved away from the formal political realm; and neat country boundaries – which once seemed to form the horizon for most groups – are no longer such steep barriers to the formation of agendas and the actions of key regimes and Islamist actors.

So yes, we will have to do more than recalibrate. Last year, Khalil al-Anani invited us to consider the “ISISification of Islamist politics.” In a recent review in the Middle East Journal (“A Struggle for Power: Islamism and Democracy”), I argued that the most helpful work for understanding the Islamist future might be Abdallah al-Arian’s study of the emergence of Islamism in Egypt in the 1970s. To put that a bit more pugnaciously: we might learn most by reading al-Arian’s book – or maybe Wickham’s first book – backwards, going back to the 1970s to understand what Islamist politics of the late 2010s might
look like in an environment where formal organizations matter less, regimes are more ruthless, revolutionary activity is more prominent, generational issues (and youth activism) feature more prominently, ideological lines are blurrier, and the Muslim Brotherhood no longer has such a hulking presence. I recently explored some of the implications of this environment for the Egyptian Brotherhood itself with Michele Dunne. In this essay, I wish to turn my attention to a consideration of what we learned in the previous two decades that may still be useful, particularly in establishing frameworks for research in the coming years and understanding the shifts that are occurring as we study.

In that respect, let me point to three areas that past scholarship led us to highlight and should not be abandoned but instead can still inform our understanding of the evolution of changes within the Islamist spectrum.

**Strategy**

While earlier scholarship of the 1980s stressed ideology and doctrine to a significant degree, social science scholarship of the early 2000s subtly (and I am not certain always consciously) shifted to a greater emphasis on strategy. The earlier writings guided us through the contemporary relevance of Ibn Taymiyya and the Kharijites. The more recent writings nodded in such directions but spent far more time with party platforms and stances on current issues. In that sense, the pre-2011 decade (and the immediate post-uprising writings) did capture the growing primacy of politics – the increasing degree to which the semi-authoritarian political process prior to 2011 and the uncertain and unstable processes that emerged after 2011, prompted opportunistic, though ultimately quite portentous changes in Islamist thinking, organization, and, above all, strategy.

The growing prominence of salafis – many of whom speak a language that draws very heavily on core texts and doctrines – will mean that we will never be able to abandon the efforts to understand Islamism at lease in part through doctrinal and ideological lenses. Indeed, I think much of the best current work is done in precisely that area. But I am struck by how much the key debates among Islamists right now still focus on strategy and how the differences rest most essentially on core political judgments: the possibilities for building a state; the viability of a revolutionary path; the primary adversary that Islamists should focus on. The primacy of politics – understood as participating in the formal realm – has quickly become antiquated for most Islamists in the Arab world. But the abandonment of conventional politics has led not so much to a retreat to the thicket of textual exegesis as a contentious and portentous debate about what the best strategic option to pursue. The political – broadly, not narrowly, understood – still matters.

**From Intent to Context**

The generation of scholars working on Islamists in the 1980s began more from the inside out than the outside in. Those who focused on ideology and doctrine probed what ideas impelled Islamists into action. The source of inspiration could be discovered in large (though never exclusive) part through studying what leaders thought. And those who focused on sociology looked into the background of both activists and the rank-and-file: what in their upbringing and early experiences would lead them to gravitate toward Islamist ideas?

The later generation of scholars in the 2000s again shifted some of the focus without abandoning the interest in internal thinking and background. Islamists came to be understood a bit more from the outside in. As the focus shifted to formal organizations and to politics, it became apparent how the overall political context shaped Islamist behavior, organization, and ideology. The baldest form of this way of looking at the importance of context came to be called the “inclusion/moderation” argument, which was rarely made by scholars without considerable nuance and qualification but still framed much debate.

That stress on context can very well survive the post-2011 changes. Indeed, we should understand much of how Islamists have changed – the splintering of various paths, the turn away from formal politics, the decline of formal organizations, and the turn to revolution – largely in terms
of the radical changes in political context during and after
the 2011 uprisings. This is not to remove agency from
Islamist actors – their ingenuity and creativity are generally
on full display, sometimes in cruel ways – but they are
ultimately coloring inside (and occasionally outside) the
lines drawn by regimes and political processes.

**Sources: A Whole Lot of Listening**

Scholars have always listened (or read). The earliest
scholars of Islamists conducted interviews and read tracts
and newspapers. But recently I have been struck by both a
quantitative and a qualitative shift in how scholars came to
do their research.

Quantitatively, there has simply been a lot more to read
and a lot more people to talk to in recent years. There have
been pamphlets, websites, nadwas, press coverage, blogs,
platforms, Facebook posts, and video clips. There were also
youth activists, leaders, renegades, and fellow travelers to
interview. Perusal of the footnotes of scholarly works shows
that later scholars have had to listen harder to stay in place.

But there was a subtle qualitative change as well: the rigid
dichotomy between Western researcher and Arab Islamist
began to break down. There have been scholars in the Arab
world who have followed – and contributed to – debates
that began in the United States or Europe. There have
been Islamists who went abroad to earn degrees on how
to study their movements. And there have been former
Islamists who turned to scholarship to understand what
they had been in the process of becoming. There have been
scholars from the United States or Europe whose works
were translated or who could participate in seminars in the
Arab world.

No Islamic State defector has applied to a doctoral
program in political science in the United States nor
has the Islamic State offered to sponsor a post-doctoral
researcher. There are limits in how far reaching a
cosmopolitan community of listeners and scholars can be
built. But the way in which scholars have learned to cast far
more widely and draw on multiple sources and the ways in
which some older boundaries have eroded among national

**Looking Forward**

I have given a fairly happy story of where we stand: we have
learned a lot; we have also learned good ways to learn even
more. Much of what we learned will stand us in good stead;
the ways we had of learning are still relevant. We will be hit
with an embarrassment of riches as information, networks,
and methodologies have grown in size and sophistication.

But I close on a bit of a darker note: the nature of
politics in the Middle East – the rise of dysfunctional
authoritarianism in some places and state decay and
violent conflict in some others – will block our abilities
to take full advantage of these above-listed benefits. This
is most obviously the case in the dwindling numbers of
locales where social science research can be carried out.
More subtle pernicious trends may be at work as well. The
transnational scholarly networks that have emerged will
likely survive, but they will be undermined by assaults on
academic freedom and sometimes by mounting political
sensitivities. And one trend that has invigorated the
field tremendously – the rise of a generation of talented
and well-trained social scientists well versed in regional
languages and research techniques, quite often acquired
before embarking on doctoral training – will likely ebb
over the coming years. Students from outside the region
are likely to be discouraged or prevented from gaining the
experience and training they need; those within the region
will labor under less conducive conditions.

Scholars are hardly immune to broader social and political
ails, and though this will not eliminate our opportunities to
build on the past, it may seriously undermine and undercut
them.

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The Failures of Radical Islam

By Ahmed Khanani, Earlham College

The positioning of the phrase “radical Islam” has recently become increasingly clear as major media outlets have interrogated why, on the one hand, many Democrats (including President Obama and Hilary Clinton) have avoided the phrase and, on the other, most Republicans (e.g. Donald Trump and Governor Christie) have not. Emily Bazelon and John McWhorter suggest that Clinton’s refusal to use “radical Islam” is part of her effort to prevent Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis from materializing. Similarly, both analysts read critics like Christie as depicting her non-use as both pandering to political correctness and also neutering American efforts to counter groups like ISIS. To be generous to Christie (and Trump), we might contend that they hope to distinguish between the beliefs and actions of, on the one hand, violent, Islamically inspired groups (like ISIS or Al Qaeda) and, on the other, something like “everyday Muslims.” In this regard, “radical Islam” approximates a project of rescuing: of rescuing “Islam” from radicals, fundamentalists, Wahhabis, Salafis, from a great many undesirables. Yet, as this phrase gains political currency in American politics, not only does the rescuing project lessen in significance in relation to balancing narrowly identified “American security interests,” but, more importantly, the analytic value of this phrase loses in importance in relation to its use as an anxious indicator of one’s political leanings.

In this brief essay, I draw on a postcolonial perspective to highlight major problems with the phrase “radical Islam” that speak to a broader failure in Western texts and thought – evident in virtually all popular media, academic writings, and policy briefs. Specifically, phrases like “radical Islam,” “Islamist,” “jihadist,” and other such neologisms tacitly suggest that Western analysts can not only diagnose what is happening in the Arabic-speaking MENA, but that said analysts can even proffer clear prescriptions. If, for example, analysts write of “surging radical Islam” in, say, Iraq, there is a clear fix: somehow it must be curbed. I want to suggest that rather than beginning with neologisms to describe a situation that exists outside of the language currently available to Western analysts, we ought to instead listen closely to how people “on the ground” describe their lived experiences, religio-political projects, and both the banal and also the extraordinary practices of violence that shape their worlds. By attending to the ordinary language of Arabic-speaking peoples in the greater MENA, Western analysts and policy-makers will not only be able to move beyond unhelpful categorizing – that is, doing a bad job of “lumping and splitting” – but might even be able to exchange the deeply troubled project of rescuing Islam and Muslims for productive research agendas, thoughtful analyses, and successful policy initiatives.

Let me first begin by charting three significant liabilities with the phrase “radical Islam” that have been overshadowed by the essentially political debate over its use. I will then briefly discuss the central claim I want to advance herein: that actions and language are most usefully apprehended through situating them in local contexts. More concretely, to understand contemporary phenomena in the MENA (and, I imagine, much of the developing world), analysts ought to begin their work by asking, “what does this word, this practice mean in the local context in which it takes place?” Let’s turn to the failures of radical Islam, then.

In using the phrase “radical Islam,” we are necessarily acting as though there is a true Islam that we can somehow know – that we not only have access to true Islam, but we also know it to be moderate, or at least not-radical. Why not instead draw from Western scholars of the Muslim tradition like Talal Asad and begin from the premise that there is no such thing as an “Islam” out there? Differently, the term “Islam” brings together a diverse range of practices and beliefs that cohere around the pillars of monotheism and the Prophet Mohammad as the final of God’s prophets – though, of course, even these
two pillars have been differently understood and acted upon by Muslims over the centuries. Since we know that both historically and also in the current moment there is incredible diversity and disagreement amongst people who identify as Muslim, then it follows that writing about Islam as a unitary entity that can be easily accessed is, at best, misguided while writing many people out of Islam and, at worst, is a rhetorically powerful, analytically empty move to discredit people with whom we disagree.

Another way of thinking about this is that if we begin from the premise that there is such a thing as “Islam” and that, therefore, some people are good at being Muslims and others are not, analytically we’re basically enacting the same moves as ISIS: the only disagreement is about who is a good Muslim and who is not. In other words, when analysts and politicians use the phrase “radical Islam,” they are tacitly referencing a not-radical Islam as the counterpoint as though they know that not-radical Islam, and in so doing they are in fact making claims about what real, true Islam actually is and are using this knowledge in service of moral criticisms of specific people with particular beliefs and actions. This not only runs the risk of essentializing Islam, it also enacts an epistemic violence that is indistinguishable from the epistemic violence engendered by the very people whose Muslim-ness is called into question with the phrase “radical Islam.” In making a claim about true Islam and criticizing, say, ISIS for their failure to correctly embody true Islam, the conversation about ISIS shifts from a register of, e.g., criticizing a group for enacting indefensible sexual violence to a theological debate, which is precisely where the Western politicians, analysts, and academics are at their weakest and ISIS is at its best.

My final major concern about the phrase “radical Islam” has to do with power dynamics. More precisely, I am concerned by the ways in which American, and generally Western, foreign policy and neocolonial imperatives coincide with who is identified through the rubric of radical Islam – and how Muslims sympathetic or expedient to these purposes are excluded from this troubling phrase. It is no coincidence that George W. Bush invoked the specter of radical Islam – and its inverse, moderate Islam – in the process of declaring retributive war in September 2001. This is all to say that we ought to remember that when we use the phrase “radical Islam” we are taking sides politically – and not just because politicians are currently making it a hot-button issue. It is a phrase that tacitly makes moral, political, and violent claims that typically rest just beneath the surface. I hope and believe we can be more creative than the for us/with the terrorists binary that has informed so much of Western discourse since 2001. The language of “radical Islam,” I want to suggest, is very much consonant with this binary, placing those who use it squarely in the “for us” camp and those who do not are rendered anti-American. Personally, I find this unsatisfying.

Thus, “radical Islam” fails insofar as it locates all Muslims in a crude binary that reifies and essentializes Islam while also profoundly limiting the realm of politics available to Western actors. Moreover, in shifting the debate to the register about true Islam, two significant consequences emerge. First, it is impossible to resolve theological debate in this world: either ISIS theologians are right about “true Islam,” or Donald Trump is – either way, there’s no way to convince anyone about theological issues by way of evidence in this world. Second, and perhaps more troubling, when Western politicians and analysts dichotomize radical and “true” Islam, they not only engage in theological debate, but they are also effectively making a claim about what kinds of religion can be tolerated. Radical Islam, then, exposes fractures in the underlying liberalism that constitutes the fabric of American politics. Moreover, “radical Islam” both undertakes normative work that renders it a failed “empirical container” and also inadequately describes the world around us.

I suspect that other Western neologisms to describe the Muslim MENA have similar failings. Elsewhere I have argued that the term Islamist has several damaging shortcomings that ultimately render it unhelpful in thinking and talking about Islamically inspired political actors and groups. Rather than simply document the ways in which commonly employed neologisms host
both empirical and normative failures for Western analysts and scholars, I will briefly argue for an ethical and methodological alternative: charting the range of meaning of unfamiliar words and practices in local contexts as a first step in apprehending new phenomena. In particular, I want to suggest that policy failures in the MENA can be partially explained through scholars and analysts inability to explain politics in the region because of an inattentiveness to local practices of meaning.

As has been well documented, on the heels of removing Saddam Hussein from power, in 2003 the US-led Coalition in Iraq wanted to purge all traces of Hussein's network from positions of power and thereby summarily removed all Baathists from the vast majority of government positions – including removing nearly 400,000 people from their military posts, taking away promised pensions, and not taking away their weapons. Predictably, this decision resulted in former Baathists going underground; party members have since emerged as a key player in contemporary politics: they are now allied with ISIS. What appears at first blush an obvious policy failure might also be productively read as a failure to understand the meaning of local practices: hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were party-members not because of an ideological or personal commitment, but for dozens of reasons from the everyday and banal (e.g. better job opportunities for Baathists and family pressures) to the extraordinary (e.g. avoiding execution under Hussein's regime). Because analysts and policy-makers were confident that party-membership was the same thing around the world their decision to remove Baathists from public work was reasonable; yet, had they begun by asking themselves, “what does it mean to be Baathist in 2002?” the violence that is currently engulfing Iraq and Syria may well have been lessened.

More broadly, and by way of conclusion, I want to suggest scholars, analysts, and policy-makers would benefit from pausing to ask: what do people in the MENA mean with the words they use? What do key words (e.g. democracy, terrorism, human rights) actually mean in ordinary language – that is, in everyday conversations – to people in the region? And what are the actions associated therewith? Differently, I have argued that “radical Islam” fails Western analysts because it harbors strong normative commitments that shape the range of empirical referents associated therewith – these problems plague Western neologisms that seek to describe the politics of the MENA. Given the failures of “radical Islam” and other neologisms, it seems ethically sound and intellectually responsible to begin from the grammar up: to discern the meaning of everyday words and practices as understood by peoples in the region before attempting to diagnose problems or offer remedies.

Ahmed Khanani is an assistant professor of politics at Earlham College.
**Why “Islamism” does not help us understand the Middle East**

By Jillian Schwedler, Hunter College

Many of the categories we use to talk about Islamists—moderates, radicals, jihadists, and so on—no longer make much sense. Nor is it helpful to think of “Islamism” as an ideology that some groups have and others do not. Yet the scholarly and policy literatures continue to broadly define Islamists as Muslims who believe that all aspects of life should adhere closely to sharia, while “ordinary” Muslims, by contrast, do not insist that sharia be so strictly applied. Islamists are thus portrayed as more hardcore, doctrinal, and conservative. They are less willing to accommodate alternative perspectives, be they socialist, communist, secular, or democratic. In a broad sense, we see Islamists as ideological, whereas other Muslims embrace their religion to varying extents but are not so intransigent or closed-minded in their beliefs. This view of Islamists needs to be revised, as it no longer provides much analytic traction for understanding the politics of the region.

As I have argued elsewhere, this view also establishes Islamist groups as the object of study, with different groups possessing different sets of beliefs and adopting and advocating for different policies. Thus Muslim Brotherhood groups follow the teachings of founder Hassan al-Banna; Salafi groups follow the teachings of other founding thinkers, and so on. These sets of beliefs are assumed to be crucial for understanding what these groups believe. This approach dominates because it seems so self-evidently true: there are groups that espouse different beliefs, and they talk about the differences among themselves quite vigorously. And because many of them self-identify as Islamiyyun, we have external confirmation for the validity of classifying some groups as “Islamist.”

It is hard to argue with a conceptual framework that distinguishes groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda from ordinary Muslims. Those distinctions make good sense given that most Muslims resoundingly reject extremist thinking and such uses of violence. In the policy world, the stakes of such categories have as much to do with understanding the complexities of Muslim societies. With Islamophobia reaching a fever pitch in the U.S. presidential primaries, emphasizing those differences can also do important political work by undermining arguments that treat Muslims as an undifferentiated monolith. But this approach also enables the creation of policies that treat “them” differently—the “them” just becomes Islamist extremists rather than all Muslims. This is the thinking behind policies that seek to wipe out groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda. But as a political project, targeting jihadi Islamist groups is a losing game, one that even some mainstream policy analysts view as flawed because it ignores the broader conditions that allow such groups to flourish.

The range of ideas and beliefs that distinguish Islamists from ordinary Muslims cannot be easily situated on a single continuum (let alone through a binary), nor are they unchanged over time. Of course most scholars recognize that concepts are abstracts that never fully capture empirical reality; however, some of the concepts used to describe Islamists have become so ingrained that we almost treat them real. In actuality, a wide range of actors—groups as well as individuals—engage quite seriously with narratives of Islamist legitimacy, justice, norms, and obligations, with explicit reference to sharia. Thinking and talking about what sharia requires is a practice in which many Muslims engage seriously and regularly. Debates about Islam are hardly limited to Islamiyyun.

Furthermore, the centrality of discussions of faith and religious obligations wax and wane in public discourses circulating in Muslim communities. Some of the key debates over the past few years include: the ways in which justice is perceived to be connected to Islamic values; whether anti-Islamic and Islamophobic discourse from the United States and elsewhere deserve a serious response from Muslim communities; the ways in which some
segments of Muslim communities reflect more deeply on their religion at certain times, be it weekly or during Muslim holidays or in time of personal or national crisis.

Many regimes in the Middle East also frame their own legitimacy, and the legitimacy of their actions and policies, in terms of what they argue is the most correct or most authentic version of Islam, but this practice does not make it into most discussions of Islamism. Ostensibly Islamic regimes like Saudi Arabia and Iran are not the only ones to claim to be acting in accordance and on behalf of Islamic values. Repressive regimes like Sissi’s in Egypt prosecute individuals for “offending Islam,” even as they repress the Muslim Brotherhood for its “wrong” version of Islam.

The question of Islamist politics therefore is about not only Islamist groups, but also the degree and type of ways that people discuss and feel the role of Islam in their lives, which of course varies over time. I am calling this process of connecting and feeling “Islamistness,” a term that is intentionally awkward to remind us that as a category it does not work seamlessly. Thinking about the dynamics and degree of Islamistness can help us to evaluate the importance of particular ideas or debates to policies, affiliations, affect, identity, and alliances, without treating those debates as relevant only to those labeled Islamist.

By arguing that many groups and regimes engage with what we used to categorize as Islamist ideas at some point, I am not claiming that all politics in the region has some degree of Islamistness. To the contrary, it does not explain, for example, why Saudi Arabia’s King Suleiman has forged a close relationship with Egypt’s Sissi—both vilifying the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt—while Suleiman allies with the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen. But I do think that our conventional categories of actors fail to help us understand the complex and changing role of ideas and beliefs in shaping the region’s politics.

We can think about the Islamistness of particular spheres or discourses, waxing and waning over time, and talk less about the “ideological” commitments of different groups as if those ideas were fixed and stood outside of time. We might also strive to recognize more directly in our work the ways in which differing sets of commitments to Islamistness shape political practices and alliances and when those commitments are subsumed by other political logics.

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Rethinking Relationality: Abductive Reasoning, Action Research, and Islamist Politics

By Stacey Philbrick Yadav, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Scholars of Islamist politics have been struggling to come to terms with developments that seem to be moving too fast and too far in places and among people we have known well. Whether because of a coup in Egypt or a war in Syria or Yemen, most contributors to this collection of essays are working in contexts of rapid change, where the organizations, groups, and individuals we have long studied have taken on new roles and are interacting with new, arguably unpredictable, forces. In some cases, Islamist politics seems to have undergone a qualitative change. In others, perhaps, it seems to have become irrelevant, as such.

Intellectually, the increasingly pressing question when I think about the methods and epistemologies of our research program is whether “Islamists” are even a thing. I mean this both analytically and colloquially. First, as a post-positivist critique of the too-easy intellectual objectification of a research program in which I am heavily invested but about which I am increasingly uncertain, and second, as a way to describe some of the effects of the rapid changes in places in the region that we are collectively trying to think through. There is a possibility that we can’t easily make sense of ongoing developments because our concepts – Islamism first among them – lack traction.

One of the primary lessons of the existing literature on Islamism, yet one that I don’t believe we have fully reckoned with as a collective, is our inability to isolate Islamists as an object of analysis. No matter the scholar’s epistemological commitments – and surely some among us question the extent to which a social-scientifically objective relationship is desirable or possible on ethical or practical grounds – our collective work shows that it is neither intellectually productive nor even possible to study Islamist politics in isolation from non-Islamists. In different country contexts and using different methodological tools, we focus on how Islamists interact with institutions, other interlocutors and organizations, and each other. We study Islamists only in relation.

Doing so requires some kind of implicit criterion of demarcation by which we understand an Islamist to be distinct from a non-Islamist, but as Jillian Schwedler ably argued at our meeting last year, and reiterated this year, we are far from this ideal and our efforts have too often devolved into a kind of “idea entrepreneurship” aimed at the development of typologies of Islamists – moderate, radical, jihadi, etc. Schwedler encourages us to “ask whether many of the common-sense distinctions and concepts that structure our analytic frameworks should be revised or even retired.” Two possible trajectories of revision seem clear, on the basis of different epistemological grounds. The first, like Ahmed Khanani’s ordinary-language approach to the study of Islamism in Morocco, might take as Islamist those who describe themselves as islamiyun. Another might hold that “Islamist is as Islamist does,” and seek to deduce a set of practices against which to evaluate the work of Muslims who may or may not call themselves Islamists but who engage in practices or espouse views that align with some institutions that we understand as Islamist.

It is not clear that we currently have agreement on even the most basic criterion of demarcation, Islamist/non-Islamist, nor does it seem possible to arrive at one that would not systematically privilege institutional membership, a criterion that seems intellectually indefensible, given what we know about Islamist movements, organizations, parties, practices of everyday piety, and the slippage among them. From a Lakatosian standpoint, this undoubtedly hinders the potential progress of our research program, but the critical
reappraisal may at the very least protect us from the “tyranny of unexamined systems” (Feyerabend 1965, 212).

The Promise (and Peril) of Abductive Reasoning

As we struggle to connect unfolding events in the region to what we know or think we know from the perspective of our existing research program on Islamist politics, it makes sense to move from Feyerabend’s general ethic to something more practical, like Ian Shapiro’s notion of “problematizing redescription.” For Shapiro, this is a two-step process that “starts when one shows that the accepted way of characterizing a piece of political reality fails to capture an important feature of what stands in need of explanation and...then offers a recharacterization that speaks to the inadequacies of the previous account” (2002, 615). It is possible that a narrow focus on Islamism – and what we think we know – needs to be redescribed in such a way.

This process of problematizing redescription emerges most clearly through an encounter with the puzzling and is most clearly advanced by abductive reasoning. The mode of reasoning seeks to avoid the linearity of both inductive theory-development and deductive theory-testing in favor of a an iterative and recursive “hermeneutic circle-spiral” by which we continually revise and refine our thinking about a particular puzzle – including the specific nature of the of puzzle itself – in light of new and ongoing discovery. The abductive focus on the puzzling or surprising “requires attending to the expectations and other prior knowledge one brings to the field,” and being open to “new concepts, new relationships, explanations, or accounts” that emerge when “theorizing these surprises or puzzles” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2011, 32-33).

Embracing this iterative-recursive approach in order to rethink the centrality of Islamism would, among other things, allow us to embrace the curiosity that we have as we face new and unanticipated events in the Middle East, without needing to immediately fit them into existing theory. It would, in effect, allow us to be curious learners more than experts. And by “allow us to be,” I mean that it would encourage an honest reckoning with where many scholars of Islamist politics are right now in relation to the rapid changes on the ground in our areas of expertise. In my case, the nearly year-long war in Yemen has left the country’s political dynamics practically unreadable. Instead of asking “what role are Yemen’s Islamists playing in the current conflict?” I would far rather ask (or be asked) “what’s going on politically?”

Despite the clear advantages to abductive reasoning, the perils are also reasonably clear. If one’s head is already spinning, a hermeneutic circle-spiral that is recursive and interactive cannot promise to slow the spinning down. In fact, in the short term, at least, it may make knowledge seem or feel even less tractable. That problem is particularly acute when we are called upon to comment from a perspective of expertise, to provide a longer (if still recent) historical perspective on a given conflict, to offer a genealogy of a particular organization and, in particular, to opine about where things are going rather than ask what’s going on.

Where Action Research Comes In

This leads to the issue of our role as scholars of Islamist politics in an international policy community, an issue that is particularly apt for the contributors to this collection, given that POMEPS takes as its explicit aim “to increase [scholars’] contribution to the public foreign policy debate and to the policy-making process, in order to allow their expertise to have more of an impact on vital decisions about the Middle East.”

The line between our scholarship – idealized by a majority in our field as a dispassionate and “objective” exercise – and policy advocacy is far less clear than might always be recognized. Yet outside of political science and along its methodological periphery,there is an established literature on “action research” or “participatory research,” in which scholarship consciously shapes the policy arena that scholars study. The challenge of such research, as Charli Carpenter ably demonstrated in Perspectives on
Politics, is that when effective, it may actually contribute to changing the very phenomena under investigation (Carpenter 2012, 368). While this is problematic from the perspective of neopositivist political science, the epistemological commitments that underwrite interpretivist work already take for granted the potential impact of scholarly inquiry itself and challenge the subject-object distinction implicit in neopositivist claims.

That does not mean, however, that action research is not ethically fraught, even for those who accept its basic epistemological and political premises. Indeed, in the current regional context with its very high stakes, scholars of Islamism might rightfully feel compelled to use knowledge to advance some particular good — say, the political freedom of people who are being suppressed by ascendant anti-Islamist and/or sectarian regimes. However, the risks of engaging directly — risks for our interlocutors and risks for our own career trajectories — are real. POMEPS, I believe, navigates this line well through its emphasis on research programs more than individual scholarship. That said, our conversations should necessarily include a more open reckoning with the limits (and politics) of expertise under rapidly changing conditions. This can start, I think, with the kinds of questions we ask each other. As a thought exercise, if nothing more, it is worth considering what would happen if we were to stop asking each other about Islamists and start asking each other about politics, broadly. We might find that we still want/need/like our conversations about Islamists (qua Islamists), and those concepts will still be available for us. But we might not.

What I Don’t Mean to Say

I worry that this essay will be read as biting the hand that feeds me. After all, I might be arguing for the abandonment of a research tradition on Islamist politics in which I’ve worked for more than a decade. But I am not actually arguing that, at least not quite. I am arguing, I think, for the intellectual space to breathe, and certainly, for some greater reflexivity and honesty about our diverse roles in the process of knowledge-production. These are not novel arguments, but they do require repeating. And, as Carpenter argued, “taking seriously the idea that we are part of the world we are studying requires more than a few paragraphs in our methods section.” (2012, 364).

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This framing recollects a similar critique made by Thomas Carothers with regard to the literature on democratic transitions, where he advised that “aid practitioners and policy makers looking at politics in a country that has recently moved away from authoritarianism should not start by asking, ‘How is its democratic transition going?’ They should instead formulate a more open-ended query, ‘What is happening politically?’” Thomas Carothers. 2002. “The End of the Transitions Paradigm.” Journal of Democracy 13 (1): 18.
New Methods, New Sources
Understanding Islamist Politics: The Possibilities and Promise of Untapped Surveys

By Lindsay Benstead, Portland State University

What a Difference a Year Makes: Polling before the Arab Spring

Nationally representative surveys were first conducted in the Arab world in the early 1990s by the World Values Survey and other organizations. However, only about a dozen of the more liberalized Arab countries were surveyed by major cross-national projects by 2010. In surveys that were conducted, researchers probed attitudes about Shari’a law and the role of religion in the state, but questions about past or future vote choice—that is, precise political behaviors—were not included, due to their sensitivity. A measure of respondents’ preferred party appears to have been contemplated for the first wave of the Arab Barometer, conducted 2006-2008 in six countries (Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Yemen), but this variable was not added to the final dataset. Following the Arab spring, researchers measured political ideology for the first time in the Barometer’s second wave in 2010-2011, asking which party best represents the respondent politically, socially, and economically. In Tunisia and Egypt, respondents were asked which party they had voted for in the first transitional elections in 2011.

Following the Arab spring, the Transitional Governance Project was launched in part to study and explain electoral behavior. A collaborative project involving five scholars, the initiative brings together pre- and post-election studies in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, designed to explain electoral behavior, including support for Islamist parties.

The Transitional Governance Project organized two polls in Tunisia: one in 2012, just after the October 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, and one in 2014, in the run up to the October parliamentary and November, 2014, presidential elections. These elections and surveys are summarized in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election and Survey</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tunisian Constituent Assembly Election October 23, 2011</td>
<td>Unicameral, closed-list proportional representation, Ennahda (37 percent), CPR (8 percent), Arditha (7 percent), Ettakatol (7 percent), PDP (4 percent)</td>
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<tr>
<td>First Transitional Governance Project Survey October-November 2012</td>
<td>1,202 Tunisians, face-to-face household, paper administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tunisian Constituent Assembly adopted January 26, 2014</td>
<td>1,220 Tunisians, face-to-face household, paper administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second Transitional Governance Project Survey May 20 June 15, 2014</td>
<td>Unicameral, closed-list proportional representation, Nidaa Tounes (38 percent), Ennahda (28 percent), UPL (4 percent), Popular Front (4 percent), Afek Tounes (3 percent), CPR (2 percent)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tunisian Parliamentary Election October 26, 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tunisian Presidential Election Bari Caid Essebsi, Nidaa Tounes (56)</td>
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Table 1. Elections and TGP Surveys in Tunisia since 2011

Using data from these surveys, Ellen Lust, Dhafer Malouche, and Jakob Wichmann conducted preliminary analyses to determine which voters supported Ennahda in the 2011 elections and how its base of support changed over time. We found that while in 2011, Ennahda’s voters spanned a large spectrum—they tended to hold diverse views on the role of religion in the state and on economic issues—but by 2014, they became more practicing and supportive of a close role of religion in politics. This suggested that while Ennahda remained popular, many voters, especially those less committed to having a more religious state, decided to vote for other parties in subsequent elections. It also showed empirically that an “Ennahda voter” does not equate with “Islamist.” By 2014, decided Ennahda voters were more likely to be male, older, from lower classes, practicing religion, and supportive of a strong role for religion in the state. They also tended to be more decided that supporters of other parties, who were more likely to state they were leaning for one of the dozens of secular parties in the field.
Second, we found that respondents viewed Ennahda as more religious than other parties, but that they varied in terms of perceived degree of religiosity. It is well known that Ennahda is more centrist than many other Islamist parties in the region (e.g., the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Palestinian Hamas). Many respondents rated Ennahda as only moderately religious, hinting at the existence of constituencies for other parties to the right of Ennahda, which would later be legalized in 2012, including Islah (Reform) Front and Hizb al-Tahrir. Interestingly, when the interviewer was dressed in an overtly religious way, respondents tended to report that they saw Ennahda as less religious than when the interviewer was dressed in overtly secular dress. Through these surveys, new insights into possible constituencies for the range of Islamist movements and parties that might eventually emerge in Tunisia and elsewhere came into greater focus.

Third, we also saw some of the key reasons for the decline in support for Ennahda between 2011 and 2014, though on this question in particular, more analysis is needed. Many who voted for Ennahda in 2011 decided to vote for Nidaa Tounes in 2014, due to Ennahda’s perceived poor performance on security and the economy. We found that Ennahda had the highest disapproval rating of any party in the country—more than 30 percent of Tunisians stated that they would never vote for Ennahda.

Fourth, using the 2014 data, we were able to anticipate what was likely to happen in the October 2014 polls. We found the secular Nidaa Tounes and the Islamist Ennahda polling similarly among decided voters, with the former slightly ahead. Although the majority of Tunisians were undecided at the time, the poll found that 33 percent of decided voters favored Nidaa Tounes, while 28 percent preferred Ennadha. (The results of the elections held later in October were 38 percent for Nidaa Tounes and 27 percent for Ennahda). We also found that Beji Caid Essebsi, who was later elected president, was favored by a wide margin four months before the election. While our poll results were not released publically before the elections, they gave us some confidence in the effectiveness of our methodology and provided a means of capturing a snapshot of voter behavior at a critical moment before the first regular election held in transitional Tunisia.

Fifth, we found that the proportion of decided voters — and the proportion of those decided for Ennahda — varied by district, offering information that is both useful to political parties as well as to academics seeking to explain why parties of different orientations appeal to voters in different areas and the factors that mobilize voters for different movements earlier and later in the campaign. For example, as of June 2014, two months before Tunisia’s 2014 parliamentary elections, only 13 percent of voters in Kairouan were decided, with 4 percent leaning toward any party, while 55 percent of those in Monastir were decided and 25 percent were leaning toward one of the parties. These and other aspects of Tunisian’s foundational elections merit greater attention and analysis.

Can Polls Be Accurate? Survey Research’s Strengths and Weaknesses

Many in popular and academic circles — including many experts in Islamist politics — express skepticism about polling methods. What about social desirability? Will people reveal their preferences?

These are important concerns, but a few points are worth noting. First, social desirability and preference falsification are also worries with other methods, including qualitative interviews—the most common method used to study Islamist parties and movements. While survey researchers may include caveats about what surveys cannot tell us, they should also point out what they can. With replication, surveys offer data that is representative of a large population, substantially adding to our ability to explain political realities and processes.

Second, survey methodologists have developed techniques to study and reduce the impact of social desirability on survey results. These include research on the effects of observable and unobservable interviewer traits, as well as mode studies, which assess how more private modes impact answers. (For example, consider how reporting...
sensitive answers might change if a respondent answers in a self-directed way on a laptop instead of in a face-to-face interview.) These techniques are crucial to both reducing bias, as well as studying social dynamics surrounding contested and sensitive issues. Consider the question referenced above that asks respondents to rate the extent to which Ennahda (and other parties) is a completely secular or completely religious party. That responses to this question (and every other survey question about support for Islamist parties) are systematically affected by the religious dress of the interviewer, suggests that Tunisians attach social meaning to the political role of religion and see it as contested. To avoid embarrassment or sanction, respondents systematically conform to the socially stereotyped views of the interviewer, and the extent to which they do depends on the perceived authority of the researcher. Respondents implicitly sense that citizens disagree about Ennahda’s stance on religion and politics—whether it is too conservative or not conservative enough. This hints at the existence of a constituency in Tunisian society to the right of Ennahda’s positions.

Conclusion

New data from the Transitional Governance Project and the Arab Barometer offer under-utilized information needed to assess whether our expectations about Islamist parties and movements need to be reshaped. Changes in the landscape of the Arab world since the Arab uprisings impact the urgency with which we need to understand substantive questions around electoral politics and democratic political change, including changes in the Islamist landscape. And, we now have much more high quality data with which we can address these issues. Scholars have still only scratched the surface of what we can learn from this data.

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2 Transitional Governance Project, http://transitionalgovernanceproject.org/


5 The Tunisian Post-Election Survey (TPES) was a face-to-face household survey conducted October 8-November 30, 2012 by the Transitional Governance Project shortly after the October 23, 2011 election of the Constituent Assembly. The poll was conducted by Lindsay Benstead, Ellen Lust, and Dhafer Malouche, with support from the National Science Foundation, Portland State University, Princeton University, and Yale University.

6 Survey of 1,220 Tunisians conducted in 2014 by United Nations Democracy Fund and Centre d’Études Maghrébines à Tunis, in collaboration with Lindsay Benstead, Ellen Lust, Dhafer Malouche, and JMW Consulting. Transitional Governance Project.


8 Lindsay J. Benstead and Dhafer Malouche. 2015. “Interviewer Religiosity and Polling in Transitional Tunisia.” Presented at the annual conference of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.

Old questions and new methods in the study of Islamism

By Steven Brooke, Harvard Kennedy School and University of Louisville

Just as they have been for Middle Eastern peoples and governments, so have the last few years been tumultuous for our academic understandings of the region. Islamist groups have been at the center of many of these changes: lodging quiet successes in Morocco, adapting to the democratic give-and-take in Tunisia, falling victim to their own successes in Egypt, consolidating their hold on power in Turkey, and taking up arms in the region’s devastating civil wars. Not only have these developments spurred us to revisit our longstanding assumptions and conclusions in the study of Islamism, they are also re-shaping the very methodologies, concepts, and tools that we have used to arrive at them.

In this workshop paper I want to advocate integrating into the study of Islamism spatial, quantitative, and user-generated/social media data. Two interrelated concerns – one proactive and one reactive – motivate this emphasis. First, the rapid proliferation of publicly available data offers new opportunities to test and consolidate our existing understanding of Islamist politics. It can also help us expand to domains that had previously been inaccessible for researchers. Second, and more practically, in some places the political and security climate has become hostile to the type of qualitative and ethnographic work that has long formed the backbone of Islamist studies. In these conditions studying Islamism – of the Muslim Brotherhood variety or otherwise – has become increasingly difficult, if not outright dangerous.

Qualitative researchers – often blending intensive fieldwork, interviewing, and primary and secondary-source analysis – have generated nearly all of our most consequent academic investigations into Islamism. These methods have informed signal works on Islamists’ historical development, mobilization, processes of ideological and generational change, internal debates, democracy and political competition, and the relationship between Islamist groups and the state. Beyond each author’s individual preferences, abjuring alternative approaches to the study of Islamism made practical sense. Despite operating in authoritarian political systems, Islamists were readily available for researchers: we could ask them questions, read their books, and generally spend time understanding their daily life. At the same time, the types of data that were more amenable to different analysis, such as election results, were of questionable provenance and dubious quality.

Recent events in the region, from uprisings, electoral competition and governance, civil war, and/or renewed repression, have each generated a considerable amount of new data. Used creatively, this material can help us revisit a number of assumptions and allow us to test longstanding theories in the academic study of Islamism. I want to highlight recent and in-progress works – both my own and that of others – that use these materials to address key arguments embedded in the literature on Islamism: the purpose and effect of Islamists’ social services, the pathways of ideological change, and the social bases of Islamist activism.

In a recent review article, Melani Cammett and Pauline Jones Luong noted that even the most basic aspects of Islamist social service provision remain “presumed rather than demonstrated.” I take up their challenge by using spatial methods to understand the connection between Islamists’ social service provision and their electoral successes in Egypt. For one project, I use Arabic-language social media to code the spatial distribution of nearly 500 of the Muslim Brotherhood’s medical caravans that were mobilized in anticipation of parliamentary elections in early 2013 (those elections never happened, due to the coup). Matching this activity to results of the 2011 to 2012 parliamentary elections showed that the caravans were clustered in districts where Brotherhood candidates had faced their toughest challenges in earlier parliamentary elections. This user-generated data can help us understand
how and why Islamists use social services, a topic that has historically proven difficult to study.

The experience of Islamists in the various legislatures and presidential palaces furnishes additional material that allows us to revisit predictions of how Islamists would behave in government. In a working paper, Sharan Grewal coupled biographical details of 87 Ennahda deputies with their voting records in Tunisia’s new parliament to quantitatively test theories of moderation. He finds that deputies who spent time in the West were more likely to vote liberally on issues of religion and state, those who had been more active in student unions and syndicates were more likely to take liberal positions on women, and deputies who had to prison were more likely to object to banning members of the former regime from political life – although the length of time one had spent in prison was positively correlated with support for the ban. Beyond the specific conclusions, Grewal’s research suggests the potential of more deeply analyzing the edicts, laws, and pronouncements that Islamists produced during their time governing.

Much of our information about the social base of Islamists comes from case studies and observation. Yet the large-scale Islamist mobilization following the July 3, 2013 military coup provides important new quantitative data to understand the social context of Islamism. Neil Ketchley and Michael Biggs used an open-source listing of those killed during the Egyptian government’s attack on pro-Morsi protesters in Rabaa ‘Adwiyya square to make inferences about who these protestors were and where they came from. Matching the victims’ biographies with census data, they conclude, “pro-Morsi protesters killed at Rabaa came from districts with low rates of illiteracy, in other words the most prosperous and urbanized parts of the country.”

The above projects all focus on political Islamists and, as such, are largely concerned with issues of electoral mobilization and governance. At the other end of the spectrum, the prominence of salafi-jihadist groups in many of the region’s conflicts provides opportunities for innovative new analyses of these actors. Particularly notable is the centrality of user-generated social media. As Marc Lynch and his coauthors note, the Syrian civil war “has been perhaps the most socially-mediated civil war in history, with little direct journalistic access to the battlefield and an extraordinary amount of user-generated content shared across social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.” When big data like this is used thoughtfully it can generate interesting answers for questions about rebel governance, recruitment, internecine conflict, and theological debates. One avenue of analysis for future scholars might be to emulate Richard Nielsen’s automated textual analysis of fatwas, books, and other materials to understand why some religious figures turn to jihadism.

Leveraging rapidly proliferating and publicly available data in order to complement and deepen our existing understanding of Islamist politics is a worthwhile endeavor purely on the academic merits. Viewed in light of the regional context, and in particular the increasing difficulties of researching the very sectors of politics and society in which we are interested, the case becomes even stronger.

In the best of conditions, the types of research that have fueled academic study of Islamism were difficult. But even in Mubarak’s Egypt, for instance, it was relatively easy to speak with Islamists, spend time with them, and generally attempt to understand how they conceptualize their role in society (and, in turn, how society relates to Islamist activism). Now, as the military regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sissi continues to expand its control over multiple facets of Egyptian life, it has become basically impossible for us, as scholars, to carry out the fieldwork that we have long been accustomed to. As Nathan Brown puts it, when discussing Egypt, “I don’t think anybody [today] is trying to do a research project that went through official channels that has the words ‘military’ or ‘security’ or ‘Muslim Brotherhood’…” The recent murder of Italian Ph.D. student Giulio Regeni highlights the dangers confronting scholars who work in these contexts.
Of course, it's not just foreign academics that are struggling to navigate these currents: Egypt's government is making a concerted effort to bring the country's restive universities to heel, and also targeting dissident academics and researchers. Not only does this cause immediate research difficulties, it also inhibits vitally important interaction with local researchers and academics by opening them to spurious charges of “collaboration with foreign entities.” One option is to simply switch to countries where fieldwork-based research on Islamists remains possible (indeed, a silver lining is the way that these developments force us to diversify an Egypt-centric research agenda). Another is to delve into the historical record, noting parallels with the current period of repression and how Islamists coped.

I hope this essay is not read as another salvo in the increasingly tired debates between the qualitative and quantitative research traditions. Indeed, the types of material that technological advances and liberalizations (and de-liberalizations) have generated are just as promising for qualitative and interpretivist investigators. We can gain as much from an in-depth investigation of a single document as we can from a meta-analysis of that entire scholar's web-scraped corpus. Rather, I want to emphasize that qualitative studies have contributed enormously to our understanding of Islamists and Islamism, and in so doing they have given us a tremendous array of assumptions and conclusions that the upheavals and technological advances of the last few years have given us the opportunity to revisit.

Finally, I would also note that the aforementioned studies are each grounded in broader research frameworks that take existing qualitative research seriously, often integrating it as a vital component of their work. They clearly motivate their questions by referring to existing theoretical claims and empirical irregularities, and they turn to new data or methods to gain traction over these puzzles. Indeed, this willingness to blend methods and data sources and to anchor both in local contexts, is key to successfully developing new research questions. Keeping in mind prior contributions is important, even as we look to rethink and improve our existing understandings of these actors.

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Rethinking Moderation, Attending to the Liminal

Michaelle Browers, Wake Forest University

There was, not so long ago, a rich debate in Middle East politics over moderation. More recently there seems to be what might be termed “moderation-thesis fatigue,” as was well captured a year ago in a piece by Jillian Schwedler. Rather than asking about moderation per se (What is moderation? What can foster it? Inclusion? Cross-ideological cooperation?), at this moment when so many countries in the Arab region are experiencing instability, discontent and deep social divisions, we might inquire more immediately as to the fate those actors that the literature has already highlighted (even celebrated) as moderate: How have they fared, what role have they played, and what role might they yet play? However, I want to further suggest a rethinking of why it was that they were celebrated in the first place. Just as Stacey Philbrick Yadav notes “our inability to isolate Islamists as an object of analysis,” I argue for the redescription of moderation—and, ultimately, an abandoning of the term altogether—by focusing on the go-between, in-between action performed by those individuals we often label as moderates, a category of action which I am suggesting we redescribe as liminal.

Theorizing Middles

Social and political analysis of moderates, middles and liminality is vast and varied. This is seen most clearly in the association of middles with both stability and with change. The former emphasizes those actors (typically identified as the middle class or ideological moderates) who stabilize by virtue of their stake in the status quo and/or their possession of ideas that valorize stability, encourage measured reform and discourage radical change. My own work leaned toward the latter sense in locating alternative visions among various in-between and go-between individuals who were thinking, acting, dialoging and building connections across ideological divides. Many of these same individuals were important players in the growth of protest activity that brought us the Arab uprisings and the overthrow of heads of state in a number of countries, including Egypt. I was not alone in drawing attention to Egypt’s middle actors and moderates—a and many post-2011 works highlighted the importance of liminal spaces and liminal actors in explaining the uprisings and even in projecting further potentialities.

Liminality has been associated with both reconciliation and with emancipatory politics, marking an in-between that allows for a mixing and mingling of things usually kept separate, a zone of contestation and transition that is open to alternative possibilities. Both aspects are found among those actors that scholars of Arab politics have highlighted as “moderate” or “middle.” I focus here on Islamist liminars, while maintaining the need for study of those individuals playing similar roles in other ideological corners—and limit my focus to Egypt, in light of space and knowledge constraints.

Locating Egypt’s Liminals

Liminals are found among the so-called “middle generation” of the Muslim Brotherhood—more a political generation in a sociological sense than age-cohorts—sometimes self-styled as the reformist brothers or ikhwan islahiyyun. In the 1970s, many of these figures were involved in the creation of al-jama'a al-islamiyya and active in student unions before joining the Brotherhood around 1975 to 1977. In subsequent years, many either left or were driven from the Muslim Brotherhood. Prior to the Egyptian uprising, some departed with Madi to form the Wasat party. Others had their membership suspended when they worked with other groups in the course of the uprising or became part of the handful of dissident parties established in the run-up to Egypt’s 2011 parliamentary elections. Some remained within the Muslim Brotherhood, but were in Tahrir Square and working with other groups ahead of their organization. ’Abd al-Munim Abu al-Futuh remained within the Brotherhood until 2011, preferring to reform from within. He finally left (or was expelled) to run for president when it the Brotherhood claimed it would not seek the presidency, taking others with him.

Despite challenges from within and without, many of these reformist brothers were elected to Egypt’s post-revolution parliament; but their foray into formal political institutions was short-lived, since that body was dissolved by the supreme constitutional court (whose judges were appointed by Mubarak) in June 2012. Although a Muslim Brother was ultimately elected to the presidency, Muhammad Morsi was no liminal actor and perhaps too few scholars have observed what many former Muslim Brothers from this trend have reported in writings over the past two years: that hardliners used their electoral success and their access to state institutions during their one year in power to purge their ranks of those internal dissidents that they have been struggling against since the 1990s. A number of these figures proved vocal critics of policies that took place or continued under the Morsi presidency. Before the military coup, reformist (former) Brother Haytham Abu Khalil asserted that the political crisis in Egypt was “a result of a floundering presidency,” which was taking its orders directly from the Brotherhood (specifically from deputy supreme guide Khayrat al-Shatir), and lacked the “planning expertise” needed to govern effectively. Abu al-Futuh (and his Strong Egypt party) initially supported Tamarrud (Rebellion), which led the campaign to collect 15 million signatories to a call for early presidential elections. However, he immediately opposed the military’s use of this popular movement to oust Morsi and take power and helped form the Third Square (al-maydan al-thalith) along with an ideologically wide range of actors and groups — a liminal space of protest to take place in Sphinx square, situated outside of both the military organized protests in Tahrir Square calling for a crackdown on “terrorism” and the Islamist protests organized by Morsi’s supporters in Rabi’a al-Adawiyya square.

Many, too, have been arrested in the wake of Morsi’s overthrow, including both Madi and Wasat Party deputy, ’Issam Sultan. The former was released in August 2015, while the latter still languishes in prison along with ‘Ariyan and Biltaji. The Egyptian Current Party, which was led by former Muslim Brotherhood youth members and some youth from April 6, merged with Strong Egypt in October 2014, providing some hope that some liminars will not be so easily fractured by the regime’s divide and rule tactics. At the same time, Strong Egypt, like all opposition forces, has had many members arrested, cannot receive any funds, and finds itself regularly shut out of or attacked by the Egyptian media. In the lead-up to the fifth anniversary of the January 25 revolution this group remained a voice for the opposition. But its ability to address the larger divides in Egyptian society—let alone to stave off the deepening divisions within the democratic opposition—remains limited by the current political climate and repressive regime practices.

Much previous work has credited these individuals (along with other activists working outside of both state

and traditional parties in Egypt) with doing much of the legwork of forging the broad-based oppositional politics prior to the lead up to 2011. I also identified a second group of Islamist go-betweens who did much of the headwork. This second category of liminars consists of older, more intellectual figures—many of whom began their politicization in Arab nationalist or socialist movements but have come in one way or another to be associated with an Islamicist ethos and are often grouped together under the heading of wasatiyya. They include the law professor Kamal Abu al-Magd, the former Judge Tariq al-Bishri, the journalist Fahmi Huwaydi, the writer and lawyer Muhammad Salim al-'Awwa, Muhammad Ammar. Some consider Tariq al-Bishri’s October 2004 call for disobedience to an unjust regime as the manifesto that galvanized the opposition. His name quickly circulated as a potential consensus candidate for president. He declined, citing age, though Salim al-'Awwa decided to run. Bishri was immediately tapped by the SCAF to lead the constitution writing process, as the revolution’s first order of business. When Morsi put forth his infamous November 2012 constitutional decree that would have granted him broad powers as president, Bishri again spoke out critically. Despite the failed experience of the Morsi presidency, the emergence of popular support for the military’s removal of the country’s first democratically president and the current climate in which calls for the “elimination” of Islamists are widely heard, these figures remain committed to democracy and dialogue. Those who subscribe to the participation-moderation thesis would expect inclusion to contribute to a further moderating of views and exclusion to their radicalization. Certainly, since the military coup, the lines between those who support the regime and those who support the Muslim Brotherhood have become much sharper. Nonetheless, these liminars continue to be the most consistent advocates for dialogue and reconciliation. The lawyer Kamal Abu al-Magd has been perhaps the most vociferous in calling for the establishment of reconciliation processes that would put the Brotherhood and the Sisi government in dialogue. Yet, his multiple efforts to mediate between the two, announced in the media, have been consistently rebuffed by both sides. And he has, in turn, become the object of critique by both: he has been criticized by the Muslim Brotherhood for suggesting they give up their claim to the presidency and renounce violence and he is criticized by the government for suggesting the release of at least some of the Muslim Brotherhood members currently imprisoned.

The motives of these figures was called into question before the uprising in Egypt. In the current climate, they are finding themselves not just suspect but threatened. In addition to arrests and intimidation tactics on the part of the Sisi government, the press has been used to sully their reputations, as their critical forays into the public are consistently met with vitriolic rejoinders and charges of slander, treason and the like. This past July, Kamal Abu al-Magd gave an interview in Tahrir that was critical of the political climate under Morsi and was viciously attacked in the media the next day, most prominently by Amr Adeeb on the talk show al-Qahira al-Yawm. Interviews with some of the analysts at al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies revealed that many secular self-identified “liberals” and “democrats” view these liminars as bad as the Muslim Brotherhood—or even worse (for providing a cover or enabling the Islamists). The fraught status of the liminal intellectuals and activists over the past five years seem to confirm Edmund Burke’s claim for those who engage in moderation and compromise: the former “will be stigmatized as the virtue of cowards” and the latter as “the prudence of traitors.”

Attending to the Liminal

Shortly after Egypt’s military removed Muhammad Morsi from power, Egyptian political science professor and activist Rabab el-Mahdi identified “a wide and hard to bridge societal polarization” as the source of the current “catastrophe” and suggested that, absent a reconciliation process, Egypt could enter a phase “much worse than that of the police state under the rule of Mubarak.” Another Egyptian political scientist, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, noted that reconciliation between the regime and the Brotherhood

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is essential if the bloodshed is to stop and the country is to avoid a civil war. Tens of thousands of Muslim Brothers members and thousands of other Islamist and secular activists have been imprisoned or are in exile. There have been more deaths in clashes with police, by acts of terrorism, and though torture or neglect in prison. Five years after the uprising in Egypt, many commentators are bemoaning the “collapse of the Egyptian center,” the “pervasive distrust” and “wall of fear” among social groups in the country. The literature on reconciliation processes consistently points to local, homegrown mediators as key to long-term success. Deliberative models are increasingly touted as means of building trust and resolving crises. Much of the literature on democratic transitions and consolidation note the importance of centrist, moderate, or middle class forces. In O’Donnell and Schmitter’s words: “the talents of specific individuals (virtù) are frequently decisive in determining the outcomes.”

What I am suggesting is that the “talents” that matter most are those of actors who are committed to working in the in-between and as go-betweens—that is, liminal actors who are willing to build connections, broker and engage across divides, to think and act independently of existing structures of power in order to pursue a not fully formed but in many respects salient vision of an alternative to authoritarianism, whether it emerges in the form of Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood or the military.

How can one expect to cast lines between the echo chambers absent Egypt’s liminars, whether the so-called Islamic wasatiyya, the “reformist Brothers” and ex-Brothers, or other individuals whom we might associate with other ideological categories (and about whose level of “moderation” we might well disagree) but who clearly and consistently display a similar category of action as liminars on the Egyptian political scene? It is in those in-between spaces and via those go-between actors that alternative visions and communities are worked out. Of course, beyond this, we must consider not just liminal spaces and those who create and animate them, but the social structures in which these liminal spaces and individuals are embedded.

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Exploring Causal Mechanisms
The Islamist Identity Crisis: How Mainstream Islamism Lost Control of Its Own Narrative

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Political developments in the Arab world since 2011 have dramatically shaped Islamist political activity and discourse in the region. They have also influenced Islamist movements further afield, in terms of the strategies and political narratives that movements now pursue. Indeed, it would not be too strong to say that Islamist movements in many countries are in crisis. It is not a crisis of popular support, nor a crisis of irrelevance. Many Islamist movements maintain high levels of support and remain deeply relevant to the future of the countries in which they operate. Rather, it is a crisis of political identity that has taken a profound toll on the ability of Islamist groups to control their own narrative. They rightly recognize that they are losing control over the narrative of who they are and what they stand for at their own peril. The mainstream Islamist brand is in crisis, which is having destructive effects on the ability of Islamist movements to mobilize their political base. As more and more stories are told about them, Islamist narratives have become increasingly reactionary, and reflect profound differences within movements over strategies to regain political efficacy.

Several key moments in the last five years served to trigger this identity crisis. First, the apparent political openings in several countries of the Arab world in 2011-12 helped to transform Islamist narratives in places like Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco, and Libya from one of a reformist opposition movement to one of a potentially powerful political party that plays a role in governance. In the process, Islamist movements went through a painful process of redefining themselves both organizationally and ideologically to play within the new rules of politics and to get to a position where they could effectively govern. Subsequently, the widespread closure of many of these political openings forced Islamist movements to reevaluate whether the organizational and ideological transformations in progress were appropriate to the circumstances, and opened up divisions within the movements regarding political strategy towards the state. State collapse in the wake of the Syrian, Libyan, and Yemeni civil wars also strengthened opportunities for violent jihadi political entrepreneurship that challenged the narratives of mainstream Islamist groups and further discredited the political transformations in progress. Finally, the regional rivalry between Sunni Gulf states and Iran spilled over into open confrontation through the support of ideologically-driven proxy fighters within these civil wars, leading to an intensification of sectarian divisions and a loss of control over more inclusive Islamist narratives in favor of those more narrowly defined by the ‘near enemy’.

I argue here that the combination of four factors stemming from these recent political developments in the Middle East has put severe strain on both the internal and public narratives of many Islamist movements worldwide, and has accelerated the weakening and fragmentation of Islamist political movements. Specifically, a) resurgent authoritarianism, b) the aggressive spread of violent and often theatrical jihadism, c) state-sponsored sectarian interventions, and d) internal organizational crisis within movements have each helped lead to a loss of narrative control. The consequences of the loss of this narrative control are significant because the lack of clear messaging facilitates fragmentation among Islamist political actors and rewards the most provocative ideological narratives. This in turn creates long-term challenges for domestic politics and security within the countries in which Islamist movements have popular support. I address each of these four challenges to mainstream Islamist narratives in turn.

Resurgent Authoritarianism

In countries where new political openings were anticipated or activated, but which subsequently saw the closure of those political openings, Islamist movements have had to rapidly and repeatedly change their political narratives.
The most common pattern has been a shift from a dominant narrative that criticizes the government or regime for incompetence, corruption, and discrimination, to a more constructive narrative that articulates a vision for what can be built and why the movement is poised to build it. Subsequently, however, the newly constructive narrative lost credibility as either political circumstances or internal capacity forced the movement to acknowledge its inability to accomplish publicly stated goals. This led to either a fight or a flight reaction that deeply impacted Islamist narratives in the face of resurgent authoritarianism. The affected movement's narrative became either more stridently critical of government actors or more pragmatic and less ideological in its approach.

The narrative shift of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt swung rapidly between extremes because of the extent of its political success and the severity of its expulsion from the political system; it became emblematic of a “fight” reaction and shifted to persistent and vociferous government criticism. In Bangladesh, the Jamaat-e-Islami similarly saw its narrative turn from one of government participation and alliance with mainstream political parties towards sharp criticism of the political system following increased government repression of the group, including the arrest or execution of prominent leaders.

The shift to an increasingly pragmatic and less ideological narrative is best represented by Ennahda in Tunisia. Its narrative moved from government critique, to constructive visioning, and then to political pragmatism as its political opportunities faded. The Islamic Action Front in Jordan saw a similar but less dramatic shift in recent years as government criticism and narrative visioning faded to increasing political pragmatism in the wake of the neighboring Syrian war.

These rapid narrative shifts coming from Islamist movements are in part the result of divisions within movements triggered by the need for new strategic positioning in the political system. Regardless of the direction that these narratives have gone, however, the combined effects of resurgent authoritarianism and subsequent instability in narrative discourse have done significant damage to Islamist movements’ public brand. This has led to confusion among potential constituents over how these movements see their distinctive mission.

**Violent Jihadism**

Although the public prominence of violent jihadism has always been a threat to mainstream Islamists’ political positioning, developments in jihadist activity around the world since 2013 have made it much more difficult for non-violent Islamists to control their own narrative. The conquest of territory and declaration of the caliphate by the Islamic State group, coupled with strong global recruitment efforts and the theatrical marketing of violence have put mainstream Islamist movements on the defensive as never before. Comparable public displays of violence by Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab have further filled the media space with violent Islamist messaging.

Authoritarian regimes and political opponents are often keen to use militants’ religious justifications for violence to negatively brand non-violent Islamist groups. These mainstream groups are therefore forced to spend much of their narrative effort distinguishing their ideology from militant groups, criticizing other Islamist groups, and fending off politically-motivated misinformation. This has had two primary effects that have diminished mainstream Islamists’ ability to control their own narrative.

First, the amount of narrative energy spent condemning violent attacks distracts from the effort to build their own messaging and positive brand in the eyes of the public. For example, a large portion of Ennahda’s public communication in 2015, both in Tunisia and abroad, focused on the condemnation of violent Islamist attacks rather than an articulation of their ideological contributions.\(^1\) A similar story can be told of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the wake of jihadi attacks from the Sinai.\(^2\) Secondly, because of the constant efforts to control their brand in the face of violent Islamist claims, non-violent Islamists become implicitly grouped into a mental
The category of Islamist (both violent and non-violent), rather than other possible mental categories (opposition political parties, non-violent activists). This framing is compounded by self-serving governments, which often choose to talk about both violent and non-violent Islamists in the same breath.

The Sectarian Turn

The Syrian civil war that began in 2011 has come to represent a problem for Islamists beyond the fuel that it has provided for violent jihadism. It has evolved into a broader proxy war between ideological interests in the Arab world, which has given rise to a clash of narratives between Sunni and Shi'i Islamists. These narratives are fed, both politically and financially, by the monarchies of the Arab Gulf in the case of Sunni Islamists, and by Iran for the Shi'a. While the inherent gap between Sunni and Shi'i perspectives on political Islam may be possible to overcome, in the current conflict-ridden environment of the Middle East the chasm is ever-widening. This has less to do with religious arguments than with political ones, but the political rationale for conflict between Sunni and Shi'a in the Middle East has infused many of the ideological arguments that Islamist groups currently make.

Shi'i Islamist militias in Lebanon and Iraq have fought on the battlefield against Sunni militias in Iraq and Syria, and the Islamic State group's ideology is virulently anti-Shi'a. The Saudi regime sees its major popular domestic challenge as a challenge by a rebellious Shi'i minority, and has prosecuted its campaign against that minority to the point of executing the leading Shia' cleric in the kingdom and triggering an international Shia backlash. In Bahrain, the Sunni monarchy has framed protests by the Shi'i Islamist al-Wefaq party as a geopolitical challenge to the Sunni world propagated by Iran, and the Yemeni government has framed its fight against the Zaidi Houthi rebellion in that country in the same terms. The Saudi-Iranian ‘cold war’ has directly contributed both to the destruction of the Syrian state and to the Yemeni state through influence over proxy forces. Both of these failed states have been producers of Islamist militancy, much of which is now aggressively sectarian. In addition, civil and political conflict in Lebanon is partly attributable to sectarian political choices, and Islamic sectarianism continues to plague Pakistani politics, often resulting in civilian deaths.

While much of the new sectarianism manifests through Islamist militancy, it also impacts non-violent Islamist movements, most specifically those in countries that are divided religiously, such as Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen. Party politics in Iraq is yet to recover from the deliberate alienation of Sunni political parties, whose poor political integration has been a primary trigger for state breakdown. In a mirror image of the same problem, the failure of the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain to equitably incorporate its large Shi'a population into the political system has led to political paralysis there. Finally, the Sunni Islah party in Yemen, which was poised to take a prominent position during the political transition, has fallen into a sectarian contest with Zaidi political opponents. This has facilitated a dramatic Yemeni political breakdown. The self-serving sectarianism now prominent in a number of Islamist parties diminishes their credibility across the broader population, prevents them from articulating constructive narratives of political change, and risks fueling militancy within their own ranks.

Internal Threats

The effects of the three external shocks just discussed have severely disrupted the narratives of Islamist movements, but there has also been a failure of leadership within Islamist movements themselves, triggering internal divisions. Successful Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan, or the Front Islamique du Salud (FIS) in Algeria have usually built their success on crafting an umbrella movement that can accommodate a wide range of worldviews and political interests within a compelling, but generic, political narrative. Under duress, however, these umbrella movements have a tendency to fragment along ideological and strategic lines, as members seek out differing responses to the movement's dilemmas. One effect of
this fragmentation is that divergent interests and their supporting narratives emerge from within the movement, compounding the problem of staying on message.

Direct governmental repression of Islamist movements, such as that recently witnessed in Egypt, Bahrain, and Bangladesh, forces supporters of non-violent participatory movements to re-evaluate whether they are willing to play by the government's rules when those rules are explicitly designed to be exclusionary. Some supporters are likely to decide to hold the party line, hoping to expose the government's moral weaknesses and wait the repression out. Others, however, are likely to see nothing but failure in such a strategy, given strong government signals, and thus move directly to a strategy of contentious politics.

In other cases, where Islamist movements feel a loss of efficacy because of political constraints or because of the consequences of poor political decisions, a similar split in strategy may occur between supporters of the status quo and those who push for a much more proactive narrative, despite the risks. As these divisions play out, it leads to uncertainty among observers about both the core ideology and the political endgame of the movement.

As the combined result of authoritarian resurgence after a period of uncertainty, the rapid expansion of violent jihadism, a newly assertive sectarian politics within Islam, and internal strategic and ideological splits within Islamist movements, the core identity of many Islamist movements is now in question. While the individual identities of many central actors in political Islam have been reasonably stable, the collective, public identity of Islamist movements in the Arab world and beyond has been in rapid transition. This dramatic and multi-directional identity transition has not been good for the more mainstream Islamist movements. It creates real challenges for them in achieving their longstanding political objectives of generating constructive social change within an Islamic normative framework. This identity crisis impedes these movements in large part due to how it affects the narratives that movements tell about themselves and those that are told about them.

Narrative matters deeply for Islamist movements because it connects them to their potential base, without which they are unable to accomplish their political and social goals. As with all political movements, the careful construction of a political brand and change story is central to political mobilization, and political campaigns inevitably spend a large portion of their resources constructing their brand and story. In much of the Islamic world, however, and particularly in the Middle East, mainstream Islamist movements have now lost control of their core brand, and stories are told about them so often that much of their own storytelling is relegated to defending their story in the face of alternatives told by others: by governments, by militants, and by political opponents.

This creates impediments to the future success of Islamist movements that are not likely to change in the near term. To the extent that movements will be able to reclaim their narrative and the political benefits that come with it, it will likely be due to conscientious leadership decisions and unequivocal messaging around key areas of current uncertainty: position on the use of violence, articulation of human rights, relationships to other Islamist movements and sects, the role of religion in society, and the appropriate role of the state. While in previous periods it was easier for movements to be ambivalent on some of these issues and still craft a compelling narrative, in the new world of Islamism strong, vocal positions on these issues will be more critical to brand management. Indeed, the one Islamist group that has been most narratively consistent on these issues in recent years, the Islamic State group, has been by far the most effective in terms of narrative definition. While mainstream Islamist groups should certainly not imitate its brand, they will need to become much clearer and more vocal regarding their own brand if they are to retain or regain political efficacy within their political systems.

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Rethinking Repression and Islamist Behavior After the 2011 Uprisings

By Elizabeth R. Nugent, Princeton University

Prior to 2011, scholars had paid significant academic attention to developments related to the ideology and behavior of Islamist elite actors. Much of this work focused on Islamist behavior under authoritarian regimes, but a slight extension of this literature provided predictions for what would happen if Islamists ever fully came to power in future freer and fairer elections. The phrase “one man, one vote, one time” succinctly articulated the assumption that all Islamist actors would behave undemocratically after winning first elections, due to a genuine or perceived lack of credible democratic commitments based on longstanding assumptions about the incompatibility of Islam and democracy. A large body of work suggested that elite Islamist ideology and behavior was influenced by political inclusion, in combination with the ability to ideologically justify political participation to constituents. A number of different versions of the Islamist inclusion-moderation argument suggested that those actors with longer experiences of political participation might behave more inclusively.

Actual observed behavior in Egypt and Tunisia didn’t seem to match up with the predictions of these theories. These were two cases where Islamist parties won similarly significant pluralities in the countries’ first post-uprising elections, and thus were charged with leading government formation and constitution drafting processes. In Tunisia, Ennahda had been excluded from formal political processes since a wave of state repression ending in 1992 left the group outlawed, divided, and largely incapacitated.
Yet the party worked in partnership to form a Troika government, dividing the three highest positions of state with the leadership from the center-left secular Congress for the Republic and social democratic Ettakatol parties. This first term was not devoid of conflict: the Ennahda-led government stepped down after two years amid paralyzing protests over its performance in office and the lack of progress on drafting a constitution. However, after the peak in this crisis, the party remained actively involved in negotiations over the formation of a coalition government, continued to participate in debates over the future nature of the second Tunisian republic, and helped to draft the constitution that was finally passed in January 2014, the final version of which included compromises from both secular and Islamist parties. The party's behavior, its public statements, and political program indicated a more inclusive worldview open to opposing viewpoints.

Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the first legally recognized party of an organization that had regularly contested elections since 1984, displayed a more exclusive worldview and related behaviors. The FJP’s brief tenure was marked by infighting; secular and leftist opponents characterized the party as dominating, dictatorial, and uncompromising while similarly demonstrating an inability to negotiate or cooperate with the ruling party. After a year that saw public and legal challenges to the multiple Constituent Assembly elected by the FJP-dominated parliament from opposition leadership as unrepresentative and non-inclusive, and decrees issued by Brotherhood-backed president Mohamed Morsi to remove his actions from judicial oversight, the Brotherhood used its plurality to pass a constitution despite the boycott of the Assembly by significant members of the leftist opposition. Much of these diverging outcomes were driven by differences in Islamist behavior. This is not to say that there were not other important extenuating circumstances that contributed to the course of political developments, but to call attention to what elite political actors themselves contributed to them in line with long-standing political science theories about the importance of elite actors and their behavior during moments of transition. In doing so, scholars must rethink and re-theorize the development of Islamist worldview and related behavior, including what experiences influence this, how it happens, and the long-term effects. Specifically, I suggest that scholars reconsider the effects of repression and reconsider groups’ experiences of it. Typically, repression of political opposition is a defining part of authoritarian regimes and their survival, the tool through which these regimes control institutions and maintain power, and a behavior towards which opposition actors, Islamists included, strategically respond. Yet we know that the effects of experienced repression – a term that means more than exclusion from politics, sometimes even accompanies formal inclusion, and involves physical detainment, torture, harassment, and exile – to be physical, emotional, and psychological. However, we have not systematically studied the effects of these experiences on political actors’ ideology and behavior.

**Experiences of Repression and Collective Memory Formation**

In order to formalize a theory of repression, I suggest that we view experiences of it through the lens of psychological and sociological theories of collective memory. Collective memory is defined as shared individual memories that bear on people’s identities. The formation of collective memory is described in the literature as a transmission of meaning and identities from the historical past of a group, a process through which individuals converge on memories, characteristics, and values shared by an in-group, portrayed as positive in contrast to a negative out-group. Though this literature is extremely vast and varied, I highlight here a number of points central to rethinking the effects of repression. Pain and trauma are featured
centrally as shared a group experience that enables – and indeed, better facilitates – collective memory formation. Traumatic events are found to be most influential because they are more effective than regular shared experiences at creating and increasing the salience of shared identities. This, in turn, facilitates increased cohesion and behavioral cooperation among group members, as evidenced by numerous observational and experimental studies. Most importantly for the question at hand, collective memory formed as a result of traumatic experiences also has important political behavioral impacts. Memories of past collective violence imbues present conflict, even if non-violent, with aggressive forms of in-group favoritism, a duty of retaliation, generalized hatred, and makes the current situation appear to be a repetition of previous violent conflicts. Collectively held memories of past conflicts can preclude political negotiations and compromises by creating fear and mistrust in addition to playing a cognitive-perceptual role in shaping parties’ perception of others’ interest, threat, and other intentions.

This literature provides important insights for understanding elite Islamist behavior. Throughout the twentieth century, Islamist actors — even those permitted to participate in the pseudo-democratic spaces of the Middle East — overwhelmingly faced state repression as regimes worked to control opposition, during both periods of consolidation as well as liberalization. In some cases, histories of Islamist actors highlight pivotal repressive experiences as important moments leading to increased cooperation, while in others, repression leads to a more closed worldview and behavioral retrenchment. By drawing from theories of collective memory formation, we might understand why this occurs. Though state repression of Islamists is quite ubiquitous, the nature of this repression – meaning, whether it targeted Islamists exclusively or rounded them up within a larger repressive framework – appears varied when considered within specific political, historical, and temporal contexts. If Islamists perceive themselves to be unfairly targeted, either in terms of pure numbers or in facing harsher tactics, the repressive experience should lead to within-group collective memory formation, in a manner that hardens worldviews and diminishes the group's propensity for cooperative behaviors. If Islamists perceive themselves to be part of a larger group of opposition activists due to more widespread regime repression and prisoner holding patterns, across-group collective memory formation should occur, working to moderate closed worldviews and increase cooperation between Islamists and other repressed groups.

Considering past repression of Islamists within a larger repressive context helps to explain worldviews and behavior in 2011. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was systematically, repeatedly, and overwhelming targeted for mobilization for which it both was and was not responsible by the Mubarak regime as well as its predecessors, facilitating with-in group collective memory formation. Meanwhile in Tunisia, successive authoritarian regimes cycled through repression of Islamist and secular (whether leftist, communist, or union) opposition, sometimes creating overlapping populations of opposition in prison and in exile, ultimately preventing with-in group and promoting across group collective memory formation. Comparing these repressive histories within a collective memory framework helps to explain what and how these experiences contributed to the formation of significantly different collective memories and resulting worldviews and behaviors. In both cases, repressed political actors have a level of awareness about their pasts; after 2011, previous repression, remembered in different ways, is offered as an important component of explaining their present.

In Egypt, major repressive campaigns against the Muslim Brotherhood preceded certain structural and ideological conservative turns for the group, in addition to the hardening of an older generation, the members of which bore the brunt of severe state repression. Periods of increased cooperation between the Brotherhood and other opposition resulted from less polarization during the 1980s, when the Mubarak regime largely left the Brotherhood alone. Evidence of the cumulative effect of targeted repression emerged after 2011, not only in the observed Brotherhood behaviors but also in the self-conscious way Egyptian elites explained them. Statements
by individual members of the Brotherhood insinuated that some portion of the group felt it deserved to govern, perhaps even exclusively, as the result of its suffering, while opponents cited excessive repression as the reason behind its dictatorial behavior.

In contrast, my ongoing research demonstrates that repression of Ennahda led to a more open worldview for the group. While the group was certainly targeted by the Ben Ali regime between 1989 and 1992, remaining formally banned through 2011 and with many of its leaders in prison and exile through the mid-2000s, it perceived this to be within a larger context of widespread regime repression. Members of the group remember their repressive experiences as being shared with other opposition groups and leaders, as a result of being targeted together in various roundups, repressed at similar levels and in similar ways, and held or forced into overlapping repressive prison and exile spaces. This, in turn, fostered increased communication, an increased sense of camaraderie, and increased cooperation both before (most notably, the 2005 October 18 Collectif) as well as after the revolution. Tunisian politicians talk differently than Egyptians do about their repressive experiences, referencing them not only as difficult experiences but also as times for personal and political growth, and as experiences that were shared across groups, in turn creating a higher level of cohesion among these groups in the pre-2011 opposition.

Ongoing Repression and Future Developments

While the collective memory mechanism is important for understanding Islamist behavior to date, it also has important implications for the long-term effects of ongoing repression in Egypt. Since the July 3rd coup, the Sisi regime has utilized repression widely, arresting 41,000 individuals between July 2013 and December 2014. Though journalists and leftist activists often receive the most attention in international circles, the regime has overwhelmingly targeted the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters since the military removed president Mohamed Morsi in a coup. His removal ushered in a new wave of repression against the group, beginning with the August 2013 deaths of 817 people when the police forcibly removed peaceful protesters in support of Morsi. Roughly 30,000 of those arrested are estimated to be Muslim Brotherhood leaders and supporters. The targeted nature of these repressive tactics does not go unnoticeable; the Brotherhood’s already forming collective memory of the past two years links this period to the ordeal (mihna) of 1954 to 1970, an experience which formed the basis of the group’s victim mentality, hardened the worldview of an older generation, and furthered the development of its undemocratic, closed structure and inability to cooperate with other organizations. Studies of the societal impacts of social memory demonstrate that the effects of collective memory can be detected up to two- and three-generations later. If this is true, the targeted actions of the Egyptian regimes may have hardened the worldviews and polarized the behaviors of Brotherhood members for the foreseeable future.

As Islamist behavior continues to evolve through the new opportunities and challenges presented by ongoing political development, we must continue to question our past analyses and the assumptions on which they rested. Introducing the study of collective memory is one way to reconsider previous work and predictions, one that departs from the rational actor framework to suggest a more realistic human experience of repressive politics. Further inquiry requires further comparison, including thinking about how collective memory does or does not explain Islamist behavior in other contexts such as the region’s monarchies which have witnessed controlled rather than sudden liberalization, how long collective memory might influence political behavior, and which part of collective memory – for example, the actual experience of repression, group narratives created about repression, forced interaction and communication, or the prevention of in-group collective memory formation – is doing the work in creating its political effects. The effects of repression on long-term mobilizational abilities might also be further theorized; the Brotherhood famously developed networks of extensive social service provision, some of which were utilized politically to mobilize supporters after
2011, while Ennahda was unable to cultivate any such large scale network as the result of the repression the group experienced. In any event and in any form, the long-term effects of the lived experiences of repression should remain a central topic of study as we make sense of the current period in the Middle East.

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As Schwedler notes, the term ‘Islamist’ can encompass a range of political actors united only in their commitment to the application of Islamic teachings, in some form, to achieve social, political, and economic reform and which may not be similar in the form of political engagement through which they advocate this approach. Here, I use this term to refer to actors who are committed to the application of Islamic teachings and whose engagement takes the form of non-violent political contestation, including elections if/when available.

An obvious difference is the existence of a strong and politicized military in Egypt, though arguably the SCAF would have had a hard time publicly justifying the coup without the defection of secular and leftist players from the democratic process.


See Coman 2015 for a succinct overview of these studies.

Though much of this literature focuses on situations following civil war, when both sides are guilty of violence and must be reconciled to end a conflict, the findings it produces appear to be applicable any situation that “serves as a foundational event for narratives of identity”, a category within would fall the situation of a state perpetuating collective violence against its citizens.

Salafi Politics during the Arab Uprisings: Methodological Insights from Game Theory

By Jacob Olidort, George Washington University

The tectonic shifts in Middle East Islamist politics over the last five years include trends within the region’s Salafi movement that can only be described as inexplicable. In 2011, Salafis in Egypt formed political parties, despite the doctrinal prohibition on engaging with modern institutions and, in 2015, the Salafi Nour Party competed in elections. In April 2013, Lebanese Salafi Ahmad al-Assir – despite his harsh condemnations of Iran and Hezbollah had previously avoided calls to violence – called on his followers join Sunni fighters in Syria and himself took up arms and led a battalion into al-Quşayr in Syria.

The Jordanian jihadist ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi seemingly reneged on his ideological posture by offering to mediate on behalf of the Jordanian monarchy in negotiating the release of Mu'adh al-Kasasibeh, the Jordanian pilot captured and eventually burned by the Islamic State in February 2015. And then there is perhaps the biggest irony – that the Islamic State, a group known for its exclusive and uncompromising commitment to early Islamic doctrines – has gained followers and fighters through the modern channel of social media.
When action doesn’t match ideology

Here lies the fundamental analytical problem when we try to explain the actions of Salafis: How do we account for clear contradictions of ideological principles coming from a group whose entire reputation centers on its commitment to its ideology? Certainly, those who have studied Salafi communities in the Middle East during the previous century know that much of the credit for their rise to political and social prominence over the course of the twentieth century goes to modern institutions and media: publishing houses, western-styled universities, cassette tapes and CD-Roms, television shows – all institutions that, by their nature, qualify as bida (reprehensible innovation), which Salafis would otherwise forbid on the grounds that these appeared after the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad and his early followers and which he did not explicit condone. However, it was these media through which Salafi scholars earned an income and which they justified as mechanisms for disseminating the Salafi methodology (manhaj) and creed.

However, there is a distinction between these technological preoccupations – all of which Salafis pursued with very clear ideological ends – and the political actions and alliances that Salafis have made over the last five years. In some cases, the ideological motives were clear, in particular as these related to the sectarian nature of the Syrian civil war – this, for example, serving as a driving impetus for al-Assir’s decision to lead an armed battalion to join Sunni militants. However, taken from the perspective of al-Assir’s Salafi principles, which do not openly condone violence, we cannot explain his change in posture from being simply a vocal critic to a fighter.

Al-Assir’s case is perhaps the easiest to reconcile in terms of ideology. Much harder is making the case, based on Salafi ideology, for Salafi political parties – not only in Egypt, but also in Tunisia and possibly soon in Morocco, where a new group recently formed on the model of Egypt’s Salafi Call.

Rethinking classifications

Analytically, the problem we face is one of the ideological categories of Salafi groups and their explanatory potential. In 2006, Quintan Wiktorowicz introduced a typology that has been more or less accepted in the public and academic discourse on how to understand Salafis: There are the purists (or what some call “quietists”) who, Wiktorowicz explains, “believe that the primary emphasis of the movement should be promoting the Salafi creed and combating deviant practices.” The politicos (or what some call the harakīs) who were born out of the fatwa issued in support of Saudi Arabia hosting U.S. troops on Saudi soil during Saddam Hussein’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait, and who, as Wiktorowicz explains, “continued to show deference to the senior purists while simultaneously challenging their authority by questioning their limited understanding of context.” Finally, and most famously, there are the jihadis, who promote “the use of violence to establish Islamic states.”

While these categories do roughly align with the ideological bases of these groups, they do not account for the actions these groups have taken for the simple reason that, unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a modern political ideology, Salafism is a legal and theological movement. In other words, the latter is clear and consistent about the theological and legal vision it promotes but it is generally vague on the political platforms it advocates on the bases of these. Inversely, Muslim Brotherhood-type Islamists are clear about their political ambitions and far from conceptually sophisticated or consistent about the kind of Islam they promote. It is the robustness and sophistication of the former’s religious doctrines that accounts for its ideological resonance today, in which the political contexts of the Brotherhood’s rise to prominence are no longer relevant.

The fluid political environment of the last five years has put into sharp relief the risks of adhering too closely to the aforementioned categories. Indeed, it is precisely the ideological unpredictability of Salafis in the political realm that has allowed many to stem the tide of political uncertainty in their local societies.
More specifically, we are trying to square the circle of describing the dynamics of Salafis by way of fixed categories. While the jihadis have remained relatively consistent and predictable from the perspective of their ideological positions, for other Salafi groups there has been significant crossover, as mentioned earlier. And this crossover is bound to continue as long as the region’s local governments remain unstable and unpredictable. In earlier writings, I proposed to categorize the quietists as standing along a continuum, with absolutist quietists (or Madkhalis, eponymously named after Rabi’ b. Hadi al-Madkhali who defined their position) – namely, those who universally advise strict obedience to local rulers – on one extreme and then a gradation of “politically-inclined quietists” who weigh in on political matters through the prism of their theological worldview yet resist becoming physically involved in them.

However, while this continuum does factor in political relevance of quietists, it does not account for the very latest surprises in which some politically-inclined quietists violated a cardinal ideological principle and formed political parties. This trend, in particular among Salafis in Egypt, demonstrates the limitations of using fixed categories to describe decision-making strategies and dynamics of non-jihadis. Specifically, where these groups differ from jihadis in terms of how their actions reflect their ideology is that the latter are insensitive to the repercussions of their actions, i.e. they will act on ideological principles regardless of the physical challenges and pressures against them. In fact, they may very well become emboldened and encouraged to pursue their ideological positions further if challenged. By contrast, all other strains of Salafism seem highly sensitive to the resonance of their ideological views within local society and under local political pressures.

To address these dynamics, and in particular the decision-making process that drives some quietist Salafis to become political while others to resist it, the methodological insights of game theory may be especially productive.

Salafi Responsiveness to Political Circumstances

The natural question based on this graphic is under what circumstances do some Salafis cross the dotted line and form political parties? This question may be rephrased and broadened to “under what circumstances do some Salafis violate/change/reinterpret their ideological positions?” It is a question that I have asked in the context of why some gravitate towards violent strains of Salafism why others do not. In both these cases – and one could produce many others – game theory is a relevant tool since, as Thomas Schelling explains, it describes how individuals make decisions through “rational behavior…based on an explicit and internally consistent value system.” Whereas the decision-making of individuals is not always based on rational choice, Salafis certainly claim to do so on the basis of their value system, Salafi ideology.
Game theory has been introduced into political science literature to explain the process of institutional change, but not, thus far, to the case of Salafi groups. Avner Greif and David Laitin define institutions as “a system of human made, nonphysical elements – norms, beliefs, organizations, and rules – exogenous to each individual whose behavior it influences that generates behavioral regularities.” For the purposes of Salafi communities engaging in politics during the Arab Uprisings, the precise “institution” we are looking at is Salafi ideological principles of political engagement. Specifically, we are interested in two related points: first, why and when do they violate ideological principles by engaging with political institutions and processes and, second, at what point does such self-contradictory behavior become the rule rather than the exception of Salafi politics?

Greif, Laitin, as well as Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and others have attempted to explain actions and statements by political leaders and the survival and adaptation of political institutions by examining the relationship between circumstantial factors in the decision-making of these groups. Greif and Laitin suggest that there exist two principal factors that influence the behavior equilibrium of institutions: “quasi-parameters” and “institutional self-reinforcement.” In other words, to extend to our case of Salafi engagement with politics, there is a balancing act between calculating personal preferences of self-preservation and ideological consistency within fluid political settings.

Whereas parameters are external (or exogenous) to the institution and variables are internal (endogenous) to it (and thus defined by the institution), Greif and Laitin’s quasi-parameters “can gradually be altered by the implications of the institution under study, and... [whose] marginal change will not necessarily cause the behavior associated with that institution to change. They do not cause the behavior associated with that institution to change because the changes of these features and their ramifications on the institution are not ex ante recognized, anticipated, directly observed, appropriately understood, or payed attention to.”

The extent to which quasi-parameters do influence such changes is determined by their potential for “self-reinforcing” those institutions, a determination that Greif and Laitin explain, can be measured according to “when the behavior and the processes it entails, through their impact on quasi-parameters, increase the range of parameter values (and thus ‘situations’) in which the situation is self-enforcing. If an institution reinforces itself, more individuals in more situations would find it best to adhere to the behavior associated with it.”

Returning to our politically-inclined quietist Salafis whose institutions (i.e. their ideological principles of political engagement) are subject to change, these, we can argue are influenced by a combination of theological justifications and, perhaps more often, by one or several “quasi-parameters” (potential for Saudi backing, chances of survival under local government, risk of being stigmatized as ISIS affiliates because of shared ideology, risk of other Islamic political successes, i.e. Morsi’s victory and thus the ascent of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2011 (and thus their own) and so on). To paraphrase Greif and Laitin’s explanation of quasi-parameters, each of these be altered by the implications of Salafi political engagement and yet each may very well not cause the behavior associated with Salafi political engagement to change. If we take Greif and Laitin’s discussion further, we could state that these politically-inclined Salafis would be increasingly inclined to participate in the political sphere when such activity will increase the range of parameters in which the situation becomes “self-enforcing” for the institution – i.e. when the institution (of Salafi political engagement) continues to validate itself and where, in turn, more individuals and more situations would adhere to it.

**When does the exception become the rule?**

Having addressed our first question of why and when do they violate ideological principles by engaging with political institutions and processes, we can turn to the more analytically interesting second question. Namely, at what point do such “plays” in the political sphere by individuals or groups of Salafis become the rule rather
than the exception of Salafi politics? Or, to rephrase this question, at what point does engagement in politics affect long-term institutional change whereby Salafis justify, on ideological grounds, their formal participation in politics – in other words, turning them into a more traditional Brotherhood-styled Islamist group.

To answer this question, and to gauge how likely it is for parameters to make Salafi political participation “self-reinforcing,” we need to appreciate how Salafism emerged as a social movement during the latter half of the twentieth century. Specifically, that this process took place in the context of the popularity of Islamism as a regional political ideology, financial and institutional support from Gulf-based patrons, and the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood (whose political threat created opportunities for Salafis to define their alternative narrative) by local governments – in other words, favorable parameters.

The evolution of Salafism in the 1990s and early 2000s was tempered by parameters that risked not enforcing Salafism, specifically, the rise and successes of Salafi-jihadism. It is under these unfavorable parameters that quietist Salafism gained relative acceptance in local communities, who marginalized it as an inward-oriented scholarly movement lacking any interest in the political sphere.

Just as it is premature to make any definitive statements about politics in the Middle East today, the same is true of what we could say about non-violent Salafi communities attempting to survive within them. Yet, while our assessment of what Salafi principles of political engagement will look like in the long-term remain tentative, understanding how its leaders balance ideological robustness and personal risk as these are validated or threatened by political circumstances might be a good place to start in developing a way to speak about them.

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No Victor, No Vanquished...or Delaying the Inevitable?

By Ian M. Hartshorn, University of Nevada, Reno

Researchers in this collection have usefully questioned the notion of Islamism as an analytic category. What constitutes “religious” politics is too often taken as an a priori category coloring our locus of study. Groups, parties, and movements may be overemphasized or reified while subtler and more dynamic elements are lost. This paper suggests the constitutional process and constitutional texts as potential alternative object of study that yields at least three benefits.

First, constitutions, with their long historical shadows, help color “normal” and “extraordinary” politics. They answer questions central to the supposed Islamist-Secular divide including source of legislation, role of the state in religious life, and the limits of religious speech and action.

Second, by looking at the constitutional process as one that is ongoing either through interpretation or actual revision, this approach moves from structures to processes and gives us leverage over understanding what is a religious versus a political issue.
Third, while at first blush research on constitutional
design and constitutional text may seem to be throwbacks
to another century, they are increasingly relevant in the
modern Middle East. Once barely worth the paper they
were written on, constitutions in North Africa have been
used to justify democratic elections or military coups, the
rights of workers and space for free enterprise, and how a
state will engage in international relations. Constitutional
design and constitutional text are a worthy subject of our
attention in part because they are seen as worthy by the
people taking up the mission of drafting and interpreting
them.

Tunisia After the Revolution

Five years after the uprisings that rocked the Middle
East, Tunisia has been hailed as a success story. It has
seen a (fairly) peaceful change of government following
elections. Despite the persistent threat of terrorism,
political bargains struck by new parties with help from
civil society actors have worked, even earning the Nobel
Peace Prize. The crowning achievement in this transition
is the new Tunisian constitution passed in early 2014. The
constitution, in the words of its first article, was designed
to support a “free, independent, sovereign state, its religion
Islam, its language Arabic, and its system [is] Republican.”
Despite this, the fundamental issue between “religious”
and “secular” politics in the state has not been solved. The
major decisions regarding this seeming paradox have been
delayed, and the institutions that are supposed to handle it
do not exist.

Tunisia under dictatorship had both a strong (if
underground) Islamist current and a rich secular tradition
bequeathed by both French colonialism and a post-
independence rule. These contradictions were on display
in the first post-revolutionary elections for the constitutional
assembly. Islamists from the Ennahda party won a plurality
of seats with leftists, social democrats, and conservatives
scattered among smaller parties. The constitution would
help set the course for balancing these secular and religious
forces.

Text and Context

The constitution was ratified with four explicit references
to Islam: two in the preamble, one in the first article, and
one restricting presidential eligibility to a Muslim. The
real form of religion and secularism in the state, however,
is shaped by Article 6, which reads that the state is the
“guardian of religion” and that it guarantees “freedom
of conscience and belief, the free exercise of religious
practices and the neutrality of mosques and places of
worship from all partisan instrumentalization.” It goes
on to “prohibit and fight against calls for Takfir and the
incitement of violence and hatred.” The phrasing was
hailed as a great success, with cheers and celebration from
members of the constituent assembly. Parliamentarians
from self-described “modern” (the preferred term to
secular) and Islamist (increasingly self-described as
“conservative” by members) parties embraced on the floor
of the People’s Assembly upon its ratification.

In the months preceding it, however, violence and
acrimony gripped the process. Two leftist leaders
were assassinated in 2012, stoking fear of an assault on
those accused of apostasy. In the final days of debate,
one member of the Assembly, Habib Ellouze, publicly
questioned the religiosity of a leftist politician, Mongi
Rahoui. Ellouze’s accusation could be interpreted as an
act of “takfir” or excommunication, opening Rahoui to
violent threats. The ratification process ground to a halt as
secular forces demanded the reopening of debate on issues
of religion and the state. Imed Deimi, a politician involved
in mediating secular and Islamist demands describes
the scene as leaders sought to salvage the negotiation as
seeking to strike a “golden balance.” Mediators wrote all the
terminology demanded of the two sides on a sheet of paper
and found a way to shoehorn the majority into one massive
article.

The article, however, commits the state to conflicting goals
of freedom of conscience and guarding religion, as well
as preventing threatening religious speech but protecting
the free exercise of religious practice. It also invokes the
possibility of direct intervention in mosques to prevent
their “partisan instrumentalization.” During a series of interviews earlier this month, leaders close to the issues presented by the constitution gave their views, two years post-ratification.

Rather than describing a battle two-years buried, leaders describe a struggle that is yet to come. Rahoui, the leftist politician who now sits in the Tunisian parliament stated “the battle continues against the forces of the religious state...because the constitution was not decisive.” The sentiment holds among his ideological rivals. Nadhir Ben Ammou, former minister of Justice who now holds a parliamentary seat on the Ennahda list stated that Article 6 is a “balm over cancer...a momentary solution to the roots of the problem.” So what aspects of the religion/secular divide are still open to debate, and where will those debates take place?

**Future Battle Lines**

It is worth noting that the crisis that spawned the article itself, together with the instances of violence experienced during the transition, have settled the issue of “takfir.” In over a dozen interviews with activists and politicians, none felt that banning excommunication or accusations of apostasy was “free speech” instead interpreting it as “terrorism” or “threats.” Even Ennahda representatives take this line.

The clause on partisan instrumentalization and political speech in mosques, however, is not as simple. The religious affairs ministry recently sacked more than two dozen imams and closed several mosques for incitement to violence. While Ennahda supported the decision, others were more critical. Ben Ammou, the former justice minister, argued in an interview that the Ministry of Religious Affairs itself is “not a solution.” Those who take a hard line against inciting rhetoric like professor and frequent media commentator Alaya Allani call on the government to “control mosques to stop terrorism.”

How the state will fulfill its mandate as “guardian of religion” is also up for grabs. Historically, former dictator Ben Ali controlled religion stringently, and used the ancient Zeitouna University to disseminate a specific message, largely for foreign consumption. Some indications suggest that the ruling Nidaa Tounes party has similar aspirations, with President Beji Caid Essebsi writing in *The Washington Post*, of his desire to “return our mosques to their spiritual function and banning entry to foreign preachers.” Only new laws for mosques and religious education will show where the state intends to exercise these powers.

**Mechanisms and Fora**

These “delayed” or “deferred” decisions on religion and the state, which both secular and Islamist politicians hope to revisit in the future, could play out in a number of venues. First and most obvious is the Tunisian parliament. A coalition government between the big-tent secular Nidaa Tounes and moderate Islamist Ennahda has kept decision-making slow and incremental. Few laws outside of economics and security have passed. The most critical fields, including those regarding religion and the state, have been delayed. Any future movement will likely be hampered by the recent near-collapse of Nidaa Tounes. Conceived as more of a secular front than a coherent party, a revolt by more than 30 parliamentarians has fractured the organization entirely. Ongoing unrest and economic insecurity threaten to strain the governing parties even more.

The constitutional issues may end up in the Constitutional Court, the members of which have not yet been nominated. Even if the parliament can pass laws dealing with the tricky issues of state and religion, no constitutional court is yet in place to review and interpret the exact meaning of these laws. The constitution leaves open many questions about the actual operation of the constitutional court, meaning its early work is likely to be delayed and controversial.

Finally, the mechanism by which consensus was reached on the original constitutional articles is no longer available. The National Dialogue, which won the Nobel Prize for
its efforts during the transition, was effectively disbanded in an effort to move the country into more conventional and institutionalized political practices. Politicians are, for better or worse, on their own to decide how secularism and religion will operate in the new Tunisian republic.

The Future of Constitutionalism

The unfinished nature of the constitutional process, the belief held by both nominally “secular” and nominally “Islamist” forces within the country that they can “do better” is both heartening and disturbing. Playing a long game is a hallmark of democracy and as discussed in other essays in this symposium it militates against the “one man, one vote, one time” trope that has plagued Islamists. On the other hand, Constitutions are engineered to be long-lasting and hard to change. The deep desire to change a constitution so soon after its adoption and in ways that will fundamentally shape the relationship between religion and state could be destabilizing. For scholars however, the long constitutional process sheds light on the ways in which religion and politics interplay in a consolidating democracy. What becomes “normal politics” in Tunisia will help decide what constitutes a “secular” or “Islamist” claim, reminding us that these too-often used terms are malleable analytic categories in many contexts.

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How do we contextualize Islamist organizations like Hezbollah

By Rola el-Husseini, City University of New York and the Project on Middle East Democracy

Every year a large number of books and articles are published about the Lebanese organization Hezbollah. These publications are often case studies of the organization, and because of the sensationalism of the topic they always attract a lot of attention, despite the fact that they often lack new insights. A notable feature of these studies is that Hezbollah is rarely examined as an actor within a larger context composed of other Islamist organizations. Works that do identify Hezbollah as one of a variety if Islamist organizations often provide a simple comparative analysis, and are generally rooted in a “terrorism” perspective, therefore analyzing Islamist groups almost exclusively from the point of view of their enmity with Israel. Comparative analyses of Islamist parties in general remain rare; there are only a handful of exceptions that address political participation and the impact of inclusion on political moderation, or the role that these organizations can play in strengthening the state. To my knowledge only one forthcoming study comparatively examines Hezbollah’s participation in the Lebanese political game, finding parallels in the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian national politics. Furthermore, Lebanese Islamist groups other than Hezbollah remain understudied in general by American scholars, probably because they have been of little interest to those concerned with terrorism.

As argued by Michaelle Browers, relational analyses of Islamist groups are even rarer than traditional comparative analyses. The failure to contextualize Hezbollah in relation to other Lebanese Islamist groups can lead us to overlook valuable insights. During the extensive fieldwork that I conducted among Sunni Islamists in northern Lebanon in 2014 and 2015, Hezbollah regularly came up in
conversations with my interlocutors. This is not surprising, given the prominent profile of the organization and the context of increasing intra-Muslim strife and sectarianism in the region (sectarian antagonism has been particularly exacerbated by the Syrian civil war, and the interference of Hezbollah and Iran on the side of the Assad regime). While Hezbollah was often mentioned with begrudging respect in my interviews with Sunnis, it was a respect tinged with bitterness — not only because of the disappointment many of these groups feel vis-à-vis Hezbollah’s increasing sectarian positioning, but also because the predominantly Shiite group has managed to succeed in an area where my Sunni interlocutors have often failed. Indeed, the name of Hezbollah did not only come up in discussions of the war next door in Syria, but rather in the context of Hezbollah’s effectiveness in drawing majority support among the Shiites and monopolizing political representation in Lebanon. While the Sunni Islamist scene is splintered among several organizations, the Shiite political scene is firmly controlled by Hezbollah and its ally Amal. What explains the success of Hezbollah in attracting and retaining the loyalty of the majority of the Lebanese Shiites? Is it a result of Hezbollah’s strong commitment to social services, as described in a recent book? Or is the perception of Hezbollah as the protector of its community the determining factor? These are questions that can be usefully addressed in a comparative fashion.

Viewing Hezbollah as coinciding within the same Lebanese context as the Jama’a Islamiyya (JI), the local Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, provides the opportunity to consider competing explanations for the consolidation of support among the Shiites for Hezbollah, and also to examine the lack of similar support for JI among the Sunnis. Despite the fact that JI is a couple of decades older than Hezbollah it has so far been unable to gain the same degree of hegemony. As noted above, many scholars attribute Hezbollah’s success to its foundational role in the resistance against Israel — especially the perceived defeat of the Jewish state in 2000 with its unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, and the so-called “divine victory” in the summer of 2006, when Hezbollah emerged intact from a month-long Israeli onslaught. These events have made Hezbollah into the community’s protector in the eyes of many Lebanese Shiites, giving them a sense of pride centered in the organization. While dissenting voices exist, the naysayers are in the minority. Hezbollah has remained strong despite its involvement in the Syrian war on the side of the Assad regime, and despite the many mistakes of Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s secretary general, which have antagonized the Arab world at large and increasingly isolated the community. Nasrallah maintained in a speech on February 16th of this year that there is an Israeli-Saudi-Turkish axis involved in the war in Syria, and warned against an Arab rapprochement with Israel. The Lebanese foreign minister, who is a member of the Christian party allied with Hezbollah, drew from this perspective in declining to support Saudi resolutions against Iran. A week later, the Gulf Cooperation Council added Hezbollah on the list of terrorist organizations, a move that had been resisted for long time, thereby joining the United States, Canada, Australia and most of Europe in their classification of the group. By estranging itself and Lebanon at large from the Arabs, Hezbollah has effectively isolated the Shiite community from its larger environment. The organization has therefore positioned itself as the principle bulwark defending the Shiites against perceived threats, both from the old enemy, Israel, and from the new foe, Sunni extremists.

In contrast, JI has been unable to consolidate the Sunni community under the organization’s leadership. Its natural constituents, the Sunnis of Northern Lebanon, Beirut, and Sidon, remain divided in their loyalties among an array of traditional leaders and new Sunni elites. The new elites in particular, mainly rich businessmen who have made their fortunes abroad, have used their capital to create a clientele among their coreligionists, therefore depriving JI of its small window of opportunity to assume leadership of the community. JI does not have the clout of being a military protector, nor does it have enough political influence to give it much leverage in Sunni affairs. It has been unable to provide Sunnis with jobs or state benefits. The group boycotted the 2005 legislative elections, and in 2009 only one JI member was elected to parliament (there have been no elections in Lebanon since 2009).
While JI has established a large network of social-service institutions similar to Hezbollah’s, these efforts have also been limited by a lack of political and social clout. JI institutions include the Dar al-Shifa’ hospital, a series of clinics, a network of fifteen schools concentrated mainly in the north of Lebanon, a small women’s organization, and a scouting group for youths. These efforts are substantial, but they have been unable to attract the attention and loyalty of large swaths of the Lebanese Sunnis in the same manner as Hezbollah’s social organizations have done among the Shiites. When I asked about their lack of social appeal, leaders in JI attributed the situation to political influence, suggesting that, “contrary to Hezbollah, [we] do not have the political and financial backing of a state.” Hopes among JI adherents for greater political influence and possible financial support were dashed when Mohammed Morsi was overthrown in Egypt by the military in July of 2013, greatly weakening the Muslim Brotherhood. JI does receive moral support from the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, but this support so far has not translated itself into financial assistance.

Juxtaposing Hezbollah and JI elucidates for astute observers the differences in how Shi‘ism and Sunnism work at the national and international level. Through its involvement in the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah has not only alienated itself from its larger Muslim context, but has also shown its dependence on Iran for patronage, funding, and military training. While Iran serves as the primary “Shiite state” and the sole supporter of the Shiites in the region, there is a lack of any similar cohesion among the Sunni. The Sunnis are divided among numerous factions, including those sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood (in its many iterations), and those who support and receive assistance from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.

There are many things to learn by linking an analysis of two groups such as Hezbollah and JI, which occupy, to some extent, the same national milieu. This approach can give us insights into how the interactions and imbalances between the two groups can only be interpreted within a larger context, involving regional players. The increasing tension between Hezbollah and JI cannot be understood outside the context of what some have called the “new Arab cold war,” centered on the sectarian conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, however, the differences in the popularity and influence enjoyed by Hezbollah and JI cannot be understood unless one is aware of the particular trajectories of these communities, their loyalties, and their regional connections.

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The ‘Third Image’ in Islamist Politics

By Kristin Smith Diwan, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington

Since at least the 1990s, Islamists have felt the pull of domestic politics as semi-authoritarian states opened up room for Islamist parties or proto-parties in national parliaments and structured national dialogues. The preponderance of academic studies followed them with analyses of organizational change; the moderation of Islamist parties; and the contribution of Islamists to either persistent authoritarianism or democratization depending on the analysts’ leanings. The jihadist literature such as studies of al-Qaeda countered this trend by necessity, but there is no mistaking the strong contribution of country-based research done by scholars of comparative politics to our understanding of Islamist politics.

Today’s Islamist politics in the Middle East augur a sharp turn towards the international. Resurgent authoritarianism, inter-state security cooperation, proxy wars, and sectarian polarization mean that the actions of Islamist movements are unintelligible without consideration of the international environment. Individual movements cooperate across borders, and the competition among rival movements is regional. The third image – the international system and actions to alleviate security dilemmas fed by anarchy – takes center stage, decisively shaping the behavior of states and movements alike.

From Domestic Politics to Regional Strategies

Resurgent authoritarianism is stifling representative domestic politics, closing down or narrowing the arena for political participation. Security crackdowns are sending Islamists – both Sunni and Shia – to jail or to exile. Once abroad, Islamist political activists are forging new transnational connections, and rethinking their strategies and ideas in light of their shared experience of political suppression.

Cooperation is not limited to the Islamist movements. The five years since the citizen uprisings have seen a pronounced jump in inter-state security cooperation as well as foreign interventions. In such an environment the political and security calculations of Islamist movements can no longer be restricted to their own state authorities.

More broadly, the current flux due to state collapse, civil wars, and proxy wars opens up big strategic questions about the future of Islamism and the survival of the state system in the Middle East. Most indicative of this transformational environment is the rise of the Islamic State, which challenges Middle Eastern states and Islamic movements alike. Domestic debates among Islamists today are dominated by questions of foreign policy and geopolitics centered on the proper course of state action in this unsettled and unsettling environment. The terms of the competition amongst Islamist movements are increasingly set by their strategic and doctrinal positions on regional conflicts and on the future of the region.

Sectarian polarization, fed by the competition between regional heavyweights Saudi Arabia and Iran, in most cases pulls Sunni movements closer to their governments, and makes captives of Shia communities in Sunni-led states. This environment is completely inimical to the cross-sectarian cooperation needed to empower domestic opposition coalitions, weakening the movements for constitutional reform which showed some strength at the end of the first decade of the millennium and into the Arab Spring.

The Gulf Intervenes

This shift towards transnational and interstate action – as both movements and states have sought to define the future trajectory of political life and to decide the outcome of regional political struggles – has been accompanied by the ascendancy of the Arab Gulf in regional affairs.

In the Gulf, the challenge to domestic reform movements came early in the Arab Spring, as regional dynamics
affected the balance of opposition coalitions. In Kuwait, a diverse opposition of Muslim Brotherhood, movement Salafis, tribal populists and leftist nationalists initially allied to push for greater popular sovereignty. Still the question of the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in regional politics plagued the opposition enterprise.

An early expression of solidarity with the mounting Bahrain protest movement by Kuwait’s prominent Muslim Brotherhood leader Tareq al-Suwaidan was quickly silenced. Fellow Muslim Brothers and other Sunni Islamists adopted a sectarian view of the Bahrain uprising and fell in line in support of the loyalist position of the Muslim Brotherhood in Bahrain, exacerbating relations with Kuwait’s Shia. Later the success of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in parliamentary and presidential elections escalated fears of the group’s regional ascendancy, costing the Kuwait opposition liberal support, and weakening the opposition coalition.

The rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt altered state calculations as well. In June 2013, a prominent group of Muslim scholars gathered in Cairo to encourage Sunni support for jihad in Syria. The gathering included prominent Egyptian Salafi preachers; the Qatar-based, Muslim Brotherhood-allied Youssef Qaradawi; and the popular Saudi Salafi Sheikh Mohammed al-Arefi. The Brotherhood-led government’s leadership in mobilizing transnational Islamist support from within Gulf societies for a more activist regional agenda portended trouble for conservative Gulf states. In the ensuing month the Morsi government would be overthrown, Mohammed al-Arefi detained for questioning in Saudi Arabia, and Qatar subjected to unprecedented political pressure from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to reverse its maverick support for the regional agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood and all independent forms of political Islam defined the increasingly assertive policies of the UAE. In the early days of the Arab uprisings the government cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood organization within the country. Yet their prosecution of the movement did not stop there. On the basis of a newly negotiated Gulf security agreement, the UAE began threatening extradition of Muslim Brotherhood members in Kuwait accused of financially supporting their Emirati brethren; one former MP was sentenced to five years in jail for insulting the Abu Dhabi crown prince. The UAE later joined Saudi Arabia in withdrawing its ambassadors from Qatar and threatening to blockade the fellow Gulf nation for its backing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and within the Gulf. The UAE’s foreign interventions in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen have been driven in large part by its desire to defeat the Brotherhood’s political program.

Still the regional wars, particularly the civil war in Syria, commanded the attention of the region’s Islamists and provided an open arena for mobilization. The uncoordinated efforts of Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia to back rival rebel factions within the Syrian opposition was matched by the independent initiatives of Salafi preachers and activists. Kuwait became a center for bundlers collecting private donations to support Syrian fighters. It had a radicalizing effect. The sectarian narrative begun in the civil war in Iraq intensified dramatically with Syria, as Sunni Islamists within Gulf societies and elsewhere used sectarian rhetoric to mobilize arms and men to counter the Hizbollah and Iran-backed Assad government.

New leadership in Saudi Arabia brought resolve to militarily confront perceived advances by Iran and allies across the region. The Saudi-led Sunni coalition to confront the Houthi advance in Yemen introduced yet another arena for regional contestation. Yet unlike in Syria, the Saudi actions in Yemen served as a vehicle to recapture the support of Sunni Islamists for the state, both for the execution of the Yemen war and stepped up confrontation with Iran. Sunni political movements of all stripes – Salafi, Ikhwan and reformist – have expressed enthusiastic backing for the Yemen intervention.

As states wrestle with how to secure their interests regionally while establishing control over transnational Islamist mobilization, national integration becomes
critical. Yet early indications do not augur well for a return to the policies of the 2000s, when states provided greater political opening and expanded representation. Instead Gulf states appear to be confronting the challenge of the new regionalized Islamist landscape by a combination of stick and carrot: more vigorous prosecution as represented in new terrorism laws, and nationalist appeals under the leadership of ruling families. The recent execution in Saudi Arabia of 47 detainees based on terrorism charges, including members of al-Qaeda as well as the firebrand Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr is indicative of new state redlines. Yet in keeping with the new international imperative, the success of their national strategies are likely to be determined by the outcome of regional confrontations, as much as by domestic measures.

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Public Piety and Nationalist Sentiment in Jordan

By Sarah Tobin, Brown University

During the 20th century, Amman, Jordan developed quickly into a globally-connected capital city, as millions of Muslims obtained access to literacy and education, heightened levels and types of consumer practices, new and profoundly different media technologies, and a religiously-justified, market-friendly “Islamic capitalism.” The visual impacts of these changes were profound: urban landscapes were filled with satellite dishes on rooftops while Ramadan soap operas and Saudi Arabian preachers broadcast inside living rooms; hijab fashion redefined Islamic headcoverings; and global and transnational middle-class ethics of life and lifestyle – regional and international travel, leisure culture, entertainment industries, and visible consumption – became marked as both modern and authentically Islamic. In 20th c. Amman, heightened commodification of cultural forms and spaces increasingly mediated what was understood as authentic Islamic knowledge, performance and practice, identities, and piety. It is a description of what Jillian Schwedler has termed “Islamistness” (this volume). Public piety, in these cultural forms, has shaped what is understood today as modern, authentic, and Islamic. It has also shaped the contours of nationalism in contemporary Jordan.

Public piety in Amman today carries, in a very bottom-up fashion, a distinctly nationalist tenor, which the Hashemites have attempted to coopt and utilize in “branding” Jordan as a place for stability, security, and inter-religious tolerance while surrounded by countries in intense conflict. Benedict Anderson asserted that imagined communities are understood “not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are to be imagined.” As a result, we see that a stylized middle-class Islam is a key to a modern national identity in Jordan. This is because public piety in Amman crosses ethnic divides and solidifies a class-based form of socialization and affiliation, thus enabling a national identity. As Nathan Brown points out (this volume), “The political—broadly, not narrowly, understood—still matters.” It is not the case, as Anderson argued, that national communities supplant “traditional” religious communities. Rather, the case of urban Amman demonstrates that Muslim modernity and cosmopolitanism here are not necessarily the antithesis of national identity but are a constitutive component of it.

Public Piety as a Political Tool

There is a political immediacy for the Hashemites to coopt and utilize such public piety. Beyond empty propaganda campaigns of “We are all Jordan” and “Jordan First,” as well as attempts at popular cultural schemes of song and dance to Jaishna (“Our Army”), the Hashemites have attempted to sustain legitimacy by emphasizing the King’s genealogical decent from guardianship of the Holy Places as well as his contemporary commitment to the welfare of the populace. King ‘Abdullah, the Hashemite ruling family asserts, embodies both an inheritance and a benevolence. This highly individualized construction of monarchal power “obscures both the monarchy’s debt to British colonial powers in establishing its rule and the fact that, as a unified entity, Jordan has no historical memory before the twentieth century.” The shallow state-sponsored historical-nationalist narratives of tribe and natal geography, and popular cultural references, have resonated with less than half of the population who identify as ethnic Jordanians. These narrow nation-building attempts have left a large portion of Jordanian residents still seeking legitimate inclusion in the state, especially Palestinians.

The Hashemites have worked to direct the attempts to fill the void of these nationalist sentiments with more universally agreeable messages about Islam in Kingdom. The Friday khutbas that broadcast throughout Amman reflect the state-endorsed content for an acceptable public piety. In November 2014, the Jordanian government laid down new and expanded laws for some 5,000 Muslim clerics in the country. Hayel Dawood, minister for Islamic
affairs, indicated that clerics are “the ground forces against the extremists.” He then made himself clear: encourage moderation or you are out – “Once you cross the red line, you will not be let back in.” Those who preach extremism or praise ISIS can be tried in the state’s new Security Court to face terrorism charges. Specifically, Jordan is demanding that preachers refrain from any speech against King Abdullah II and the royal family, slander against leaders of neighboring Arab States, incitement against the United States and Europe, and “sectarianism and support for jihad and extremist thought.” The clerics are Jordanian government employees, earning a higher-than-average $600 per month, along with other perks such as social security and preferred access to government facilities. The government’s Facebook page gives suggestions for Friday sermons, such as “Security and Stability: The Need for Unity in a Time of Crisis,” “The Hijra New Year – Lessons Derived from the Prophet’s Flight from Mecca,” and “The Beginning of the Rainy Season – Safety Measures.” The government enforces palatable, dispassionate messages that do not contradict the ethics of middle-class public piety, and may serve to reinforce it.

**Middle Class Islamic Life in Jordan**

However, such attempts at directing religious life are not sufficient to promote meaningful nationalist sentiment amongst all residents. As a result, residents of Jordan have sought legitimate inclusion in the state through middle class consumption practices that are socially and culturally rendered authentic and modern, as well as Islamic and pious. A sense of belonging and subjectivities of moral and moderate in Jordan are now sought through economic means rather than strictly political. The insertion of Islamic ethics and norms into economic practices has seen tremendous increase and plurality in recent times. Islamic banking and finance is an industry that has grown from one marginal bank (the Jordan Islamic Bank) in the mid-1980s to three Jordanian Islamic banks and one foreign Islamic bank. Jordan’s Postal Savings System (Al-Sanduq Tawfir Al-Bareed) has been fully Islamized, and a large portion of formal and informal microfinance schemes now operate by Islamic principles.

There is now a self-defined middle class in Jordan that is pushing for contemporary, modern, market-friendly enterprises, which dominate public religious life, civil society, and nationalist inclusions. This middle class is made up a relatively wide swath of Jordanian society, which undermines attempts at normative Islamist political life and emphasizes consistency in practice instead, which is resonant with both Ahmed Khanani and Stacey Philbrick Yadav’s memos in this volume. The economically poorer East Ammanis participate in wealthier West Amman public culture; the new economic development Boulevard does not sell alcohol, but displays the largest Christmas tree in the country; Turkey has become the new preferred – and both Islamic and soap opera enticing – honeymoon destination; fashion that resembles religious conservatism is mocked and dismissed as “not-modern” and “not really Islamic;” Twitter and Facebook promote news stories of regional and international interest rather than state-sponsored television or even local newspapers. An inclusive, “moderate” Islamic nationalism in Jordan is, therefore, contingent on economic practices that speak to a local understanding of a middle-class Islamic life and lifestyle.

**Religious Inclusivity and Jordan**

It seems the Hashemites have begun to catch on and attempt to capitalize on these popular trends. In December 2015, Christmas and the Prophet Mohammed’s birthday fell at nearly the same time. King `Abdullah took the opportunity to send a video message. Sitting on a sofa in his apparent living room, King `Abdullah begins the message with the familial language of “brothers and sisters” and “sons and daughters.” The Prophet Mohammed is discussed as “our great-grandfather,” as the message turns from holiday greetings to an endorsement of interreligious tolerance, peace, and the “true” message of Islam and Christianity – the former as a religion of compassion that brings together Christians and Muslims against the “outlaws” of Islam in “our shared common values.” The video ends with a reminder that Jordan has “never witnessed division” with “equal citizenship that binds us together,” stressing that Arab Christians are a vital part of Jordanian identity that makes “us proud of our model
of religious harmony.” While the political emphasis (and amnesia) is overt, the video attempts to also amplify the celebratory function of the two holidays that also serve as public holidays off of work and localized days of heightened consumption, with gift exchanges and extensive family gatherings. This model of the “true Jordan” is one the content of the holiday matters less than the middle-class structure and formation for how it is celebrated.

The seeming contradiction is that it is through these conditions of religious plurality that the nation is generated and national sentiment is constituted, rather than the processes of exclusion. If Islamism and political Islamism were “the Muslim middle class way of saying no to what they considered their excluders—their national elites, secular governments, and those governments’ Western allies,” then Jordanians are saying “yes” to living in a nation defined by diversity and plurality and in some cases more so than their counterparts in neighboring countries. This is not unanticipated because “since the 1990s, against the backdrop of intensifying religious sentiment in the Muslim world, a nascent post-Islamist trend has begun to accommodate aspects of democratization, pluralism, women’s rights, youth concerns, and social development with adherence to religion.” Multi-religious frameworks are necessary for life in any contemporary, global society. However, diversity in contemporary Amman is not simply defined in terms of Muslims and Christians. It is also defined by the varying practices of Muslims. Perhaps, however, “branding” an Islamic diversity is the future of state inclusion for urban Jordan.

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The War on Terror and the Arab State

By Ann Wainscott

The War on Terror is reshaping Arab states in a variety of ways. This memo calls for more attention to the ways in which Arab states have responded to the War on Terror, and the long-term consequences of those policy responses. There is a particular need for studies that classify state responses to the War on Terror, and account for variation among them.

The onset of the War on Terror marked the beginning of an unprecedented expansion of state power around the world. Many observers have analyzed how the Bush Administration used the fear generated by 9/11 to push through a series of invasive policies that limit individual freedom and, in some cases, violate individual liberties. Other analysts have examined how American media and pop cultural institutions were complicit in supporting national security narratives. Despite these U.S.-focused studies, there has been comparatively less attention to how states outside of the United States have capitalized on the fear generated by the War on Terror. Interestingly, scholars of African politics have completed more studies of the effects of War on Terror discourse than scholars of the Middle East.

The War on Terror is a discourse embraced by governments to justify particular policy choices. Regardless of the claim that, “We are not at war with Islam,” Muslims have been the primary target of anti-terror policing, both in the United States and abroad. The targeting of Muslim populations puts Arab states in a difficult position. Many states in the Middle East and North Africa have Islamic identities. Even if they do not, their states are composed of a high percentage of citizens who identify as Muslims. In the midst of a discourse that demonizes Muslims, Arab states are under pressure to police their religious spheres and participate in the US-led Global War on Terrorism. Arab states have embraced a fairly consistent set of counterterrorism strategies. As Marc Lynch explained in an earlier issue of POMEPS Studies, “The currently favored strategy, which combines autocratic repression with the official promotion of ‘moderate’ Islam and the conflation of very different movements under the banner of ‘terrorism,’ is likely to make problems worse.”

Scholars are right to be concerned about the use of the War on Terrorism as a concept. As Lisa Stampnitzky has documented, the use of the term ‘terrorism’ is meant to portray those who participate in violence as bloodthirsty and irrational in order to eliminate discussion of their grievances. In doing so, the discourse itself limits the policy options available for addressing ‘the problem of terrorism.’ In particular, those who argue for understanding the grievances of violent actors or negotiation with them may be maligned as complicit. At the same time, while scholars question the utility of the concept, states are deploying it to defend policy choices. Below I identify three ways in which the effects of War on Terror discourse are already visible in the politics of Arab states.

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1 Hatem, Mervat F. “Discourses on the’ War on Terrorism’ in the US and Its Views of the Arab, Muslim, and Gendered’ Other.” The Arab Studies Journal, 2003, 77–97.


**Broader definitions of Terrorism**

The most popular response from states across the Middle East and North Africa to War on Terror discourse has been the codification of anti-terror legislation. During the War on Terror, states in the region tended to adopt anti-terror legislation immediately following a domestic terrorist attack. Jordan, for example, amended its anti-terror legislation, Law on the Prevention of Terrorism, in 2006 following a terrorist attack in Amman the year before. In addition to Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Syria, have followed the general pattern of using the “opportunity” of a domestic terrorist attack to pass anti-terror legislation.

Anti-terror legislation tends to share a number of similar characteristics including broad definitions of terrorism, extended periods of police detention without charge or access to a lawyer, expansion of the state’s security apparatus and the introduction of new penalties such as the death penalty for those convicted under the laws. These new laws effectively make martial law unnecessary. Particularly since the beginning of the Arab Uprisings, states have used anti-terror legislation against political opposition.

But terrorist attacks do not tend to lead to the development of new anti-terror legislation, they tend to result in the passage of pre-existing legislation that had stalled in the legislature. This pattern suggests that states are adopting laws that would not be acceptable to citizens in the absence of an attack. In such circumstances, fear functions as a mechanism of compliance. The attacks frighten citizens. States use the passage of new legislation to calm citizens and appear to be doing something. Parliamentarians who oppose the legislation sometimes do not speak out under such circumstances. In Tunisia, for example, two terrorist attacks in 2015 led to the adoption of anti-terror legislation that had been debated in parliament for over two years. Those who originally resisted the bill abstained or did not attend the vote.

**Greater State control of religious institutions**

Both secular and religious states in the region have responded to the War on Terror by incorporating religious institutions into the state. My work has documented a dramatic expansion in the budget and the number of employees in the Moroccan Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs since a domestic terrorist attack shook the region in 2003. By ‘bureaucratizing Islam,’ the state has greater control over religious elites who now more than ever tend to be on the state’s payroll. The state can also deploy religious institutions to shape religious beliefs and practice at home and abroad.

**Security Rent Seeking**

Classification as an ally in the War on Terror has material consequences that allow states to strengthen their investment in the security sector. The case of Yemen is worth noting here. Aid has fluctuated wildly to the country, depending on how the United States has judged its centrality in the War on Terror. In 2006, US aid dropped to the “new low” of 4.6 million USD, but the change in American administrations and AQAP’s increased involvement in the territory led to the highest aid package in history to the country in 2009 and 2010. Though paused in 2011, aid was restarted in 2012, with another all time high aid package of 337 million USD.

While Yemen is an extreme example, it points to the financial incentives for Arab states to align with the War on Terror. Prior to the Casablanca bombings in 2003, Morocco had not embraced America’s War on Terror as it was unpopular among Moroccan citizens. After the bombings, Morocco took a number of steps to align...
itself as an ally in the war. In response, the country was rewarded with a Free Trade Agreement, signed in March 2004 and ratified by Congress in July after fifteen months of negotiations. Further, the US designated Morocco a non-NATO ally in June of that year. The timing of the agreements suggested that Morocco was being rewarded.

When considered in concert, these three changes in anti-terror legislation, state control of religious institutions, and security rent seeking, it is hard not to conclude that the War on Terror has retrenched authoritarianism in the region in profound (and frequently measurable) ways. I urge scholars to turn their attention to this important subject and analyze how the War on Terror is shaping Arab states.

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8 The negotiations began in January 2003, prior to the Casablanca bombings. Nevertheless, the language of final agreement suggests the United States saw it as an opportunity to reward an ally.

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.