Do Islamists have an intellectual deficit?

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Editor's Note: As part of Brookings's Rethinking Political Islam project, we've asked a select group of outside scholars to react and respond to the overall project, in order to draw attention to potential blind spots, trends of note, and more.

Although my primary area of research has been premodern Islamic tradition, my interest in "political Islam" in general and in *reformists* in particular goes back farther than that, and has been the subject of my more recent thinking. When interviewing the leadership of the Egyptian "revolution"—as it was then being called—during the summer of 2011 in Tahrir Square, I developed a suspicion that has since developed into something stronger, though not quite a coherent thesis just yet. It is that the reformists—by which I mean "moderate Islamists" who are, almost by definition, committed to working within the modern nation-state system—have been devoid of a well-grounded vision of Islamic politics, by which I mean a vision backed by a densely elaborated discursive tradition.[1] Notwithstanding the debate concerning the extent to which social movements' success depends on a coherent ideology (as opposed to just effective framing), a debate whose adjudication is beyond my scope here, I note that in the context of fierce competition from the militant, quietist and pro-establishment Islamic groups, it appears that this deficiency is taxing Islamists' ability to deliver the goods they promise and prevent radicalization.[2]

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[1] By discursive depth, I simply mean that a set of ideas is widely and deeply explored in such a way that the implications of and tensions among the various key commitments of a given system or family of ideas has been explored sufficiently. Marxism, for instance, is a dense modern tradition; Islamic *kalam* theology and law, are dense premodern traditions spread across centuries and continents; so far, reformist Islam is not.
[2] Snow et al. 1986, Beck 2015:163.

The impressive array of papers and reaction essays on Islamists included in the [Rethinking Political Islam](#) initiative, enhanced by the authors' productive engagement with each other's contributions, sheds unprecedented light on Islamists' predicaments, transformations, strategies of survival, and future prospects across Middle Eastern states, and gives much food for thought for future scholarship. I will direct my comments to the question of what social movement theorists have referred to as framing and/or ideology, and what I shall refer to as discursive tradition.[3] The distinction between the two concepts, pointed out in a number studies, turns on notions of durability, coherence, and manipulation: framing being "innovative amplifications and extensions of, or antidotes to, existing ideologies" whereas ideology is "fairly broad, coherent, and relatively durable" set of beliefs and values that are, in addition, "pervasive and integrated" and concern not just politics but life in general.[4] Since Islamism sees itself as primarily about contesting ideology (rather than alleviating a limited kind of injustice), such a distinction may not be justified. However, a modified form of this distinction may be useful, since the Islamic activists' framing of discourses designed for the sociopolitical arena may differ from, even as they draw on, their theorists and clerics' participation in Islam as a discursive tradition. I explore the notion of discursive success in terms of the *density* and *coherence* of a discourse, and taking my cue from the contributions, ask how the Islamic movements' "success" is related to their discursive success. I suggest that the reformists (namely, those who agree to work within the nation-state and in most cases a democratic system and are the focus of all of the contributions here) suffer from an intellectual deficit, and that this deficit is observable both at the level of movement framing and the deeper reformist discourse.

This deficit can be discerned in the set of challenges facing the reformists that most contributors have pointed out, such as intergenerational rupture or tension, perception by youth activists that their leaders lack principles and compromise endlessly, defection to more radical or militant groups, and the growing frustration with the democratic experiment. All these, so the hypothesis goes, suggest an intellectual deficit on the part of the Islamists in question, who have yet to produce a better, more coherent defense of their politics. Compare the sleek websites and media production of ISIS, due in part to their framing success in attracting the young, westernized, and tech-savvy youth, or even to the impressive scholarly resources offered by the Saudi (reformist, *sahwi*, as well as other) shaykhs of the Gulf, to the soporific websites of the Brotherhood or the South Asian Jamaat groups. Nonetheless, the reformist discourse has shown notable success in some respects. For instance, despite all of the current developments, a

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[3] Ovamir Anjum, "Islam as a Discursive Tradition: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 27.3 (2007).

[4] Benford & Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26 (2000), pp. 611-639:613.

number of contributions have noted the ideological or discursive distance of "the Islamist ideological corpus" from *takfiri* ideologies as well as from the notion of violence as the primary mechanism for change. In this respect, and others, the role of ideas is crucial, although not determinative. Yet, on the whole, if ideas that are ensconced in a dynamic and deeply grounded discursive tradition constitute an important factor in the success of movements, the relative weakening of such a discourse has been one of the Islamists' weaknesses in recent decades.

Without reiterating the well-worn debate on whether ideas matter, I would like to suggest a couple of specific ways in which the ideology-phobia of some important social scientific trends should be qualified, and I do so as a foil to open up space for my argument. Materialist explanations tend to push back against the claim that ideas have an independent role, however variable and small, in the explanatory apparatus. They do so in at least two ways: first, even when ideas do seem to matter, their operationalization and interpretation are decisively determined by their material context, and second, ideologies are little more than frozen expressions of commitments and interests whose material contexts have been lost to us. The latter objection is non-falsifiable and hence itself ideological. The former claim, in my view, is overstated. Mental constructs and systems of ideas in which such constructions occur are not determined by context in any simple sense. Such systems do not only influence the weighing of moral options or how scriptural interpretations are to be operationalized, but more importantly, they shape the very mental construction of the material context. Namely, although context matters, the very perception, parsing, and interpretation of context depends on preexisting ideas and frames. Pushing this line of argument a bit, the materialist claim could be turned on its head; no institutions and material factors in fact exist except as mental constructs, at the mercy of the discursive tradition(s) of which the subject is a part.[5] Both idealists and materialists have learned to restrain their claims; one can commend Stacey Philbrick Yadav's formulation that emphasizes the "iterative relationship between discourse and institutions."[6] To the extent that discourse matters, Islamic reformist discourse (by which I mean not only framing, but also, what has been called "ideology") deserves social scientists' attention.

The gap between thinkers and the organizational leadership is often minimal in movements in their early years, as in the lifetime of Hassan al-Banna, Abul A'la Mawdudi, and more recently, in the Moroccan *al-Adl wa 'l-Ihsan* under the charismatic

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[5] A discussion of the various approaches to ideology among social movement scholars can be found in Beck 2015, ch. 5, "Is Radicalism about Ideas and Ideology?"

[6] Stacy Philbrick Yadav, "Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood and the perils of powersharing," *Rethinking Political Islam*, The Brookings Institution, August 2015, http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Research/Files/Reports/2015/07/rethinking-political-islam/Yemen_Yadav-FINALE.pdf?la=en.

leader and scholar-intellectual, Abdelsalam Yassine.[7] The difference between Morocco's Adl and PJD as profiled by Avi Spiegel, suggests to me that Adl's members who draw on the more confident and deeper writings of their late leader enjoy a great deal of success *without* electoral participation.[8] Yassine's insistence, for instance, that democracy is not quite the same as Islamic *shura*, exploring the associations and corollaries of both, while also rejecting the quietists' subservience to the rulers and openly criticizing the king, sits more harmoniously with the desire for an authentic Islamic existence in modern times, as it recalls the prophetic critique of the rulers by the *ulama* in Islamic traditional imagination.[9] The Egypt-centered reformists' ambivalent embrace of democracy, in contrast, draws nearly universal criticisms of inauthenticity.[10] I agree with Spiegel that we need to think of success in terms broader than electoral gains, and I would suggest that discursive depth and personal and political transformation of subjects ought to count for more. The success of the Salafis in Egypt in 2012 shows that such transformative religious influence may be turned into electoral gains relatively easily. Pakistan's Islamists also offer an instructive example where Mawdudi's powerful writings once shaped the larger national discourse without earning the Jamaat electoral victories. In contrast, when such grassroots socio-religious influence is lacking, even political access is of limited use as the leaders are reduced to making deals with other powers. —In the Yemeni context, for example, Yadav details such compromise in his discussion of "the limits of partisan politics without a strong *haraka* foundation."

Other Islamic trends, in contrast, fare somewhat better in what I have called discursive density. The accretist-traditionalists (my neologism by which I refer to the generally pro-establishment Sunni ulama defined by commitment to legal *madhhabs*, *kalam* theology, and moderate sufism) can boast a dense tradition, even if it loses in terms of sociopolitical relevance and popularity to the Islamists. The Salafis, whom I categorize as originalist-traditionalists, draw on longstanding traditions of *ahl al-hadith*, Hanbalism, and premodern sharia elaborated most powerfully by late medieval traditionalists like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-Qayyim, al-Dhahabi and others. South Asian traditionalists have long looked to the expansive Hanafi-Maturidi tradition,

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[7] Hoffner (1951) differentiates between the initial phase of a movement that often needs a "man of words," succeeded later by "fanatic" believers who convert the ideas into practice. A more recent and nuanced scheme suggests that "effective leadership will have the characteristics of each of these roles -- the ability to creatively start a radical movement, the Machiavellian ruthlessness to see it through, and the pragmatism to know when to choose different strategies" (Beck 2015:67). Weber describes this process in terms of charisma and its routinization (Max Weber, "The Nature of Charismatic Authority and its Routinization" in *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, translated by A. R. Anderson and Talcott Parsons, 1947).

[8] Avi Spiegel, "Succeeding by surviving: Examining the durability of political Islam in Morocco," *Rethinking Political Islam,* The Brookings Institution, August 2015, http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2015/08/~/media/A02C6E64675D44E3BAF9BA97E3D19DF7.ashx.

[9] ʿAbd al-Salām Yāsīn [Yassine], *al-Shūra wa'l-Dimuqraṭiyya* (authored in 1416/1995, is available on his website: http://www.yassine.net/ar/document/835.shtml (accessed 18 June 2015).

[10] Ovamir Anjum, "Salafism and Democracy: Doctrine and Context," *The Muslim World*, forthcoming.

reinvigorated by authorities like Shah Wali Ullah, who can be seen as lying in some respects between the Arab accretists and the Salafis. The Twelver Shi'a, similarly, boast a similarly comprehensive and dense legal and theosophical tradition stretching without serious rupture back to the beginning of the Safavid period in the 16th century. The Islamists of the Brotherhood "school," in contrast, while open to drawing selectively on most of these traditions, and most alive to issues of social and political justice precisely because of their receptivity to modernity, exhibit an ambivalent relationship to the historical Islamic tradition. They relate to it in order to reform and transform it, rather than be deeply transformed *by* it. Despite their modernism, their relationship to modernity remains somewhat skeptical and tenuous. At an intellectual level, this could plausibly result in a lack of interest in sustained investigation of either tradition. Alternatively, it could generate exceptional interest in juxtaposing and investigating both. The institutional conditions for the latter being nearly non-existent in the region, it is the former of the two options that is often taken.

For most Islamic activists, the original vision and style of Hassan al-Banna—a charismatic leader and master of synthesis and compromise—continues to set the tone. Mawdudi, a more theoretical, systematic, and polemical mind, can be credited for being the first to furnish the Islamists with a model of Islamic history, society, and state. In Egypt, Qutb was the next influential figure after Banna, albeit one on the margins of the organization, who possessed the literary force, intellectual passion and, charisma to create a self-confident vision, one which may have been derailed by his immoderation (or perhaps attractive precisely due to that), attributable perhaps to his prolonged imprisonment. Otherwise, Muslim Brotherhood's leaders have been technocrats and bureaucrats, not inspiring thinkers and visionaries. The Pakistani Jamaat has done no better after Mawdudi. Perhaps the closest thing mainstream Islamists have had to a powerful visionary since Qutb is the Moroccan Abdelsalam Yassine, whose luster has been dulled possibly due to Morocco's marginality in the broader region. Despite these important influences, the mother organization in Egypt, and to varying degrees elsewhere, seem to have Banna's indelible mark of pragmatism, compromise, and a measure of anti-intellectualism.

The draining of intellectual resources may be one of the causes of organizational insularity. Anti-intellectualism, aggravated under repressive conditions, seems to preclude any path to the top of the organizational ladder other than loyalty and seniority, perpetuating the old-timers' hold on to authority. There are no Bannas, Mawdudis, or Qutbs any more, only aging avuncular figures best at surviving, not inspiring. This *seems* to me to be the case with the two movements I am familiar with, the Egyptian Brothers and the Pakistani Jamaat. Whether it is in fact so is an interesting problem for investigation.

My hypothesis of intellectual deficit could be challenged by at least three kinds of reformist contributions to Islamic discursive tradition. First, starting in the 1980s if not earlier, a newer generation of reformist Azhari ulama such as Muhammad al-Ghazali and Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and intellectuals such as Salim al-`Awa, Muhammad `Imara, Fahmy Huwaydi, among others, whom Raymond Baker in a recent monograph has labeled "the new Islamists," have laid down the framework for a more tolerant (read: less anti-western, which may have something to do with Egypt's liberalization under Sadat), although not necessarily more coherent or cogent, sociopolitical vision of Islam.[11] Second, a powerful trend of the "economization of Islamism" has grown up since the 1970s.[12] As the international focus shifted from an ethos of developmentalism that had encouraged Islamist thought in the direction of state-centered ideologies and strategies, to neoliberalism and the influx of petrodollars, the reformist focus partly shifted from capturing states to the creation of "Islamic" economy and banking. This latter trend has produced in its wake not only a new sector of global economy but also ever-growing literature on the subject. A third reformist focus has been on the "fiqh of minorities" with a view to the growing minorities of Muslims in the West and the increasing globalization of reformist communities and concerns.[13] All three types of projects, underway at a few reformist institutions in Qatar, Pakistan, Malaysia, and in the West, are straddled by a concern to adjust Islam to modernity.

If mainstream Islamists and their reformist ilk are producing political, economic, and social scholarship in response to modern challenges, in what respects might they still be considered deficient? Although the debate is far from over, much recent scholarship, by both Western academics and Islamic-traditionalists of both originalist and accretist kinds, has called into question the cogency of each of these reformist discourses. The Islamists seek to justify, it has been argued, an Islamic state without exploring the full implications of the modern nation-state and asking whether an "Islamic state" is possible or desirable; they call for social justice but exhibit ignorance or neglect toward the destructive aspects of modernity vis-a-vis family, community, and the environment that many Islamic traditionalists and many moderns themselves worry about; they make the case for a modern Islamic economy, without sufficient reflection on how "modernity" is to be attained without the uniquely materialist motivations at its heart furnished by capitalism and secularism; and offer a *fiqh* of minorities without a well-formed understanding of the host societies.[14] Furthermore, they are accused of impatience vis-a-vis the meticulous, erudite scholasticism of medieval Islamic tradition

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[11] Raymond W. Baker, *Islam without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists*, Harvard University Press, 2003.

[12] Tripp, Charles. Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[13] Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

[14] Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, Columbia University Press, 2012; Mahmoud A. El-Gamal, "Contemporary Islamic Law and Finance: The Trade-Off Between Brand Name Distinctiveness and Convergence," *Berkeley Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Law* 1(1), Spring 2008.

and take refuge in generalistic, result-oriented instruments such as the notion of public benefit (*maslaha*) and objectives (*maqasid*) of Islamic law -- instruments that are similarly available for abuse by their equally result-oriented militant counterparts.[15] The Islamists have not failed in disseminating their message. To the contrary, unlike the militant fringe, the reformist influence of Brotherhood-style Islamism in varying degrees is nearly ubiquitous among literate religious Muslims. But precisely because of this, at least some responsibility for the widespread intellectual malaise in the Muslim world could be blamed on the Islamists, on their tendency to paper over serious conflicts, such as between Islamic tradition and the secular and liberal commitments of modern democracy and their failure to provide meaningful ways to address threats posed by modernity such as economic inequality and environmental challenges, leaving the large swaths of Muslims under their sway unprepared to take meaningful action.

On the activist side, loyalty to the organization seems to be the first principle of Islamic reformist activism, and the unbridgeable gap between learned and potentially creative reformist thinkers and the organizations' leaders chosen on the basis of seniority and loyalty seems largely impenetrable. It is a legitimate question, therefore, to ask whether such an intellectual deficit contributed to the reformists' performance in the events of the Arab uprisings, particularly to what many scholars have seen as the Egyptian Brotherhood's lackluster performance in the admittedly all-too-brief opportunity granted them.

Simple intellectual incompetence or failure need not be construed as a cause unto itself, and several explanations may be offered for this deficit. One might argue that it is the very activist structure of social movement organizations like the Brotherhood that precludes depth. Perhaps it is just the burden of having to survive under brutal repression for generations that has led to conservatism and engendered fear of critical scholarship that might call into question the group's foundational principles. In other cases, as in Pakistan, perhaps it is participation in the messiness of electoral politics that dilutes the impulse to dig in and ask tough questions. Alternatively, perhaps it is just that all religions in the age of globalization are fated to inhabit a world of "holy ignorance," as the French scholar Olivier Roy has poignantly argued.[16] These arguments may all be correct. In any case, they offer a set of fascinating problems for scholars of Islamism.

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[15] See Wael Hallaq, *Shari`a: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 511, for his account of the Syrian accretist jurist Sa`id Ramadan al-Buti's critique of the modern *maqasid* discourse.
[16] Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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