

The “glocal” effect: Rethinking religious nationalism and radicalization

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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.

Halis Bayuncuk—Abu Hanzala by nom de guerre—is the well-known leader of ISIS in Turkey. Ethnically Kurdish, Bayuncuk was active in Kurdish Hezbollah (an entirely separate militant organization from Hezbollah in Lebanon) until he joined al-Qaeda in 2007, and would go on to join the Islamic State (ISIS). In March 2016, Bayuncuk’s release from prison sparked outrage, with the ruling AKP government being seen as too accommodating of the Islamic State. ISIS, as it turns out, is fighting against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)—Turkey’s nemesis since 1984. [Such complex relations between Turks and Kurds](#) bring to mind the Turkish military’s “dirty war” in the 1990s, where the then secular Turkish government supported Kurdish Islamists (Hezbollah) against Kurdish “Marxists” in a bloody conflict.¹

In his [Brookings paper on Pakistan’s Islamists](#), Matthew Nelson nicely captures the complex dynamics between the nation-state and Islamism. “The key question facing Pakistan is no longer ‘whether Islam’ but rather ‘which Islam,’” notes Nelson. “In fact,” he goes on, “it may be helpful to reach beyond a simple *distinction* between mainstream and militant politics to focus, more specifically, on a range of mainstream political parties (and the military) working both ‘with’ and ‘against’ an assortment of rival

¹ Mustafa Gürbüz, *Rival Kurdish Movements in Turkey: Transforming Ethnic Conflict* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

militants.” Similar to Bayuncuk case mentioned above, ISIS militants are now recruiting from Islamist party activists—a well-known dynamic that is also seen in the Muslim Brotherhood’s challenge with some of its radicalized youth who are calling for violence against Egyptian security personnel and state.

The cases of Turkey and Pakistan are particularly illuminating for a number of reasons. First, both are strong nation-state projects in Muslim majority countries. Secondly, the militant Islamists facing Turkey and Pakistan today cannot be adequately addressed without a re-organizing of the fundamental structures underlying the nation-state. But if we go beyond these two cases and replace “nation-state” with Ibn Khaldun’s term *asabiyyah*—which can be translated as “in-group solidarity”—Saudi Arabia can also be seen in a similar vein. There, too, militant groups like ISIS cannot possibly be confronted without a serious reformation of the Saudi state.

As [recent Brookings publications](#) on Islamist parties in North Africa articulate, the legitimacy of the nation-state has been the most critical question at the heart of Islamist politics. Despite striking overlap on the question of legitimate authority, there seems to be a gap between literature on radicalization in the West and the scholarship on Islamism in Muslim majority countries. Were these two diverse literatures to be in conversation with one another, we could expand our conceptual toolkit.

Rethinking ummah and the crisis of political authority

In his analysis on Muslim foreign fighters, Thomas Hegghammer [brilliantly depicts](#) how pan-Islamist movements have reconstructed *ummah* (the global Muslim community) as a new form of citizenship, allegiance, and religious authority.² This political imagining of *ummah*, however, did not necessarily function at the expense of local or national governance. More often than not, the notion of *ummah* did not aim to break Islamists’ ties with the nation-state; instead, it redefined nationhood and citizenship, in an attempt to reconcile and reclaim the nation-state.

In such a conception, the question arises regarding the point at which *ummah* becomes a concrete and actionable political community for an individual, going beyond the abstract concept of religious brotherhood. Under what circumstances can one’s allegiance to the nation-state authority be questioned? The evident tension here is not only relevant for Western Muslims but also others, such as the House of Saud or Pakistani officials. Complex ethnic minority dynamics also makes the question more significant. In the Turkish case, for example, the way *ummah* was constructed helped

² Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security*, Vol. 35 no: 3 (2011) pp. 53-94.

the Justice and Development Party (AKP) consolidate power against state secularism without having to discard Turkish nationalism in the process. For Kurdish Hezbollah in Turkey, on the contrary, *ummah* has been a mobilizing factor against both Turkish state secularism and Turkish nationalism. The notion of *ummah* has been fuzzy and enabling of conflicting interpretations and mobilizations at the grassroots level. Thus, how Islamists (and Muslims more broadly) rethink *ummah* and political authority has profound implications for not just Islamist mobilization against nation-states but also for ISIS recruitment in Europe.

In what follows, I argue that the nation-state's political legitimacy is threatened by growing local insecurity under the forces of globalization, what I call "glocal effect." Violent extremism is foremost a product of relative insecurity—whether economic, psychological, and theological—which calls global Muslims to save the *ummah* against supposed "existential threats."

Relative insecurity and the rise of religious nationalism

Why are Turkish, Pakistani, and Saudi officials losing the struggle over religious legitimacy to extremist and militant forms of Islam? Likewise, what explains ISIS's success in recruiting foreign fighters? The link between the withering nation-state and feelings of insecurity may be an important though underappreciated factor.

First, the notions of *ummah* and *jihad* are legitimate claims for all Muslims including non-Islamists. Indeed, *jihad* as self-defense against foreign invasion may be seen as akin to the nation-state's legitimate armed response to foreign aggression. In other words, there is no question that *jihad* is both religiously and strategically legitimate. Rather it is a question of interpretative authority to declare when *jihad* is legitimate. Who decides what counts as "foreign invasion"? And who decides when the "borders" of the *ummah* have been violated? During the Cold War era, nation-states and Muslim religious authorities were powerful enough to keep their monopoly on violence and textual interpretation. But today, the growing number of failed states, the rise of ethnic separatist mobilizations, and state bureaucracies unable to adequately respond to threats from non-state actors have transformed the political context.

Then, for the radicals, the issue is how to convince Muslims that (a) there exists an existential threat to their in-group identity and (b) such a threat requires drastic action in the form of legitimate self-defense against foreign aggression. Both conditions need political entrepreneurs to play the "insecurity card" and stoke feelings of vulnerability. Their narrative need not be entirely rooted in fact, as instigators paint perceived grievances as objective conditions to their intended audience. Thus, a "relative

insecurity” matters in mobilizing the masses—whether Muslim youth living in the West or Muslim majority countries.

Economic insecurity

For Thomas Piketty, economic insecurity is the single important factor in explaining the rise of the Islamic State.³ Distribution of wealth in the Middle East and North Africa is troubling indeed, “[the most unequal on the planet](#),” despite the fact that the region has abundant natural resources. Almost a third (more than 28 percent) of the population is aged between 15 and 29. Representing over 108 million, this is the largest number of young people to transition to adulthood in the region’s history. The unemployment rate is [skyrocketing under urbanization](#), which has generated more slums.⁴ Faced with a grim future, economic deprivation, and constant conflict, the region is a powder keg for extremism.

Hard economic conditions, however, aren’t enough on their own; they need to be translated into a religious discourse in a meaningful way. What distinguishes mainstream Muslims and Islamists from radicals are how such hard economic realities are interpreted, which have complex roots and evolution. Most Muslims do not automatically perceive their misery as an outcome of a systematic *intentional* oppression that exclusively *targets* Muslims. Yet, when the French government, for example, presents headscarves as a national security issue, the ISIS narrative gains prominence: Muslims are attacked systematically, they are under siege, their self-defense gains further justificatory fodder. Enter radical entrepreneurs. It’s here where the kind of hard economic factors meets the prevailing political culture—supported [in a recent study](#) by William McCants and Christopher Meserole.⁵ The post-Cold War years witnessed political scientists who hotly debated where the nation-state was headed, while largely ignoring the question of whether the nation-state had adequate *legitimacy* as a source of moral authority and allegiance in the first place. These issues have major implications for the changing nature of identity politics in the neoliberal age.

Psychological Insecurity

³ Thomas Piketty, “Clamping Down with Law and Order will not be Enough,” *Le Monde*, November 24, 2015.

⁴ Quantitative data supports qualitative observation in linking new urbanization and radicalization. See, for example, Chris Meserole, “The French Connection, Part II” <https://religious.org/2016/04/25/french-connection-part-ii-radicalization-laicite-and-the-islamic-veil/>

⁵ William McCants and Christopher Meserole, “The French Connection: Explaining Sunni Militancy around the World,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 24, 2016.

Muslim radicalization, when seen in conjunction with identity movements after the Cold War, can be described as a kind of “Islamization of radicalism.” [According to Mike Davis](#), Islamism filled the vacuum in the social sphere left by socialism and anarchism in the 20th century.⁶ A search for belonging and identity is especially rewarding for youngsters suffering under the forces of alienation, exclusion, and discrimination. As an acute observer of Islamism in the West, Olivier Roy echoes by quoting a foreign fighter in Bosnia “the Muslims are the only ones to fight the system.” [Roy adds](#), “The radicals are often a mix of educated middle-class leaders and working-class dropouts, a pattern reminiscent of most West European radicals of the 1970s and 1980s. Twenty years ago these men would have joined a radical leftist movement, but such movements have disappeared from the spaces of social exclusion or have become more bourgeois.”⁷

Religious zeal in a nationalist tone, from Arab Marxism, populist Islamism, to Zionism (whether secular or religious in nature), invites us to rethink the future of identity politics among millennials. Growing psychological insecurity is less about ancient hatred, as Shadi Hamid [rightly suggests](#) in criticizing essentialist perspectives, but rather it more about where the global and the local negotiate.⁸ The psycho-analytic analysis of Frantz Fanon is still relevant as long as violence will be sanctioned by a *legitimate* authority—perhaps by a Sheikh Fanon instead of an African communist Fanon. From here, we can see that the link between psychological insecurity and theology deserves further exploration.

Theological Insecurity

No theological school other than Salafism would better fit the psychology of disenchanted millennials. The success of global Salafism cannot solely or even primarily be attributed to the translations of Qur’ans distributed by the Saudi elite. Millennial values of self-dignity and self-made authority may be seen as a reincarnation of what Samuel Huntington called the “anti-power ethic” that radically questions moral religious authority. In the case of Western millennials, these youth are mostly the children of immigrants who prioritized economic well-being over an identity search. Therefore, not only is it those youth living in ethnic ghettos that are vulnerable to radical messaging but also the rich who seek a commanding belonging that promises order in their lives.

Paying attention to theological insecurity may also shed light to the common question whether and how religious education and fundamentalism are linked. Could a lack of

⁶ Mike Davis, “Planet of Slums,” *New Left Review* 26, 2004.

⁷ Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

⁸ Shadi Hamid, “The End of Pluralism,” *The Atlantic*, July 23, 2014.

religious education still lead to fundamentalism? Those who answer yes would point out that the rigidly dogmatic are usually those lack deep knowledge regarding the intricacies of faith and a wide range of interpretation. Yet, the question itself may be misleading. Theological insecurity may be an effect rather than a cause. It may be prompted by social exclusion, unemployment, and alienation. The fundamentalist interpretation that rejects alternative religious paths becomes a safe haven for the disenchanting: a growing satisfaction with having to constantly make sense of a complex world, the chance to play a [remarkable role in human history](#) against “evil forces,” the thrill of belonging to a new community, and rooting new social norms. Is this not similar to a millennial cult or an urban gang?

This perhaps explains why a Kurdish recruit to ISIS in Turkey found himself perplexed upon learning that his new group deemed the Muslim Brotherhood *murtadeen* (apostates), despite the fact that his recruiter had given him a number of Sayyid Qutb books earlier.⁹ It's not because Qutb is more radical than many other sheikhs (certainly milder than takfiris such as Osama bin Laden). But his words ring far more sophisticated in their description of *jahiliyyah* in modern society (the term Muslims use for the customs and habits prevailing in the dark age of “ignorance” in the Arabian Peninsula prior to the advent of the Prophet Muhammad) and the need for an Islamic revival. Yet once the potential recruit has sufficiently tasted the comforting rigidity of radical ideology, the puritan call of Salafism is wheeled in to fill the rest of the narrative.

Beyond the nation-state

Combining insights from diverse literature is an arduous task. Despite this, several social movement scholars are [increasingly critical](#) of taking the nation-state as central in their analysis of religious mobilizations.¹⁰ While it is encouraging to see the insights social movement theorists bring—as reflected in recent Brookings [papers on Syria and Yemen](#)—the “multi-institutional turn” from sociology has yet to fully arrive in discussions of radicalization.

The radicalization of Muslim youth needs to be read within the forces of globalization, and not from a solely statist perspective. Increasingly, insecurities are relational, and not unidirectional: populist nationalisms and growing xenophobia in the West are also an outcome of economic frustrations, with immigrants an all-too-convenient scapegoat.

⁹ The information is gathered by the author from a Turkish video footage that interviews with one of ISIS defectors.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Armstrong and Mary Bernstein, “Culture, Power, and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movements,” *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 26 No. 1 (2008) pp. 74-99.

Today, both the downtrodden as well as the middle class feel threatened. The outcome, then, is a symbiotic relationship between Islamophobia and ISIS. Ben Carson's statement here, for example, sits well with ISIS rhetoric rejecting the compatibility of Islam and democracy: "American Muslims who adhere to Islamic Shariah law while also embracing the American values of democracy must be schizophrenic," Carson said. Carson's Islamophobic statements did not help him in winning over Donald Trump's base, but they certainly helped ISIS in its efforts to recruit young Muslims in failed states across the Middle East.

The exclusive attention to the state is also limiting because the modern neo-liberal order is composed of multiple and often contradictory institutions, as attested to in recent waves of institutional, feminist, and cultural literature. Similar to neo-Marxist scholars who debate the nature of the state, radical Islamists may differ in their conceptualizations of how state power operates. Radicals are often lay theorists, unwittingly narrating ideas of power and dominance in everyday life. These divergent understandings of power and domination, shape the targets of mobilization and the means by which they are directed to challenge existing structures. In this light, an *a priori* assumption that considers the state as *the* target is misguided.

All in all, exploring the different sorts of global insecurities and the legitimacy crisis of nation-state is imperative in the study of Islamism and radicalization.

About this Series:

The [*Rethinking Political Islam series*](#) is an innovative effort to understand how the developments following the Arab uprisings have shaped—and in some cases altered—the strategies, agendas, and self-conceptions of Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world. The project engages scholars of political Islam through in-depth research and dialogue to provide a systematic, cross-country comparison of the trajectory of political Islam in 12 key countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, as well as Malaysia and Indonesia.

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