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Rethinking how we rethink political Islam

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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. First off is the scholar of Salafism Jacob Olidort.

Given the changes in identities, doctrines, and actions of Islamist groups vying in the political sphere of the tumultuous preceding five years, Brookings' "Rethinking Political Islam" initiative is a critical opening for a new conversation on how we—in the academic, policy, and public debates—think about those Islamist groups we consider to be politically-relevant. The eleven working papers all underscore the common tension between the ideological principles of these groups and the alliances they have made over the preceding five years, some of which go against these very priorities. To those who consider the long view of modern Middle East history, these tensions come as no surprise, given that these are all movements whose founding doctrines and early shape during the 20th century were just as much determined by political pressures and personal interests.

While personality and generational differences have historically been factors in how and whether groups survive within shifting political environments, the pressures and stakes changed dramatically after the uprisings of 2011, when many Islamists were able to test their principles in positions of political power and when the significance of their actions were amplified across the region through social media channels. As the papers of Monica Marks and Raphaël Lefèvre show, the missteps of the region's oldest Islamist

group, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, had the effect of alienating it from other Islamist groups across the region. [1]

The impact of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's actions on the self-perceptions and maneuvers of Islamists elsewhere are one example of the ways in which local actions could have new kinds of transregional impact. However, even where this impact is felt, these papers remind us of the need to tread carefully when describing how these groups relate to and influence one another in their ambitions and priorities. Here Joseph Liow provides a helpful reminder in the case of Southeast Asia and the connections between local groups with their counterparts in the Middle East, where he argues that it was through the organizational efforts of both student groups, such as the Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam in Indonesia and Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, as well as coordinated humanitarian efforts on behalf of regional political causes, that Islamists were able to build transnational connections. [2]

Liow's discussion of the role of humanitarian campaigns and student organizations in forging transnational Islamist bonds raises some of the key questions we face when trying to understand the formation of new Andersonian "imagined communities" of Islamists both across and beyond the Middle East, as well as within particular countries. Namely, do the members of local Islamist groups create transregional links because they identify with a common Islamist ideology or, what is more often the case, shared communal experiences of living under authoritarian states (as, for example, Marks shows with Tunisian Nahdawis recalling their treatment under Ben Ali when looking at Sissi), or perhaps the sectarian nature of certain conflicts, or still professional and personal ties?

Ironically, the nature of these connections has become more confused with the greater visibility we now have with social media platforms. Likewise, domestic changes could be caused by foreign policy decisions, and the reverse. Here Toby Matthiesen shows how local Saudi support for the king ebbed and flowed not because of domestic issues but rather because of perceptions of the king in relation to major foreign policy changes, especially the country's backing of Sissi's government in Egypt and in response to

[1] Monica Marks, "Tunisia's Ennahda: Rethinking Islamism in the context of ISIS and the Egyptian coup," Brookings Institution, August 2015. http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Research/Files/Reports/2015/07/rethinking-political-islam/Tunisia_Marks-FINALE.pdf?la=en; Raphaël Lefèvre, "Islamism within a civil war: The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's struggle for survival," Brookings Institution, August 2015. http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2015/08/~/media/633D7B75CAFC462BB16A31058C428346.ashx

[2] Joseph Liow, "The Arab Spring and Islamist activism in Southeast Asia: Much ado about nothing?," Brookings Institution, August 2015. http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2015/08/~/media/859845D691B94F748F4B3B05DF0C2D38.ashx

heightened Iranian influence in the region.[3] Similarly, David Patel reminds us concerning Islamists and Salafis in Jordan that "[t]he difference between so-called 'doves' and 'hawks' has more to do with disagreements about how accommodationist the Islamic movement should be with the Jordanian government than it does with ideological differences."[4] In other words, the local and the regional contexts can be equally, if not more, determinant of Islamist politics than are ideological principles. Indeed, with the new sectarian dimension of many regional and local conflicts today, it is these external circumstances that help define the narratives and ideological priorities of Islamist groups and influence their political alignments.

This raises another important issue of locating influence and impact of these groups. Much like the caution with which we describe relationships between Islamist groups, so too it is especially important to rethink the assumptions of where their political influence is practiced. Here Matthew Nelson's paper on Islamist parties who wield influence in Pakistan despite their poor electoral performance is a trend increasingly on display across the Middle East, particularly given the voter base's low confidence (and interest) in formal political processes.[5] This general political apathy may mean that, in contrast to the early days of the Arab uprisings when Islamists found opportunity within formal political institutions, today perhaps Islamists feel they do not need not rely on these spaces to claim any influence. And it is perhaps for this reason that groups like the Salafis, who for decades have explicitly eschewed formal politics and have instead set out alternative political discourses, who today are perhaps more capable of maneuvering within political spaces that are either fluid or failed. Thus, much like Nelson's argument concerning the Islamist groups in Pakistan, the poor performance of Egypt's Nour party, which won only twelve seats in the new parliament, should in no way be misconstrued as a commentary on the weak influence of Islamic politics in that country. Rather, to locate the dynamics of Islamic politics in Egypt, as in other countries, we now need to look elsewhere—in particular to social media platforms, publications, mosques and the various public spaces throughout Egypt—to witness where real political influence is being negotiated.

Curiously, the papers generally don't highlight the most important change that took place—that all of these movements were products of a late-twentieth century political

[3] Toby Matthiesen, "The domestic sources of Saudi foreign policy: Islamists and the state in the wake of the Arab Uprisings," Brookings Institution, August 2015.
http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2015/08/~/media/371341741F72445E8269110C5504E327.ashx
[4] David Patel, "The more things change, the more they stay the same: Jordanian Islamist responses in spring and fall," Brookings Institution, August 2015.
http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2015/08/~/media/71C8DE0BB851451182E4B1BB2A850905.ashx
[5] Matthew Nelson, "Islamist politics in South Asia after the Arab Spring: Parties and their proxies working with—and against—the state," Brookings Institution, August 2015.
http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2015/08/~/media/57223F8857DE454889A8DF5AD36BBA6C.ashx

space characterized by a stable, or at the very least predictable, political infrastructure and culture. By the time these groups had matured in their strategies and doctrines, they found themselves operating within semi-authoritarian states whose accommodation (or, more often, lack thereof) of Islamic political involvement was relatively easy to assess. And that it was in response to such predictable and stable political spaces that these Islamic groups formed their identities. Today, by contrast, in every country surveyed the local government has a mere façade of stability, at best, and virtually little about its policies or course that can be described as predictable. This adds a measure of uncertainty to the Islamists operating within those borders – indeed, just as we are trying to rethink political Islam, so too these Islamists are rethinking their political Islam in relation to uncertain local and regional settings.

Second, is that, aside from the stability of local governments, the other major difference today from the political situation of pre-2011 is that political culture is being increasingly defined and arbitrated in sectarian terms – a point that, interestingly, only one paper discusses in any significant way. Even though the main theater of sectarian tensions is Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and while at the state level only Saudi Arabia and Iran have officially embraced the themes that would make it relevant, it is the sectarian significance of these areas that reverberates across borders and could determine, for example, the "mouvance" (to use Monica Marks's term) of Salafi-jihadis in places like Tunisia, as she argues. More discussion of this new sectarian flavor in regional politics would provide added insight into the regional rise of voices once removed from the political sphere, such as the Salafis, precisely because it is they who have created the political language for reading significance into sectarian tensions.

Third is the question of social media, which earned no significant treatment in these studies. While it is certainly easy to overstate the importance of social media, there are significant analytical risks of understating it. After all, it is through social media that the sectarian portrayal of regional conflict is promoted, and it is through social media that new transregional links are created in ways that had not existed prior to 2011. Therefore, not considering the role, if not the responsibility, of social media in some of these large-scale shifts risks mischaracterizing the dynamics of Islamist groups as merely local phenomena (and they may, in some cases, be just that) and how we think about the implications of their decisions.

Finally, where one would attempt the most nuanced rethinking, in terms of categories and terms, we remain married to pre-2011 typologies. Here Marks's observation regarding "the tendency, in both local and Western press, to label religiously oriented actors as diverse as Salafi jihadis, Boko Haram, the Egyptian Brotherhood, and Ennahda as 'Islamists' [having] generated additional confusion regarding Ennahda's identity and

aims" is just as relevant beyond the case of Ennahda, and for which my own work tries to provide some granularity.[6] When looking at the Kuwaiti case as in a number of others, even the line between Muslim Brotherhood and activist Salafi has been blurred. It is precisely when these groups are rethinking their founding doctrines and their ambitions within fluid political settings that the academic and policy communities would do well to revisit the fundamental differences between these groups as these were originally conceived prior to 2011 (for example, the legal-theological Salafi orientation versus the modern political ideology of the Brotherhood) as entry points for understanding them. Specifically, it is the very distinctions between the priorities and focus of Salafis and Brotherhood-inspired organizations—the former aiming to ensure that only *their* understanding of Islamic ritual observances and creed dominates, while the latter that Islam in general be in a position of social and political influence—that provides the key to understanding the different approaches for popular mobilization each uses and why the former may resonate more today.

Indeed, given the scale of all of these political shifts, and the blurring of lines between groups, how precisely can we tell "extremist" from "non-extremists?" and what does it mean to be "radical" (i.e. radical in relation to what?) versus "moderate?" Certainly, ISIS is unique in its grotesque brutality, which has even alienated the organization from other jihadi groups, and can therefore be treated as an isolated phenomenon. But when comparing the objectives and nature of the many other groups, from the AQ-affiliated jihadis to the Syrian militants to the non-violent Salafis, might we as scholars not do well to provide to readers some deeper and more descriptive explanatory vocabulary for distinguishing these myriad groups at a time when so much is at stake? Moreover, there is an added epistemological risk today of using the terms like "extremist" and "moderate" to distinguish, for example, between the different new groups in Syria since we need to remember that local voices (Assad, for example) use these same terms to push their own interests and agendas.

Here it is surprising to see some of the papers promote the "inclusion-moderation hypothesis" as applied to the Muslim Brotherhood, especially given that we now know of the opaque nature of the causes and contexts in which they have evolved over the last five years. Here Courtney Freer offers the helpful reminder that "Islamists do not necessarily moderate when included in a political system, nor do they always privilege ideological policies over systemic political change more broadly."[7]

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[6] Jacob Olidort, "Fall of the Brotherhood, Rise of the Salafis," Lawfare Institute, 11 October 2015. https://www.lawfareblog.com/fall-brotherhood-rise-salafis

[7] Courtney Freer, "The rise of pragmatic Islamism in Kuwait's post-Arab Spring opposition movement," Brookings Institution, August 2015. http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2015/08/~/media/507B34D14D53410A9BB71A97D433D940.ashx

It seems that given the transformative nature and effect of these large-scale political changes, these circumstances must be somehow integrated into our new thinking about political Islam, and specifically towards understanding various Islamic groups within the political sphere as *dynamic* and *relational* to their political environments. Here I disagree somewhat with Raphaël Lefèvre's argument that we need "a renewed focus on the kind of internal dynamics which take place within Islamist groups [that] may shed light on the factors accounting for their resilience." He argues for adopting resource mobilization theory in which Islamist groups are studied according to their "organizational survival" and suggests looking at the internal bureaucracy that provides political and professional opportunities to those who commit to that group's cause. This may be the case, but I wonder about the relevance of using these bureaucratic relationships as an analytical prism for understanding Islamist groups at a time when their political context is not always bureaucratic, much less local, and, when the increasing political fragility of local states does not always accommodate the functions of organized bureaucracies. Rather, with the globalization of the political sphere and with the greater contact between various Islamist groups across countries and continents shifting in response to local and regional political trends, it may be more productive to understand them in relation to those broader circumstances. Specifically, borrowing from a typology I used to describe the different kinds of sectarianisms in the Middle East, we could better understand Islamist groups today in functional terms as they carve out spaces for themselves within these new settings—(institutional) whether and to what degree they directly engage with local political institutions; (exploitative) whether they embrace violent mechanisms to exploit local instability, or; (accommodationist) in which they engage with politically-relevant themes without directly engaging with or challenging existing institutional structures or directly becoming involved in formal politics. [8]

[8] Jacob Olidort, "The truth about sectarianism: behind the various strands of Shiite-Sunni discord," Foreign Affairs, 25 January 2016. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2016-01-25/truth-about-sectarianism

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.

This is accomplished through four stages:

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- **Reaction essays** in which authors reflect on and respond to the other country cases.
- **Responses** from Islamist leaders and activists themselves as they engage in debate with project authors and offer their own perspectives on the future of their movements.
- **Final drafts** incorporating the insights gleaned from the months of dialogue and discussion.

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