

# B | Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at BROOKINGS

RETHINKING POLITICAL ISLAM SERIES

December 2015

## REACTION ESSAY

**Stacey Philbrick Yadav**, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

[CLICK HERE FOR STACEY'S ORIGINAL WORKING PAPER ON YEMEN](#)

---

The papers included in the “Rethinking Political Islam” collection offer several core lessons for those of us who study Islamism. These lessons both confirm and expand upon earlier insights in the existing literature on Islamism, and provide new points of analysis as Islamists respond to dramatic region-wide events that remain undertheorized. As I work to revise my original [paper on Yemen](#), there are concepts and approaches worth reevaluating, and other issues where I will dig in with renewed commitment. More specifically, as I outline below, reading others’ work has encouraged me to better attend to the interaction between regional and local dynamics, to more aggressively resist using Egypt as an analytic benchmark, and to think more explicitly about how to balance case specificity and analytic generality in my approach to Islamism.

### What we mean by “context”

In my earlier work on Islamists in Yemen and Lebanon, I made the reasonably straightforward (but nonetheless necessary) argument that we cannot understand Islamists only or largely by studying Islamists – that rules of the game, partisan and extrapartisan alliances, and discourses at work in the broader political field all matter critically for the nature of Islamist practice. While this has long been clear to many scholars of Islamism, it has needed restating by many of us in the face of ahistorical accounts that privilege an often-fictional attachment to some kind of essential “Islamist ideology.” (Think, for example, of recent efforts to determine “how Islamic” the Islamic State really is...). To demonstrate the ways in which Islamists are situated actors (“just like everyone else”), scholars working in Comparative Politics and drawing upon the broad and interdisciplinary tradition of Social Movement Theory have explored the widely varying domestic contexts in which Islamists function, and inquired into the many ways in which they both reflect and shape these contexts.

Evidence of this research tradition is clear in many of the papers in this collection. [Avi Spiegel's paper on Morocco](#) offers a particularly clear and potentially tractable “three c” rubric of context, control, and competition that is useful for understanding Islamist activism. There are lots of other

ways in which we do this, and each of us probably has his or her pet approach in our broader research, whether this is made explicit in these contributions or not. For me, it's always been the iterative relationship between discourse and institutions. Regardless of the specific categories we use, this focus on the ways in which Islamists engage with regimes and with their primary interlocutors is essential.

What the papers as a whole also help to make clear, however, is that we should not focus too narrowly on these factors solely in their domestic context, as area specialists most often do. The same set of factors can and should be examined at the regional and international level. Indeed, it is precisely at the nexus of these domestic, regional, and international levels that this collection is poised to make the best contribution. This means, for example, that to resist the framing of the war in Yemen as a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran by framing it as a domestic civil conflict is to risk mischaracterizing the opportunities and constraints facing central actors, including the Islamists in the Islah party. With Yemen's transitional government—which includes Islah—in exile (or detention), the party's relationships to both its fellow Yemenis and regional allies matter in determining its political future, though this is not yet well-elaborated in my working paper.

Yemen scholars have been writing for much of the past year about the factors other than sectarianism that matter for understanding the domestic context of the rise of the Houthi movement. [Yet reading Toby Mattheisen's paper on Saudi Arabia](#) was particularly helpful for me in thinking about how discursive framing across the region is unfolding in relation to Saudi Arabia's domestic effort to de-Arabize Arab Shi'a. While I stand by the general effort to draw attention to domestic Yemeni factors that often evade detailed analysis, the Saudi-led war in Yemen and the attendant escalation of sectarian rhetoric and violence have undoubtedly made some forms of politics less possible than they might once have been. Rethinking Islah's options in light of regional dynamics is essential, particularly as sectarian framing seems to grow more rigid the longer the war extends. What this will mean for Islah is not yet clear, but as I move forward with revisions to my own paper, I anticipate that I will devote more attention to the impact of international and regional dynamics than I did in my original draft.

### **A world beyond *Umm al-Dunya***

If the first major lesson involves reevaluating and expanding the parameters of a particular approach, the second has provoked me to dig in my heels. Reading the papers as a whole has underscored the necessity of thinking critically about the meaning of “the Brotherhood” as an analytic category, and challenging the (usually-but-not-always implicit) Egyptocentrism that continues to plague our collective analysis. As becomes clear through a reading of these papers, what it means to be a Brotherhood “analogue” or “affiliate” differs in content and in depth across the twelve country cases. Some reference to Egypt seems justified, of course, insofar as it was in Egypt that the first Brotherhood was established, and from Egypt that its intellectual influence spread. Yet the recitation of this particular history has a totemic quality that directs us to assume relationships and establish benchmarks. Perhaps this has also been exacerbated by many Islamists' self-identification (as in Yemen, where I describe a Brotherhood

cohort within the broader Islah party). But we have not more fully examined the meaning of this self-identification, of this intellectual reach.

We seem to be doing something beyond simply giving an account of historical influence or impact and I worry that many of us—myself included—have implicitly treated the Egyptian Brotherhood and its experience as a conceptual ideal type, against which we are evaluating the authenticity of subsequent organizations in terms of their closeness or distance. Is this justified? What does visiting a Brotherhood bookstore in Aden to buy works by Egyptian authors that are banned in Egypt signify for Yemeni Islamists? Certainly, nothing in my research would suggest it indicates that Yemeni Islamists judge themselves in terms of their closeness or distance to the “real thing,” or identify as in any way subordinate to or derivative of Egyptian Islamists.

Part of the prompt for this project asked us to explicitly address the impact of the suppression of Egyptian Brotherhood since 2013 on Islamists elsewhere in the region. As the essays show, impact is non-linear. It does not appear that those whose experience has most “closely” resembled or whose ideology has hewn most closely to an Egyptian benchmark are taking different lessons than those that are “farther” from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in ideology or practice. This, by itself, is interesting. But it also helps to make the case, I think, that analytic (as opposed to historic) Egyptocentrism is unjustified. I am not suggesting that studying the impact of the Egyptian coup is unjustified as it clearly has been important for many of the organizations about which this group of authors has written – but rather that the logic of impact is not grounded in the relationships these organizations have to a “mother” institution.

This opens up new options for those of us who work on countries often treated as “outliers”—cases located both geographically and conceptually at the periphery of our collective analysis of the Middle East as a region. Yemen, of course, is one of these cases, where the Islah party is either mistakenly identified as “the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood” or dismissed as something exceptional, owing to its diverse composition of tribal, Salafi, and “Brotherhood” leaders. I’m not sure we have the right vocabulary for talking about this yet—is there a way to take seriously the self-identifications of “Brothers” in ways that do not necessarily reproduce this politics of authenticity and distance? I don’t know the answer to this, but I am quite certain, after reading these papers, that I do not want to cede much ground to those who approach Islamists across the region (and outside of the region, as I’ll discuss next) as a facsimile of greater or lesser clarity of the Egyptian Society of the Muslim Brotherhood.

### **Striking analytic balance**

It is thus both possible and perhaps unsurprising that I’m making an argument in favor of some messiness when it comes to Islamism. That I don’t think we really have—or need—a “theory of Islamism,” so much as we need—but often don’t have—a theory of politics. This contention has been influenced by my participation in a similar collaborative project on Islamist parties in the Arab Middle East and in South and Southeast Asia. In that project, the similarities and differences that we mapped between Islamist parties suggested that the Brotherhood had no particular explanatory pride of place. Many lessons from that volume are echoed clearly in this

project. But because it was driven by a set of questions and subsequent hypotheses about politics rather than about Islamists, Egypt and the Egyptian experience was somewhat naturally decentered. The concepts that were the most useful in explaining variation across space and time were bread-and-butter political concepts, having little or nothing to do with the ideolog(ies) of Islamism. Ideas mattered for the cases in that project, but the form(s) of their articulation, their modification over time, and the varied effects of their reception occurred always (and only) in relation to institutions and practices—of Islamists and non-Islamists alike. I think we could read the lessons from these papers in the same way, deriving analytic lessons about the relationship between ideas and institutions without sacrificing case specificity or our shared interests in the political implications of organized Islamism. To do so, we need to think less in terms of proper names and more in terms of processes, but I fear we remain too closely anchored to the former.

## 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 three stages:

- A **working paper** for each country, produced by an author who has conducted on-the-ground research and engaged with the relevant Islamist actors.
- A **reaction essay** in which authors reflect on and respond to the other country cases.
- A **final draft** incorporating the insights gleaned from the months of dialogue and discussion.