Essay

The ever-changing face of political Islam

Transformations and new developments in Islamist movements since 1990

Raphael J. Spoetta

Department of International Relations

The London School of Economics and Political Science

London, June 2016

Introduction

On July 3rd, 2013, the Egyptian army ousted the country's first freely and democratically elected president, Mohammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood's *Freedom and Justice party,* and installed a military regime thus ending the "islamist experiment" [1]. At the same time, the Syrian civil war entered its third year and witnessed the rise of a militant group: The so-called "Islamic State in Iraq and Sham[2] (ISIS) which later proclaimed a "caliphate"[3]. In this essay, dealing with the question of how political Islam has changed as an ideology, both of these movements serve as examples to illustrate two major trends within Sunni political Islam since 1990: Pragmatism on the one hand and increasingly extremist violence on the other. However, this does not necessarily imply that political Islam has changed in terms of ideology. On the contrary, these trends could very well be seen as regression on earlier key elements of political Islam, as adaptation to changing circumstances, or as adoption of elements of other ideologies. Even the rise of jihadism since the 1990s cannot be seen as the creation of a new ideology but rather as political Islam adopting violent methods with regard of pursuing political goals. Both movements, nevertheless, indicate a high degree of flexibility inherent in Islamist ideology.

It is necessary to distinguish between several variations of political Islam. In this essay, the terms "political Islam" and "Islamism" are used interchangeably since both describe an ideology based on the belief that states or societies should be organised according to what is perceived as "Islamic principles". As a matter of fact, there is no single "Islamic religion" but various sectarian beliefs, for instance Sunnism and Shiism, or philosophical views like Salafism. Islamism could be based on every religious trend derived from Qur'an, Hadith or Shari'a. Therefore, several aspects of Islamism vary accordingly. As a consequence, it is necessary to carefully distinguish between religion and ideology and between various branches of ideologies. This essay is about trends within Sunni Islamism.

Furthermore, ideologies usually intend to transform the society – Pan-Arabism for instance aimed at establishing a state based on the idea of a shared Arabic language and culture while Communism aims at transforming the economic system by the means of revolution. The way Islamism wants to transform society is not entirely clear. Iran's political system, for instance, is

---

[1] cf. Kingsley, Patrick and Chulov, Martin: "Mohamed Morsi ousted in Egypt's second revolution in two years. *The Guardian*, July 4th, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/03/mohamed-morsi-egypt-second-revolution

[2] cf. Humphreys, Stephen: "The Strange Career of Pan-Arabism", in: *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age*, University of California Press, 2005, p. 71

[3] cf. Westall, Sylvia: "After Iraq gains, Qaeda offshoot claims Islamic 'caliphate'. *Reuters*, June 29th, 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iraq-idUSKBN0F40SL20140629

derived from islamistic ideals such as the rule of a *Mujtahid*, an Islamic jurisconsult, but includes several elements from European political systems as well: Elections, a presidency, a parliament and separation of powers. However, this political system is based on theories by Ayatollah Khomeini and there is no reason to believe that other Islamistic groups would try to establish a political system resembling Iran's. Therefore, one cannot understand ideologies without taking into consideration practices and policies of their "carriers". There is no "pure" form of ideology which could exist independently from people or movements – indeed, the very same what Moore says about culture prevails with ideology: "Culture or tradition […] is not something that exists outside of or independently of individual human beings living together in society."[4]

The rise and fall of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

In order to understand the role of the Islamistic Muslim Brotherhood within the Egyptian society, one should, at least superficially, deal with its history. Founded in Egypt in 1928, by schoolteacher Hassan al-Banna, the Muslim Brotherhood's primordial target was to pursuit a social mission. Therefore, the "Brothers" would concentrate on welfare services. Its agenda, however, was first and foremost political and inspired by the idea that state and society should be formed according to "Islamic principles". Their goal was, by the means of social reform, to establish social equality in order to reform and later transform Egypt's society and political system. The question of how exactly the Muslim Brotherhood would transform the political system remained entirely unanswered.

In the period of particular interest, 1990 to 2016, the Muslim Brotherhood maintained and intensified their social programmes. The group therefore became increasingly networked within Egyptian society:

> *"The Brothers are no longer an isolated group sitting on the political and social sidelines nor one that the regime can simply exclude. Ever since 'Umar al-Tilmisānī took over its leadership in the 1970s, the movement has rebuilt its organisation (al-tanẓīm) in secure fashion, not just at the level of increasing the group's recruitment of new members, but also qualitatively by establishing new offices and specializations placed at the service of various political, economic and social sectors within society."* [5]

---

[4] Moore, Barrington: "The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy", London: Allen Lane 1993 [1967], p. 486
[5] al-Awadi, Hesham: "A struggle for legitimacy: the Muslim Brotherhood and Mubarak, 1982–2009". *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2 2009, 214 – 228. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17550910902854015, p. 225

As a consequence, the Brotherhood became increasingly legitimate among the Egyptians who then by the majority voted for the Brotherhood's *Freedom and Justice* party at the parliamentary elections in 2011 and elected their chairman Mohammed Morsi president.

However, the Brotherhood's ideology does not appear to have changed. The Brotherhood usually followed a pragmatic approach in their pursuit of the "Islamic state". Although Islamist movements usually are strictly Pro-Palestinian, Morsi promised after his election to respect the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty [6] and the majority of the Brotherhood, which has been non-violent, maintained this attitude. After all, the Brotherhood's ideological key elements remained the same: Non-violence (at least in most cases), social equality and justice and the notion of transforming Egypt into an "Islamic state" when the society would be ready (without specifying which prerequisites should be matched by the society or how the system should be designed). The Brotherhood's pragmatic view on reality prevailed here as well: They did not intend to unite the *Umma*, the Islamic community, but rather took power within Egypt.

Challenging Sykes-Picot? ISIS's radical and violent history

Al-Qa'ida in Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham, and finally the so-called "Islamic State". What locals refer to as "Da'ish", an acronym for *ad-dawla al-islamiyya fi Iraq wa Sham*, has had many names but remained the same group, an offspring of the fundamentalist, jihadist al-Qa'ida. In this context, *jihadist* refers to a concept within Islam that, translated properly, has got nothing to do with *holy wars* but rather refers to the psychological and philosophical struggle of the individuum to come closer to God (Greater Jihad). Lesser jihad, on the other hand, refers to more material struggles, including (physical) self-defence. This tells us a lot about the motives of *jihadist* groups which I identify as sub-category of political Islam: They believe that their fight is legitimate because they would defend the *Umma* against foreign control, foreign intervention – in our case, first and foremost the United States. However, their "jihad" is not of a psychological or religious kind but they rather fight against what they perceive as foreign interventions. One could argue, since offensive Jihad is not allowed in Islam, their strikes against the US on September 11th, 2001, were of "pre-emptive" nature, at least from their point of view.

Since ISIS is an offspring of al-Qa'ida in Iraq and became increasingly successful in Syria due to the Syrian civil war, it could very well be considered a "special case" of political Islam. It has

---

[6] Blomfield, Adrian: "Mohammed Morsi vows to respect Egypt-Israel peace treaty". *The Telegraph*, August 28th, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/9504601/Mohammed-Morsi-vows-to-respect-Egypt-Israel-peace-treaty.html

got nothing to do with Salafism, though, because its concepts do not refer to the "golden era" of the Prophet himself but they intend to create an alternative form of modernity. Nevertheless, they share anachronistic execution methods and the adherence of the "true" or "real" Islam with Salafism (to be witnessed to some extent in Saudi Arabia). However, they pursued a focal shift: While al-Qa'ida primarily focused on fighting the *far enemy*, the United States and the west, ISIS concentrates on the *near enemy*: Christians, Shi'a Muslims and Êzîdî. Its brutal tactics and genocidal acts against the mentioned Êzîdî of Sinjar, who are ethnical Kurds, as well as their engagement in the Syrian civil war lead to the conclusion that they fit the description of "jihadism" – they turn against the "illegitimate" boundaries drawn by the colonial powers. Of course, this is to some extent ahistorical. While the foreign powers did not arbitrarily draw borders in the sand but rather referred to some extend to the older Ottoman administrative boundaries, ISIS ignores 100 years of history between Sykes-Picot (which, by the way was never put into effect, yet a common narrative in the Middle East) in order to legitimise its *jihad* for establishing an "Islamic state". Nevertheless, ISIS's attempts have to be understood as rejection of the Westphalian state system itself rather than challenging particular boundaries in the Middle East. [7]

While they share their viewpoint of (defensive) jihad, which means fighting against the west in order to avoid foreign incursion in the Middle East and to challenge their local enemies as I mentioned above, with al-Qa'ida, they offer an alternative model of modernity in rejecting the Westphalian state system, at least ideologically. (Not to mention of course their recourse on radical ideas formulated by the Muslim Brotherhood's Sayyid Qutb.) ISIS's establishment of a "caliphate" is interesting in two aspects. First of all, although rejecting the Westphalian system, as Hamdan[8] put it, they established structures and models of behaviour which we primarily associate with modern nation states – ISIS clearly exerts power over vast areas of Iraq and Syria (territory and a monopoly over the use of force) and although I doubt that the "Foreign Terrorist Fighters" (FTF), as they are referred to by the OSCE[9], constitute a population because of the fact that they are no ethno-linguistically homogenous group, which would be necessary according to international law to form a population, some other scholars would disagree. ISIS prevents social services, maintains a legal system as well as a tax system. As a consequence, the Westphalian state system is the ordering principle which ISIS is to some extent following.

---

[7] cf. Hamdan, Nehme Ali: "Breaker of Barriers? Notes on the Geopolitics of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 21, No. 3 2016, 605 – 627. P. 606 - 608

[8] cf. Hamdan, Nehme Ali: "Breaker of Barriers? Notes on the Geopolitics of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 21, No. 3 2016, 605 – 627. P. 608

[9] cf. Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe: "Overview of OSCE Counter-Terrorism Related Commitments." February 2016, http://www.osce.org/node/26365?download=true

Secondly, ISIS refers back to the Pan-Islamist idea, of which Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, mastermind of today's political Islam, was vanguard[10]. This concept therefore is not new, ISIS hence adopted another old concept thus trying to establish a state for the *Umma* which indicates once again the ideological flexibility of political Islam.

Conclusion

From 1990 to 2016, we witnessed the emergence of another branch of Sunni political Islam: Jihadism. Jihadist movements are to a certain extent even more transnational than the established branches of political Islam such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which founded various offshoots all around the Middle East, or Iran, pursuing the goal of "exporting" the Islamic revolution. In the case of ISIS, this jihadist organisation combines its attempts to fight against western domination with volunteers, radicalised in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya, with the re-establishment of the caliphate.

The adoption of elements of other ideologies indicate a certain extent of ideological flexibility but the recent developments in Sunni political Islam are not new, on the contrary. While the Muslim Brotherhood tried to pursue their goals of a "more Islamic" Egyptian society (and ultimately failed), it pursued well-known ideological concepts (e.g. the high degree of pragmatism) but in combination with a striking lack of political skill. When Mohammed Morsi was in power, there were reports about torture and despotism, which led to unpopularity towards his rule. In the case of ISIS, I tend to believe that this group has adopted several elements of other ideologies. Pan-Islamism, for instance, has probably been copied from Pan-Arabism, the pursuit of the creation of a state, then again, is a key element of nationalist ideologies.

In conclusion, I believe that the degree of flexibility, inherent in the ideology of political Islam, makes it impossible to speak about grave ideological changes. However, the establishment of Jihadism as alternative branch, a more violent form of political Islam, could be seen as new development while I believe that the methods of political competition may have changed but not the eventual goals. As a consequence, political Islam did certainly adopt to altered circumstances but their main ideological goals remained the same: The establishment of a state or society based on the very principles of what they perceive the "real" (Sunni) Islam and the combat against western "intrusions".

1983 words

---

[10] Keddie, Nikki R.: "Sayyid Jamāl ad-Din 'Al-Afghānī': A political Biography", Los Angeles, Near Eastern Center, University of California 1972, p. 129 - 131