Islamists from a Distance

BJØRN OLAV UTVIK
Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway; e-mail: b.o.utvik@ikos.uio.no
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Research on Islamism needs to move closer to its object and to study that object more closely in its interaction with its environment. Despite great advances in recent years, academic literature on the topic still too often suffers from a double distancing: the researcher tends, first, to remain unnecessarily removed from Islamic movements as the object of study and, second, to study those movements at a distance from the society in which they grow and in which they compete for support.

In an earlier phase of scholarship, there was often an additional layer of distance: many researchers would, more or less explicitly, consider their object of study a reactionary deviation from the natural course of things in which some secular ideology would rule the ground. The analysis would then take the form of a pathology of Muslim societies.[1] This situation has improved in the last fifteen years or so, primarily through works on individual movements that seek to understand the positive reasons for those movements' strength in a relatively dispassionate manner.[2] A similar trend toward a less biased approach has been visible in more policy-oriented studies dealing with the relationship between Western states and Islamist movements.[3] Yet there is still a dearth of synthetic work integrating the insights from individual studies, in which the growth of Islamism would be analyzed as an outcome of the modernization and mobilization of actually existing Muslim societies.[4] Moreover, as indicated previously, current research on Islamism tends to remain at an undue distance in two important respects.

First, there is a distancing in terms of scant attention to the internal dynamics of the movements and of limited use of available primary sources. This often leads to superficiality, for instance, in the form of simplistic analyses of Islamist groups in terms of hard-line conservatives versus liberal reformists, ignoring a far more complex reality of varying positions and leanings. When the Egyptian Muslim Brothers elected a new leadership in late 2009 and early 2010, scholars tended to predict a withdrawal from politics because the conservatives had won out. Events since then have not confirmed this expectation, indicating that it was based on a too simple dichotomy. What are the debates going on among the Islamists? What are their motivations, and how are these motivations developing? In this situation, a book such as Azzam Tamimi's *Unwritten Chapters* on Hamas stands out for its interesting insights into the inner workings of an important movement.[5]

Remarkably little use is made of the ever-expanding availability of firsthand material. There is now a plethora of personal accounts published by Islamists on the web, in newspapers, and in books. In addition, there is a growing secondary literature in Arabic and other local languages. But little of this is reflected in Western writings. Typically the too few writers who do present original material are cited again and again. Indeed, there are few current works that provide insights comparable to Richard Mitchell's classic work on the Muslim Brothers.[6]

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The problem of distancing becomes especially acute in studies of jihadist groups, partly because the study of "Islamic terrorism" has been largely left to non-area specialists. Of course, access to interviewing the activists in question is problematic. Nevertheless, a group of researchers at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment shows that an alternative approach is possible. Scholars like Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer insist on working with firsthand sources, mostly in Arabic and largely gleaned from the Internet. This, along with their solid backgrounds in Middle East studies, enables them to provide deep insights into the jihadist trend as well as to make a sophisticated distinction between jihadism and other forms of Islamism.[7]

Second, Islamists are too often studied in isolation from the society in which they live. There has been a lot of commendable focus on the relations between Islamists and governments, and Islamist attitudes toward questions seen as critical in the West, such as (peaceful) political participation, democracy, and the rights of women.[8] But there is a striking lack of attention to how Islamist movements relate to the wider Islamic environment that is their immediate habitat: the ʿulamaʾ, the Sufi movements, and the plethora of apolitical religious organizations. Not least important here is the wide range of movements and circles that think of themselves as *salafī*.

Islamism should not be isolated as *sui generis*. A more intimate attention to the object of study and more work with primary sources should be combined with bold comparative work. But a deep understanding of how Islamists think, who they are, and what their role is in their immediate environment is a prerequisite for making informed comparisons with developments in societies across the globe. Here the fundamentalist trap should be avoided. Grand comparisons of "fundamentalist movements" in the various great religious traditions were for a time in vogue.[9] But these studies yielded little new insight, because they took as their point of departure the presumed existence of a global phenomenon of fundamentalism. The movements they compared operated in very different social settings with different agendas. The aim of these studies was fixed on finding common characteristics associated with the imagined category of fundamentalism. Therefore, despite generating a lot of interesting empirical research, on their central research question the studies tended to find only what they started with as the criterion for selecting objects of study: that the movements shared a strong belief in an absolute truth emanating from an all-powerful God.

The social-movement approach at least implicitly involves a much broader comparison, and some encouraging work has been done here.[10] For those interested in the social role of Islamism, comparative work with social and political movements within other cultural and religious traditions that have been engaged in struggles for national independence and social reform in modernizing societies will have much to offer.[11]

NOTES

[1]This would often be most explicit with writers originating from Muslim countries. Cf. Bassam al-Tibi, *Islam between Culture and Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); and Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London: Verso, 1993).

[2]Examples include Stéphane Lacroix, *Les islamistes saoudiens: Une insurrection manquée* (Paris: PUF, 2010); Jenny B. White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 2003); Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and*

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Political Change in Egypt (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); and Malika Zeghal, *Islamism in Morocco: Religion, Authoritarianism, and Electoral Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener, 2008).

[3]For a fine example see Michaël Emerson, Richard Youngs, and Samir Amghar, eds., *Political Islam and European Foreign Policy: Perspectives from Muslim Democrats of the Mediterranean* (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2007).

[4]However, important contributions have been made by, among others, François Burgat, *Islamism in the Shadow of Al-Qaeda* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2010); and, for Egypt from a different angle, Amira El Azhary Sonbol, *The New Mamluks: Egyptian Society and Modern Feudalism* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

[5]Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters* (London: Hurst, 2006).

[6]Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[7]Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[8]See Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Yildiz Atasoy, *Turkey, Islamists and Democracy: Tradition and Globalization in a Muslim State* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005); and Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shiʿi Lebanon* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[9]An example is the grand Fundamentalism Project sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which produced, among others, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and idem, *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Other examples include Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); and Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

[10]For an important collection of contributions, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004).

[11]For a bold and thought-provoking example, see Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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