Studying Political Islam

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Over the past two decades, scholars of the Middle East have produced an impressive body of scholarship that seeks to understand diverse groups and practices that are together called political Islam. Much of our work has drawn little attention outside of academia despite the obsession with Islam shared by policymakers and the general public. The many careful studies produced by academics and some journalists—typically based on extensive field research and use of primary sources in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian—have to contend with bestselling books that trade in fears about the irrational, West-hating Muslim fanatic. Unfortunately, serious scholarship on political Islam cannot ignore this terrain of stereotypes and fearmongering, as it dominates mainstream debates about Islam and the Middle East. But in responding to these discourses, we often allow them to dictate our analytic starting point, resulting in less theoretical innovation and empirical insight than might emerge if we moved beyond the focus on Islamist groups and whether most are moderate or radical. Indeed, we might do well to abandon altogether the idea that "political Islam" represents a tangible object of study.

Many studies of political Islam begin similarly. We outline the existing theoretical models—prominently including Samuel Huntington's clash of civilization polemic and its variants, which we critique as "culturalist" explanations—and then present our alternative framework. We repeat that the beliefs, norms, and values of Islam (which in any case are varied) cannot explain the diverse experiences and practices of Islamist groups, let alone of the 1.4 billion Muslims worldwide. We argue that we should instead analyze Islamists as rational actors or perhaps focus on institutions, or regime repression, or the exclusions of globalization, or the politics of identity, or any of a number of alternative analytic frameworks. But why do we mechanically begin by critiquing culturalist explanations, even though serious scholarly studies have rejected such models for decades? In part, we hope to shape the public debate, which largely embraces the Islam-as-monolith trope. We also anticipate that our audience—our readers, our blind reviewers, the writers of our tenure letters, and the potential future colleagues at our job talks—will demand that we engage these arguments, and they usually do.

Scholars of political Islam also have to contend with the flurry of articles by nonregional experts that have appeared in top political science journals over the last decade. Of course, nonregional experts may discuss Islamist politics, but the questions they address are seldom those that scholars with advanced language abilities and field experience are asking. The subjects of women and of terrorism, for example, preoccupy scholars with little regional expertise and bolster notions that deeply ingrained "cultural" differences explain the region's violent politics and apparent lack of democracy. Like the popular debates, these are frequently driven by liberal anxieties about threats to "our" way of life. Studies of deplorable "Muslim" treatment of women complement the numerous memoirs by Middle Eastern women who have "escaped" horrible circumstances, and both are put to service by U.S. and European politicians advocating aggressive intervention in

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the region and immigration restrictions in their own countries. Western panics about the spread of Islamist radicalism globally are thus linked to the perceived need to "rescue" the people of the region from the fanatics among them.[1]

How much energy should we spend responding to these widely cited studies, which are sometimes written by prominent figures in our disciplines? Should we pursue our own research agendas while leaving such studies uncritiqued? I have not found a comfortable balance, though the problem may be more pronounced in political science than in other disciplines. In response to these frustratingly persistent images, we repeatedly argue that Islam and democracy *can* be reconciled, that Islamists are *mostly* moderates, that extremists like al-Qaʿida enjoy negligible popular support, and so on—even though most of us view these questions as long resolved. Attempting to shape the debates can be responsible intellectual work, but it unintentionally reinforces the idea that these are the right questions to ask.

To refute the likes of Huntington, for example, we present empirical evidence that not all Islamists reject Western values and democratic institutions. By developing arguments that begin with the rejection of culturalist explanations, much of the scholarship on political Islam has come to be dominated by the "life-cycle" model: a tight focus on how groups form, whom they recruit, how their objectives change (or not) over time, what they "really" believe, with whom they cooperate, whether they participate in elections, and so on. These studies cover valuable ground, but the life-cycle approach structures our inquiry in ways that reinforce the notion that political Islam is a coherent *thing* that can be understood by unpacking its component parts—individual Islamist groups. The approach unintentionally reproduces a dimension of the cultural reductionism that it seeks to refute. That is, whereas culturalist models argue that the whole Muslim world shares a common set of values through which it can be understood (and thus necessarily clashes with the non-Muslim world), life-cycle studies categorize radical Islamists as outliers of a predominantly moderate political Islam (and thus "good" Muslims contend with "bad" Muslims). Both approaches view political Islam as a discrete historical phenomenon of the Muslim world; they differ only on whether that phenomenon poses a threat to the West.[2]

Although it is vital to ask what individual Islamist groups want and do—I adopted this focus in my earlier work[3]—I fear that limiting our scholarship to life-cycle models will fail to advance our broader understanding of related phenomena, such as the widespread use of Islamic symbols and rhetoric by political actors across the spectrum (including by secular opposition groups as well as regimes). Moving beyond the life-cycle model likely means abandoning the concept of "political Islam" as an analytic category, and it opens up lines of inquiry that attend to the ways in which the meanings of symbols and practices change over time and space.

I have tried to adopt this alternative approach in my current work on political protest in Jordan. Where and how Jordanians express political dissent has been shaped by legal reforms, economic conditions, local understandings of identity politics, the changing geography of both urban and rural areas, perceptions of the regime, and diverse forms of foreign intervention, among other factors. Examining protest practices and the factors that have shaped them over the course of several decades has led me to reflect on the many ways Islamic symbols and rhetoric are used by a wide range of actors, insights I might have missed had I utilized a life-cycle model to study groups that protest. Of course, we

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have much to learn about the internal dynamics of Islamist groups and especially their more mundane, quotidian activities. In this regard, it is perhaps premature to advocate a full abandonment of the life-cycle model so much as a shift away from the focus on participation in elections and parliaments.

If we look beyond groups and what they do and believe, I think we can open new debates about the many ostensibly religious practices and meanings that are lumped together under the category of political Islam. Let us ask: What political work do Islamic symbols and rhetoric do? Why do ostensibly secular regimes utilize narratives of piety? How do the politics of religion and piety play out in highly localized bases: in neighborhoods, within families, across the geography of a single city, at the nexus of kinship relations and state modes of exercising power, between the personal and the social? Some exciting work is being done in this vein, which has inspired me to push my own work in new directions.[4]

Let us also continue the responsible work of seeking to affect the discourses of cultural difference that dominate debates about political Islam but without allowing culturalist models to dictate the point of departure for our own scholarship.

NOTES

[1]See Lisa Wedeen, "Scientific Knowledge, Liberalism, and Empire: American Political Science in the Modern Middle East," Social Science Research Council, June 2007, http://www.ssrc.org/publications/view/8A197ABF-ED60-DE11-BD80-001CC477EC70/ (accessed 29 September 2010).

[2]Mahmoud Mamdani shows how this more recent discourse of "good" and "bad" Muslims is not that different from the Orientalist discourses critiqued by Edward Said. Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

[3]Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[4]See, for example, Salwa Ismail, *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shiʿi Lebanon* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).

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