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ROUNDTABLE

How Do Scholars Study Islamist Movements and How Should We Be Studying Them?

Introduction

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In this roundtable, we have asked a group of specialists anchored in different but overlapping scholarly communities to reflect on the academic study of Islamist movements, and they present their thoughts on its evolution as well as their suggestions for its future course. The contributions are worth reading in their entirety and quite short, so there is no point in summarizing them here. But it is worth observing that the contributions highlight and begin to explore three areas in which various modes of inquiry and communities of specialists can overlap, interact with, and even cross-fertilize each other.

The first—and most obvious—overlap is among academic disciplines. All of the contributors show the usefulness of working across disciplinary boundaries. Amr Hamzawy, for instance, shows how the evolution in the disciplinary mix of scholars focusing on Islamism has changed the way the phenomenon is viewed and even the basic concepts and terms used. Most readers of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* are likely to be friendly to calls for cross-disciplinary fertilization. It is interesting to note, however, that our contributors go beyond urging such work and point out specific areas where more efforts are needed. Two general themes emerge in this roundtable: a need to integrate ethnographic and locally grounded work and a greater focus on public space and the geography of Islamism. Still further, Berna Turam shows how such work is likely to pay off with a far more contextualized understanding of Islamism than our present understanding.

A second area of overlap is geographical in nature. There is some indication of a spreading geographical reach in the study of Islamism as well as hints of cross-fertilization. But there are also strong indications that this process is just beginning. Hamzawy shows how scholars in the Arab world have moved beyond their original Egypt centrism. Turam effortlessly moves between Turkey and Arab societies. And certainly there has been significant scholarly attention to Iran. But what of Islamism further afield? Is Islamism a phenomenon for which a "Middle East studies" framework makes the most sense? Or are there parallels and useful comparisons elsewhere in the Islamic world? What of still broader comparative work between Islamist movements and religious, social, and political movements of different coloration in far-flung societies? Some social science disciplines look on cross-regional comparisons quite favorably, so

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it seems surprising how little work has been done. Bjorn Utvik does point out some initial forays in more global and comparative directions, but the results to date seem limited. If scholars do follow the path that he suggests, it raises a difficult question: can research simultaneously become more locally grounded (as the roundtable participants suggest) and more global at the same time?

A different kind of geographical cross-fertilization seems more in evidence in the roundtable contributions, although it is never explicitly mentioned: scholars in different scholarly communities seem to be increasingly interacting despite geographical separation. Two of our contributors are based in the United States, one in Europe, and one in the Middle East, but all have participated in scholarly debates and conducted research projects that move across those apparent divisions. My own impression is that there is more communication among geographically distant communities of scholars over Islamism than there is for most other subjects in the field of Middle East studies.

Finally, a third area of overlap consists of scholarly and nonscholarly communities. Here the contributors all allude to the overlap between the scholarly and policy communities and show considerable ambivalence on the subject. On the one hand, there is a greater audience for scholarly work; on the other hand, there is a tension between the questions generated by academic disciplines and those that arise in policy discussions (a tension most directly explored by Jillian Schwedler but one that all contributors seem mindful of). I might suggest that the problem here is even more complex than short roundtable contributions can explore. Not only are scholars of the Middle East less accustomed than some in other fields to having the ear of public officials but also many are frequently uncomfortable with existing policies in a variety of ways. Those who do respond to requests for expertise are forced to come to terms with the complexity and diversity of a world that consists of military and security establishments, bureaucracies, think tanks, intelligence agencies, policymaking bodies, and public and private forums—all of which look to scholars for different kinds of knowledge, have varying levels of sophistication about a wide variety of subjects, are associated with different kinds of policies and approaches, and sometimes offer different kinds of support.

There is another set of nonscholarly communities that can lead to overlap in the study of Islamism: Islamists can be extremely interested in what scholars have to say about them. Their interest—which varies tremendously across individuals and groups—is generated for several reasons: a perception that they are misunderstood; a desire to use external attention to negotiate more domestic social and political space; and a general openness to analysis, self-study, and criticism. Some of the sharpness of the dividing line between scholars and subjects is therefore removed. Indeed, this is increasingly the case as some Islamists have cultivated their own research arms, think tanks sympathetic to Islamism have been established, and university specialists on Islamism in the Arab world (for a long time largely restricted to those hostile to their subject, as Hamzawy points out) now come at the issues from a variety of perspectives.

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