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The Authoritarian Roots of Contemporary Islamist Discourse

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Protesters in Douma shouting slogans against Assad and the Islamic State, Syria, March 2017 © Mohammed Badra / EPA



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Among its diverse consequences, the popular uprising and subsequent instability of the Arab Spring saw the expansion of the role of Islamist movements in general, and their radical jihadist versions in particular. In most Arab Spring countries this development has hindered the possibility of a democratic transformation, the main goal pursued by the citizens of the Arab states against their oppressors. Indeed, Islamist organizations are one of the reasons for the propagation of tyrannical regimes in multiple countries.

The Syrian example illustrates the catastrophic consequence of the prevalence of Islamist organizations, referred to as the “Islamization of the Revolution”. The practical experience of the dominant Islamist groups, such as the Islamic State, al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, and Jaysh al-Islam, coupled with the differences in the extent of their influence, has led to new forms of political and social tyranny that simply replaced the tyranny of the Syrian government.

These Islamist organizations used their military power to confront the Syrian regime, and penetrated local communities through organized advocacy and by providing services in areas no longer under Assad’s control. Their rise to power has also been facilitated by high levels of funding, through donations and the spoils of war as well as economic resources and business activities under their control. Perhaps most importantly, these groups were able to persuade people to accept them and believe their ideologies as they portrayed themselves as faithful to Islam and claimed their objectives embodied the essence of the religion.

Although some average citizens were originally persuaded by the religious content of the Islamist discourse, the dark and oppressive realities of these groups were quickly exposed, causing many to distance themselves from them. Yet, the real problem does not lie with a certain organization, poor implementation of the project, or the corruption of leaders. The real problem is the attempt to combine religion and politics. In unveiling the political and historical dimensions of the Islamist heritage, the authoritarian ambitions of Islamist organizations are exposed.

The Authoritarian Roots of Politicized Religion



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The general contours of popular Islamist thought are by now well-known: Islamists reject outright the separation of religion and politics; they hold firm the belief that Islam is both a “religion and state”; and they see the religious domain as extending well past matters of worship, the spiritual, and personal faith.¹ This broad Islamist vision of the role of religion in affairs of the State is largely shared across both the Sunni and Shia sects, despite the historic conflict between them. Indeed, both Shia and Sunni Islam are identical in categorically denying the separation between religion and politics, sharing the same discourse on the universality of Islam and its inclusion in all aspects of life. The late Shia cleric Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah,² for example, opposed the idea that the “Wali al-Faqih” should assume control over affairs of State like Khomeini, and called for the restriction of his powers. Nonetheless, he always argued that separating religion and politics is impossible. “There can be no religion without politics,” he wrote, “as religious values are not suspended in the air, but rather live in the mind, heart, and movement of the human being. In fact, they reflect reality. That’s why our religion is politics and our politics is religion”.³ Islamists strive to influence the political choices of devout Muslim by exploiting the central place religion holds in believers’ lives, a process which is aided by beautifully written *fatwas* issued by clergy. Likewise, the practice of *takfir*, or excommunication, allows for a blending of politics and religion, strengthening the idea that political positions are a part of religiosity.

Yet, much of the historical foundation on which the ideologies of the Islamist movements are based comes from a jurisprudential tradition written by individuals in distinctive historical contexts. These movements reproduce their ideas, using a religious background for their political objectives. However, these texts are nothing more than the opinions and interests of the authors and as such do not have the supposed binding force of sacred work. More importantly, these works do not belong to the jurisprudential code, but rather to the so-called Sultani or authoritarian literature.

The Sultani literature defined political orientations with regards to the state and power. Despite its use of various Islamic intellectual styles, it originated in a specific political historical context and aimed to accomplish precise ideological missions within the Islamic political sphere to resolve internal conflicts. The



principle of combining *mulk* (authority) and religion is one of the deep principles of the discourse of the *Sultani* literature. The origin of this principle can be found in Persian literature, which described the relationship between political power, the monarchy, and religion, normally pagan. This has been interpreted by Islamic political discourse in various ways. This *Sultani* heritage, of Persian and pagan origin, is the source of many of the key ideas on which Islamist discourse is based.

A number of contemporary Islamic scholars have expressed various ideas that can be traced back to ancient Persia. For example, Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, author of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, states “I know that Shari’a is an origin and authority is a keeper. What has no origin is destroyed; what has no keeper is lost”. In the *Book of the Fatwas*, Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah affirms: “The mandate of the people is one of the greatest duties of religion, without which neither religion nor life can survive”. Furthermore, Al-Mawardi asserts in the *Sultani Rulings*, “The authority of the Imam is a continuation of the authority of the Prophet”. Careful scrutiny of these ideas proves they are all derived from an ancient text, titled *The Reign of Ardasheer* and can be traced back to the third century AD. Ardasheer was a Persian king who united the dispersed Persian emirates under his rule and founded the Sassanid state. His interest in religion led him to revive the Zoroastrian faith. A passage from this book reads, “[l]earn that authority and religion are twin brothers: neither of them can survive without the other, as religion is the base of authority. The monarch has become the keeper of the religion. The monarch needs his base and religion needs its keeper. Because what is baseless is destroyed and what is left without a keeper is lost”.

This Persian unification of religion and power was embedded in Islamic heritage by a number of Muslim jurists who endeavoured to create an Islamic context that could serve the sovereign states in which they lived. Under the supervision of the state, the jurists authored new texts with an Islamic background to provide the government with the necessary legitimacy. The Caliph, or the imam, became “the shadow of God on earth,” and “obedience to him” equated to “obedience to God”. The modern Islamist movements also took inspiration from these texts and used them to support their aims, even if the group’s identity was founded on Shia “Imamate” or the Sunni “Caliphate”.



Revoking Political Islam

The pursuit of power or the establishment of a new system of government is a political act, regardless of the means, motivations, goals, or ideologies of those working toward it. This applies to Islamists, both politicians and *mujahideen*. Politics is a purely human activity that is linked to the government, the management of worldly conditions, and the relations between the rulers and the ruled as well as between states. Therefore, giving politics a religious facade, in fact, changes the nature of both politics and religion. When politics reformulates religion, it transforms it into something else, as is the case when religion is used to reshape politics. This is what contemporary Islamist movements have striven to achieve since they emerged a little over a century ago.

The Muslim Brotherhood, a typical example of political Islam, claims to represent a moderate faction, but have a core to reach, as pronounced by al-Banna, “a social system (called Islam) that deals with all life’s affairs and the resurrection of the exemplary Islamic nation that follows the true Islam (which will be its guide). It will be known to the people as the nation of the Qur’an, with which it is coloured and for which it fights and sacrifices souls and wealth”.

The use of religious texts, such as the Qur’an and *hadith*, justifies the establishment of the jurisprudential and *Sultani* heritage, even though the Islamists only use religion as a source of legitimacy while not actually representing Islam. The Islamists’ reliance on the *Sultani* literature exemplifies another obstacle of combining religion and politics as the texts lack a coherent theoretical structure that can be transferred to the political sphere.

Philosopher Karl Popper once said, “When the authorities oppose criticism of their programs, they are doomed to commit mistakes on an ongoing basis. When they prohibit the critical examination of the practical outcomes of these programs, they risk the aggravation of those mistakes until they became self-proclaimed, and any social approach of this type is authoritarian and irrational”.⁴ This is precisely the case of political Islamist movements. The combination of Islamists’ political objectives and religion does not allow for any political dissent as they consider all criticism an insult to their religion. The Islamist groups draw legitimacy for their authoritarian actions from Shari’a law. Islamists know the majority of the Shari’a



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rulings are simply interpretations of Islamic jurists, which allows the Islamists to manipulate the rulings to achieve their own objectives.

Abdul Rahman al-Kawakibi was one of the early reformers who recognized the potential negative consequences of combining religion and politics. Al-Kawakibi believed the root cause of underdevelopment in the of Arab and Muslim world was despotism, which resulted from the tutelage of religion over politics. Beginning in the 19th century he insisted on “separating politics, religion, and education, which should not be combined to prevent the consolidation of power”.⁵ Al-Kawakibi proposed a simple solution to this problem by asserting “let us manage our life and make religions govern only in the Hereafter”.⁶

Conclusion

The deliberate merging of the religious and political spheres is an ongoing issue in the Arab world that hinders any serious attempt to reform and improve the conditions in these countries. This volatile combination of religion and politics has become more prominent following the Arab Spring with the rise of Islamist groups throughout the region. Oppressive regimes often invoked religious discourse to create legitimacy for their rule. Additionally, Islamist groups have abused religion in order to corrupt politics and bolster their strength. The only way to achieve lasting reform in the Arab region is to recognize how Islamist groups employ religion to attain their objectives in order to undermine them.

Many Syrians subjected to the rule of the *de facto* Islamist authorities have begun to understand the falsified religious claims made by these groups. This growing number of Syrians has recognized that Islamist religious discourse is only a means of seducing and deceiving ordinary people to divert their attention from their real objectives. In fact, thousands of people throughout Syria participated in demonstrations denouncing these organizations which attests to the Syrians' unwillingness to accept a new form of tyranny. The uprisings against these groups could prove to be a first step towards a new political awareness among the faithful. However, it must be followed by the dismantling of all Islamist projects.

Some might argue that the Islamist extremists the Syrians protested against are different from moderate Islamists. While it is true that their priorities and their



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methods of achieving objectives are different, their end goals are the same. It is necessary to scrutinize the rhetoric employed by the moderate Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, to reject extremism. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood speaks about “a civil state with an Islamic reference”. While at first glance this statement appears to differ from the Islamist goal of completely merging politics and religion, there is still an insistence on a religious reference for a political project which will eventually lead to a “religious state”. The religious state “is the state that considers religion to be the basis of all spheres of life, including politics: it makes the religious authority fully absorb political power, supervises it, and uses it as it pleases”.⁷

It is necessary to be wary of combining religious and political discourse because the very nature of politics and religion juxtapose each other. Politics is a continuous process of change and evolution while religion is characterized with stability in its rules and epistemological authorities. In order to finally realize the goals of the Arab Spring, the merging politics and religion must cease immediately. This combination has facilitated the rise of Islamist groups and if it continues will only serve to replace one despot with another.



Endnotes

1. Sheikh Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood and the first theoretician of political Islam in the modern era, famously stated: “Islam is a doctrine and worship, a homeland and nationality, religion and state, spirituality and work, the Qur’an and the sword”.
2. Fadlallah would eventually become a source of religious inspiration for one of the most prominent embodiments of Shia political Islam, the Hezbollah movement and party in Lebanon.
3. See *A Dialogue on a Neutral Land* (in Arabic), al-Ahali Publishers Damascus, 1997, p75.
4. Fuad Kheir Beik, *From Epistemology to Society*, Ministry of Culture, Damascus, 2002, p 233.
5. Abdul Rahman al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Oppression*, Al-Maaref Publishers, Cairo, p 170, (Kawakibi, “The Nature of Oppression”).
6. Kawakibi, *The Nature of Oppression*, p143.
7. Nassif Nassar, *The Logic of Power: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Order* (in Arabic), Amwaj Publishers, Beirut, 2001, p148.



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