Global Futures of Political Islam

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Global Futures of Political Islam

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Political Islam—understood as a narrative, an ideology, and a political project, and used interchangeably with the term 'Islamism' throughout this report—seems to be at something of a crossroads today. The rising fortunes of Islamists in the immediate wake of the 2010-11 Arab Uprisings have seemingly receded or collapsed altogether, and the question of political Islam has become the focal point of a new geopolitical divide within the Middle East. Recent studies of Islamist movements seem to suggest that the younger members of these groups have widely varying understandings of what it means to be an Islamist today as they confront a dizzying array of voices and spaces (especially online) offering options for how to live an authentically Islamic life. And while the Arab world has long been viewed by many around the world as the center of gravity for Islamic activism, there seem to be growing signs that the Middle East no longer holds the attraction it once did as the most relevant reference point for Islamist thought and political action.

Between February and April 2021, the Hollings Center for International Dialogue held a series of virtual meetings that brought together approximately a dozen analysts, thought leaders, and scholar-activists whose own intellectual and professional journeys have allowed them to develop unique insight into the changing dynamics within Islamist movements and circles. The dialogue participants represented a wide range of regional perspectives, including the Middle East & North Africa, South Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America.

Over the course of three facilitated discussions and shaped by an iterative agenda —whereby key ideas and themes from each session helped to inform the issues engaged in subsequent meetings—the group explored a number of key questions that bear on the current status and possible futures of political Islam:

- What is Islamism today and what does it mean to be an "Islamist"? Is there a shared understanding of this term?
- What issues do Islamists view as their political priorities and to what extent does this vary between countries and regions? What unites them and what are the issues over which they differ?
- What are the most influential ideas shaping Islamist politics today?
- How do current political realities around the world factor in the development of Islamism as a political and intellectual project?

This snapshot report provides an analytical summary of the discussions, highlighting many of the key takeaways and some of the most thought-provoking interventions offered by the participants. Based on insights gleaned from the dialogues, the report also frames a number of key questions that bear significantly on the future of political Islam and which help to define an agenda for future discussion and research on the topic.

Variations in What is Meant and Understood by "Islamism"

Islamism has always been notoriously difficult to define. The problem of definition and labels grew as more Islamist actors took part on the global stage, claiming to speak on behalf of Islam or a socio-political interpretation of Islam. Fifty years ago, being an Islamist meant belonging either to the *Ikhwan* (Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt or the *Jamaat-e Islami* (JI) in the Indo-Pak subcontinent. Today, the Islamism in South Africa or France is very different from that in Egypt or Turkey. Moreover, different factions under the unified 'Islamist' rubric (such as the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, or the Gülen movement and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey) could be political adversaries, calling into question the validity of the very category.   While they are all animated by some understanding of Islamic justification, merely referencing Islam as part of one's political rhetoric or party program is not sufficient to make a political group or figure 'Islamist'. In Egypt for example, both the late Mohammed Morsi and current president Abdelfattah Sisi evoke Islam in their political platform.   In some other

contexts, it is simply not possible to be in politics without using *some* Islamic terminology.

Political Islam in the 20th century had roughly three foundational principles: rejection of the nation-state concept; subordination to central authority and Sharia as the supreme law of the land; and Islam as not only the main religion but a set of principles that penetrate social and economic life. It was also possible to see unifying threads among Islamists in terms of who their ideological nemeses were,

> "Those in the Muslim world who want to engage in politics, rooted in Islamic principles or based on their faith: this is my definition of political Islamists. But people in the region feel that they weren't involved in coining this term."
>
> Dialogue Participant

traditionally: secularism and Israel. Participants noted that none of these elements are universal definitions of present-day Islamism: many Islamist actors today have accepted working within secular democratic frameworks, do not explicitly have a platform for imposing Sharia, and do not preclude forming or working within political party systems.

Although the term has a heavy religious connotation, it is also possible to read Islamism as a post-colonial ideology, and a way of offering dissent in the postcolonial context. In the 1990s, identity politics and cultural symbols formed a subversive discourse that allowed space for Islamists. A participant described it as "people creating different modes of counter-citizenship that gives the concept its true meaning." One participant from Central Asia asserted that after decades of Soviet repression. Islamism became something of a lifestyle transformation for the youth, rather than a political posture. "Young people today are coming to Islamism not because they see a specific model, but rather see it as a symbol for something other than the prevailing status quo. They want to publicly express Islam, but are less willing to join a movement," he stated.

Muslim Brotherhood supporters protest in support of President Morsi in Egypt, June 2013. Image Source: Tom Bert.

Finally, a challenge that resonated with all participants of different backgrounds was the post 9/11 problem of conflating bona fide Islamic movements that operate within the constitutional frameworks of their governments with groups that use violence like Al Qaeda and ISIS. In the United States, the focus of the academic study of Islamism shifted from looking at heritage to counter-terrorism. There has also been a shift in terminology and who the label 'Islamist' is projected on to. As seen in many examples, most notably in Tunisia and Turkey, leaders emphasize 'Muslim-ness', and prefer the label 'Muslim democratic movement' instead of 'Islamism,' arguably to circumvent the securitized discourse around Islamism. A participant argued that the label was a constraint on the politics of these actors, as it was usually the media or the regimes that coined the term, and not the actual subjects. The lack of specificity in definition, thus, paves the way for a misinterpretation of motives, tactics, and ultimate objectives.

Variations in the regional experiences of Islamists

All Islamism is local. Wider implications of geography such as historical context as well as differences inside geographic regions are important to understand Islamist

groups as political actors. Even within countries Islamism differs from region to region, rural to urban. Regardless of these differences, is there an essence that shapes what Islamism has to say about current issues, and which determines a common trajectory for the entire gamut of political Islamists? While the dialogue ultimately aimed to respond to this question, participants referred to regional and national specificities that are crucial in understanding political Islam more comprehensively.

Central Asia

In the early 1900s, political Islam in the former USSR and Central Asia was developing fast. However, as political Islam institutionalized in other parts of the world, Soviet repression intensified. As a result, Islamism in Central Asia was cut off from the ideas and trends in political Islam elsewhere. After gaining independence, many Central Asian governments choose the easy way of banning and repressing Islamist political groups and parties, breeding the ground for violent expressions of political Islam. However, it is inevitable in Central Asian politics to have Islam as the anchor that holds various political platforms in place. As a participant put it, Islam is becoming an element of populist electoral politics. Muslim communities that are active in social life such as the Fethullah Gülen-affiliated *Hizmet* or *Tabligh-i Jamaat* are competitors to political parties.

Variations among the former Soviet republics are noteworthy in their approach to political Islam. Kyrgyzstan is usually seen as an island of democracy and it is the most tolerant and open in terms of the state's relationship to religion. There is a resilience in the Muslim population to radical, extremist ideas, because they can practice religion freely. Contrast that with Tajikistan, which has very strong anti-religious repression and has persecuted millions of people for alleged ties to the Muslim Brotherhood[1].

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[1] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tajikistan-islamist-idUSKBN1ZR1C5

South Asia

South Asia has had a long history of democratic institutions well before the division of the Indian subcontinent into two countries. Therefore, Islamic movements in South Asia have been involved in the constitutional democratic process right from the beginning. A participant familiar with the JI said that unlike countries of the Middle East where Islamists faced grave oppression, JI has been able to conduct meaningful opposition against the government, always remaining on the democratic, constitutional track. "This is perhaps the reason that we did not see a South Asian spring! Because we had the paths to be involved. We were part of the power corridor at the provincial or higher levels, and part of the government structures," he explained. Still, the political platform of JI in Pakistan is to establish an Islamic government, whereas in India the same group has to remain within the bounds of the secular system.

The same participant further observed that the challenges facing JI today are more internal than external. "We are still looking for an idealistic form of Islamic government. Many people inside the movement are realizing we should adapt to the new realities, modify our narrative and organizational structures. Our organizational structure was suitable for the last century. People are not comfortable with a strict, puritan form of an Islamist political party. They want a slightly liberal structure. As far as our narrative is accepted by society we don't have to be in power. Even with the few members in parliament we can shape national, political discourse."

Southeast Asia

Post-Suharto national ideology in the Indonesian context was embodied in Islamism. There is now a clear polarization between Islamists and non-Islamists; and Islamism is seen as an export of the Middle East, in that it is equated with radicalism, anti-pluralism, etc. as well as being perceived as the enemy to local traditions. The perceived hegemony of Middle Eastern Islamist movements eclipses other groups' (like JI) influence. Islamists in Indonesia try to position themselves as part of the national identity, rather than construct Islamism as a

distinct political identity. They tend to be more realist and pragmatic, which has gained them trust.

North Africa

The two important cases to examine when discussing the plight of Islamism are the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Tunisian *Ennahda*.   While both have ascended to power after the 2011 Arab Uprisings, the Brotherhood was ousted by a military coup, and more recently, *Ennahda* was sidelined by Tunisia's president who seized governing powers. At the dialogue, participants who were close observers of these groups shared anecdotes and

> "In some places, Islamist parties reconciling with the state means they lose their position as the alternative. I think the challenge for the members is, how to make compromises but not lose the end-goal of being an alternative politically, economically and socially."
>
> Dialogue Participant

analyses that shine a light on the status quo and trajectory of the Brotherhood and *Ennahda*.

In Tunisia *Ennahda* started as a *dawa*-based organization, and it developed its own Tunisia-specific intellectual identity built on a theory of how Islam and democracy can work together. *Ennahda*'s development within a highly secular framework was both a constraint but also helped it to move beyond ideological boundaries through dialogue with non-Islamic parties and other secular actors. A participant observed that "Tunisian Islamist identity positioned itself in the national reformist tradition rather than in a transnational pan-Islamist ideology," which helped it, in a way, to challenge center politics, despite having am more revolutionary character. Consequently, and as different from the closely-related Egyptian experience, Islamists in Tunisia moved to a more comfortable position, and in fact, were criticized by youth for "ascending to eliteship" because they are seen to be part of the system now.

Indonesian Muslims during *Eid el-Fitr* prayer in Jakarta, Indonesia. Image Source: Adobe Stock

For the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the organization and building a strong political apparatus was the main mission for many years, and it came at the expense of ideology. A participant familiar with the organization, stated that the leadership was drawing ideological inspiration from their exile experiences from the 1960s and 70s, while the younger members were debating the legacy of Hassan Albanna. "The revolution happened, and the Brotherhood's ideas were not revolutionary as they should be," the participant noted.   Another participant remembered his observations from the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprisings: "Brotherhood youngsters were protesting the Brotherhood leadership in the streets for not joining the revolutionaries."

Islamists as individuals are facing a very new situation: for the first time in their history, Egyptian Islamists are feeling alienated from society and the public sphere. They're facing new challenges from the diaspora, which is affecting their ideologies and world view. In power, Islamists didn't have much difference from previous rulers.

Sahel & West Africa

Commenting about the Sahel and West Africa contexts, a participant noted that Muslim societies still have a strong relationship to religion and they want to live within the requirements of their religion. Negative perceptions of Islamism have more to do with the specific experiences of certain groups in politics, rather than ideological reasons. The experience of the Brotherhood made it clear that when in politics Islamists are like any other actor: they can perform well but they can also do the things that they were fighting against before they started practicing politics. They can perform poorly or show an authoritarian character. They can accept and support corrupt people. The participant resolved that nonetheless the Arab uprisings were an inspiration to Islamists elsewhere: "since 2011, over 20 Salafi political organizations have been established from the fresh air brought by the Arab Spring, which persuaded the Salafis that it is possible to make change through political participation," he added.

Elaborating on the future of Islamist politics, the participant proposed four criteria, which he observed were key in young people's tendencies to support or mobilize for political parties: do they vouch for democracy or theocracy? Are they supportive of authoritarianism? Do they favor deep, genuine change, or will they settle for cosmetic reforms? Do they support violence? The participant further argued that in the near future, new parties with no reference to Islam will emerge in this region.

Turkey

Turkey has a rich Islamist tradition, dating back to the *Milli Görüş,* but the shape political Islam has taken in the past two decades, especially after the Arab spring, has been a new test of power within Islamists in Turkey. Never in Turkish republican history had a conservative party been in power as the single party in government before 2002. In the twenty years of its rule, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has *become* the state, a participant posited. Some have

called this a silent revolution, which was complete with the constitutional changes that passed with a referendum in 2010. But now, Islamists as well as others criticize the AKP for a backsliding Turkish democracy and repression of dissent. A participant used this example to assert that there can be Muslim political positions that are not Islamist, and even anti-Islamist, such as Sufi groups in Turkey, which have a more conservative Islamic-rooted ideology. Some other participants underlined the significance of AKP's experience for other political Islamist actors, especially in the Middle East and North Africa.

Current State of Islamism & Challenges Facing the Project of Political Islam

Depending on their geographical location, legal and political status, and whether they are in power / government or not, the big-ticket questions Islamists are trying to answer range from sectarianism, civil war, and regime oppression to economic justice, civil rights, and immigration. Participants agreed that conditions across the board for Islamist politics are grim. In addition to the constraints posed by the label 'Islamism,' and the geographical variances in the application of political Islam in real terms, participants pointed to other challenges: structure, regime oppression, double standards, and representation.   Several participants of different backgrounds alluded to recent debates within the political Islamist organizations they are familiar with on whether to prioritize building a social movement or a party. A Tunisian participant drew the distinction between the two as the latter being politically strategic and the former focusing on ideological integrity. Another participant elaborated on the question: "Are we talking about a political project, a social project or an ideological paradigm?" he asked.   Another participant responded, pointing to another major challenge for the project of political Islam: "It's difficult to navigate and research when you have a context where there is rule by fear and violence perpetuated by the state. This is the case in many countries where political Islam has a presence."

A third challenge participants pointed to was double standards. Islamists are held to a different set of criteria than other political actors. The implied connection of

the political and the moral creates high expectations for Islamist leaders and groups to adhere to. Internal conflicts happen in every single political party, and yet when Islamists cannot agree on policies or even principles, they are blamed with being inconsistent. Ambiguities that exist within the Islamist movement are ambiguities that exist within society. As noted by a participant, there is popular demand for a moral and Islamic framework, but when the details of that political project are mapped out, that is when problems arise.

> "The question I am often confronted with when I discuss with anti-Islamist people is that they say you are only in it to gain power. So I say, what is wrong with that? Isn't everyone part of a political process to win as many seats in parliament? The thing I find problematic is that [...] when [Islamists] face people who are corrupt, who lie, yet they play clean, we accuse them of being naïve! When they play by the rules of the game, we accuse them being unethical and liars."
>
> Dialogue Participant

Finally, participants noted that no particular single person or group should be understood to represent or speak for the heterogenous whole that is Islamism. A participant living in the UK mentioned that debates around political Islam in that country tend to focus on the Muslim Brotherhood, when the Brotherhood does not even have an organized presence there. Analysis on political Islam, thus, needs to delineate the specific actor(s) involved.

Factors Shaping the Future of Political Islam & A Research Agenda

Is a contemporary political theology outside of Islamism possible? Can there be a contemporary Islamic theology that is not consumed by contemporary capitalism? How do we conceive of an Islamic political activism outside of Islamism?   In the political realm, this depends on how Islamists relate to the current structure of the state such as electoral politics. The question of whether Islamists have a different conception of statehood based on Islam still stands.   A participant complained,

"Islamist political thought nowadays becomes a study of Islamists. No ideological preparation for the questions of the day. No equivalent of Lenin's *What is to Be Done?*"

In many ways the evolution of Islamism is defined through the constraints and the violence that Islamists face in their various contexts. When Islamist groups disintegrate as a result of state oppression, what happens to the people that are affiliated with this project? A participant citing the example of the Muslim Brotherhood said she has no hope that the ideological tenets of the movement are strong enough to keep it sympathizers together. She continued: "People were attracted to the Islamist ideology for many reasons that they saw disintegrate early on in the revolution. The question to me is - Is Islam going to play a role in their political ideation later on and if so, what shape will it take?"

Opining on the future of Islamism necessitates deliberation on various questions that the participants pointed out, including:

- If political Islam or Islamism is a misnomer, what is the new lexicon that can capture the principles and values of these groups and movements?
- What are the experiences of women and youth with political Islam?
- How are different groups positioning themselves within political systems in their countries?
- How are Islamists responding to the pressing issues (such as economic justice, environment, immigration, etc) in their respective contexts?
- If political Islam continues to be shaped by 'the other', what are the uniting values and principles for Islamists around the world?

> ""Islamism doesn't put money in people's pockets, or food on the table. As a political party if you want people to vote for you, you need to be the most practical and the closest to people's needs. Democracy was the state of things, which put us in a position where we needed to reshape our relationship with Islam."
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> Dialogue Participant