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ENGAGING WITH ISLAMISTS: A NEW AGENDA FOR THE POLICY COMMUNITY

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Engaging with Islamists: A new agenda for the policy community

Mona Kanwal Sheikh

How Western governments should engage Islamists who have been democratically elected, or represent the social fabric of the societies from which they come, is a question that has been discussed in different policy fora for years - particularly since Hamas' sweeping victory in the Palestinian elections of 2006. In public debates this discussion however has been overshadowed by the preoccupation with militant Islamism, and the means and measures implemented to combat the threat of Islamist terrorism. Now, more than a decade after 9/11 the center of gravity in the public debates is seemingly shifting from the question of how to combat militant Islamism to the question of how to engage with those branches of Islamism that are increasingly willing to engage in democratic processes. For Western governments and the international donor community taking a position on those Islamist groups that embrace democracy has been full of challenges. Although these movements may embrace democracy, how does that measure up against the values of liberal politics and international human rights?

Two contemporary developments have brought this question to the forefront. First, the Arab Spring that has forced four dictators from power simultaneously brought Islamists to power in both Egypt and Tunisia. Second, the past couple of years have seen a shift in US policy towards the question of engaging with the Afghan Taliban, presumably based on the recognition that there might be no way around a future scenario where the Taliban become part of a coalition government in Afghanistan. For Western governments and the international donor community engaging with Islamist power holders demands a deeper insight into the existing variety of Islamisms, and breaking with some of the stereotypes that sometimes dominate public debates on Islamism. It is not self-evident what is meant by 'they want sharia' or 'they want to reinstall Islamic authenticity,' though it might trigger the sound of doomsday trumpets in public debates around the world. This brief will illuminate some of the main differences and characteristics of the Muslim Brotherhood in

Egypt and the Afghan Taliban in order to highlight some important insights when engaging with Islamists. These two cases will help illuminate that there can be great variation in the practical political consequences that the different Islamist movements draw from the core idea that Islam is a holistic ideology, a total way of life, and particularly relevant for public and political life.

What is Islamism?

The question of what defines Islamism can be answered from different angles: The political relevance of the question lies in the political practice that one can expect from Islamists if they are in a position of power. Besides the principal position of wanting to expand the space for religion in state and society, are there any signs of foreseeable issues that Islamists in power would fight for and put on their agenda? The two cases – presented below – cast some light on this question, and basically illuminate that there is no fixed scheme for Islamist politics. Yet, there are important issues that trigger controversy under Islamist reign: Issues of minority and women's rights, freedom of speech and the role and interpretation of sharia.

Another way of demarcating Islamism is more ideological – that is looking at the theological and philosophical tenants of Islamist movements. However the ideological approach needs to be paired with a sharp focus on political practice in order to avoid static perceptions of what can be expected from Islamists embracement of sharia and references to authentic Islam.

Islamism is far from a uniform phenomenon. The common denominators of the various Islamisms is mainly the view that Islam is relevant for all aspects of life, particularly the public and political, and that contemporary circumstances call for reinstalling the lost authenticity or authority of Islam. Characteristic of the manner in which Islamists legitimize their ideology is the reference to a golden Islamic past that they want to reconstruct. Their notion of authentic Islam relates to the period under the rule of Prophet Muhammad and the four 'rightly guided' Caliphs who acted as the political authorities in the immediate period of time after the prophet's death.

The term Islamism typically covers a number of groups, associations, and movements critical of earlier Islamic reform movements dominating the nineteenth century. These reform movements also

wanted to re-install the lost authenticity of Islam, but the discourse of Islamic reformism which was most notably articulated by thinkers such as Jalal Al-Din Al-Afghani (1837-1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), was later criticized by Islamist groups for having co-opted the 'Western agenda'. Islamism thus arose in reaction to the modernity discussions that Al-Afghani and Abduh among others raised, but replaced the reform discourse influenced by the Western enlightenment with the slogan 'Islam deen wa dawla': Islam is both religion and polity. Hence Islamism came to represent an antithesis to the view that secularization of society and politics is the only modern option, and is in fact best understood as a child of modernity.

In practice, the political attitudes of Islamists differ greatly: they range from those who work within existing political systems to anti-polity revolutionaries, from open memberships to secret cells, from democratic to totalitarian. Few sub-currents of Islamism work towards the aim of creating an Islamic state or reinstalling the caliphate - instead the aim of Islamizing society through the spiritual empowerment and education of the individual has been the objective of many influential Islamist movements. This is both true for the 'classical' Salafi movement and the 'classical' Deoband movement as I will describe below.

Under closer inspection, a world of difference in strategy, interpretation and agendas appears within the variety of movements that makes up Islamism, splitting the ranks and probably disillusioning those who long for a united Islamic utopia. Just as it is mistaken to represent modern Western politics as uniformly secular, Islamist policies are not uniformly theocratic. This is why a move away from the stereotypical image of Islamism requires a case-by-case evaluation of the particular movements in question.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Salafism

The Muslim Brotherhood (Jamaat Al-Ikwan Al-Muslimin, MB) was established in 1928 by one of the so-called chief ideologues of Islamism, Hassan Al-Banna. He prescribed a regiment of Islamic activism and renewed commitment to revitalize Islam in face of political paralysis under conditions of colonialism. The MB was one of the largest and most influential Sunni political movements in the 20th century, and became the first mass-based political movement

to oppose the ascendancy of secular ideas in the Middle East. Its popularity grew in tact with the failures of the socialist project of Gamel Abdel Nasser and his profound advancement of pan-Arab nationalism – a failure that culminated with the Israeli victory in the Six-Day War in 1967.

By the early 1950s branches emerged in Syria, Sudan, and Jordan. Soon the movement's influence would also be felt in the Gulf and non-Arab countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia. During the 1930s, the MB changed from being a movement for spiritual and moral reform into an organization that wanted to participate on the Egyptian political scene. Since then the MB has remained a significant force in the politics and civil societies of several Arab countries, though it has periodically been banned or marginalized from political participation. Particularly from the 1970s onwards it has mainly been associated with non-violence, while before the 1970s the movement had members involved in violence and assassinations of political opponents; most notably the former Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmoud an-Nukrashi Pasha.

The MB is a good example of a movement which has undergone a change in its attitude towards political participation. It started as a civil society organization; which saw as its primary objective the proselyting of authentic Islam through educative activities – only by reviving Islam on the individual level would the opposition against colonialism and secularism be successful. The movement was initially focused on strengthening civil society, and thus had a bottom-up approach to change in the polity. The interpretation of Islam as a holistic ideology was primarily reflected in the MB's engagement with service-delivery: it raised schools, shelters, and hospitals and even launched commercial enterprises.

The MB's orientation towards the state later became a dimension of their holistic approach to Islam. The movement has a considerable political influence today, and in terms of legitimacy it has powerful actors in the NGO communities of Egypt, Jordan and Sudan. With the revolts of the Arab spring, the MB movements gained considerable parliamentarian influence: the present Egyptian president, Mohamed Morsi, representing the MB founded Freedom and Justice Party, and the MB-inspired Tunisian Ennahda, which gained around 37 percent of the vote in the elections following the revolt.

The Egyptian MB's participation in democratic politics and political pragmatism from the 1970s onwards has triggered condemnation from more 'radical' proponents of Islamism, who perceive them to be too moderate. In an Egyptian context, those who are known as the MB and the Salafis respectively, represent different political attitudes, the former being more politically pragmatic. This is important to note, because even though there are theological overlaps (see the textbox) the Salafi and the MB have developed into competing political trends in the Egyptian political landscape.

Until the recent elections in Egypt the Salafis were mainly known as those who saw democracy and democratic participation to be a harmful innovation [bida], which is in line with the view that Islam lost strength once it co-opted practices that were not adopted by the early Muslims. The fact that the Salafi al-Nour controlled an estimated quarter of the seats in the Egyptian parliament before the parliament was dissolved by the army in 2012, reflects that attitudes towards innovations in religious practices can change over time. This also means that ideology should never be approached in a vacuum, but rather seen in relation to how actors interpret and apply it in practice in a given context.

Broadly speaking the Salafis in Egypt are today represented in three main groups: the Ikhwani Salafis, the new political Salafis of the al-Nour party and the more puritan Salafis who maintain that engaging in democratic processes are not compatible with the belief in God as the ultimate sovereign. The views of the al-Nour party are more conservative than those of the Freedom and Justice Party: for example they have argued that only a Muslim male should be the president of Egypt, and they believe in a strict application of Hudud laws - punishment laws sanctioning stoning and whipping for particular crimes. Since Egypt for the first time in its history elected a parliament dominated by Islamists, the question of what will be the political consequences of these newly empowered Islamists — led by the MB — is often posed. Yet, there are no clear signs of the political consequences of this majority situation. Despite the fact that the Egyptian president Morsi on 2012 issued a controversial decree granting him new powers, it is not obvious that it is his Islamist roots that explain such undemocratic steps. In an Egyptian context the secular opposition pushed for dissolving the democratically elected

parliament and supported the army in taking equally undemocratic measures.

The heated debates that led to the new Egyptian constitution in the constitutional assembly where both the MB and al-Nour dominate can only point at the issues that are in the public limelight, due to the new Islamist power holders: issues such as blasphemy, the role of sharia and the rights of women and minorities. Even though sharia remains mentioned as part of the new constitution in order for the islamists to signal that no laws are passed in contravention to the principles of sharia, this still does not reveal how this would actually affect the lives of the ordinary Egyptians. The same is true for the issues of free speech and the rights of women and minorities, because it will ultimately depend on how the courts and legislators will read these kinds of sharia provisions in the future. Even though there has been disagreement in the constitutional assembly about whether the constitution should refer to sharia rules instead of sharia principles, sharia principles were mentioned in the constitution valid under the regime of Hosni Mubarak also. Hence how the actual implementation of the abstract principles will be remains the most important question.

The Talibs and the Deobands

The case of the Taliban is very different from the case of the MB in Egypt – yet it presently raises some of the same questions and dilemmas. Reconciliation attempts with the Afghan Taliban point towards a future scenario where the Taliban will form part of government and be in a situation of power sharing. Whether that project will be possible is yet to be seen, but in any case – from the viewpoint of Western governments – it again demands a difficult balancing act between principles of democracy and representation and liberal values.

The Taliban is a movement with roots in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ideologically and in practice, the Taliban remains a unique movement that has no real precedent for Islamist ideas and movements. Unlike other Islamist movements that appeared in the 20th century – the Taliban has never been a strong ideological/intellectual movement. While Islamic revivalism in Muslim countries was often based on a history of scholarly debate and writing, the Taliban leaders and

Ikhwanism and Salafism

Ikhwanism is a variant of Salafism– if it is defined through theology and jurisprudence rather than through political practice. Like Islamism, Salafism is a very broad category. It signals that the adherents identify with the al-Salaf (the pious ancestors) - a reference to the early companions of Prophet Muhammad. This is reflective of the claim to authenticity that characterizes Islamist movements. Particular to Salafism, including the Ikhwani variant, is that it is based on a specific interpretational approach to the Quran, namely the Athari (meaning following the narrations) that dates back to the fifteenth century. The Athari approach is an anti-thesis to what in Muslim tradition is defined as theology or kalam: dialectics and speculative philosophy. A central tenant of Salafism is thus that it is based on axiomatic and literalist interpretations of the Quran and the hadith literature (narrations on the deeds and words of Prophet Muhammad), and that it rejects the theological exercise of reasoned inquiry and argumentation. Thus it is important to be aware that being a Salafi contains a normative claim about being an authentic or true Muslim, more than it is a value-neutral category. There is a tendency among some observers to take the Salafi claim to authenticity as given and thus portray them to be more authentic or religious Muslims than others.

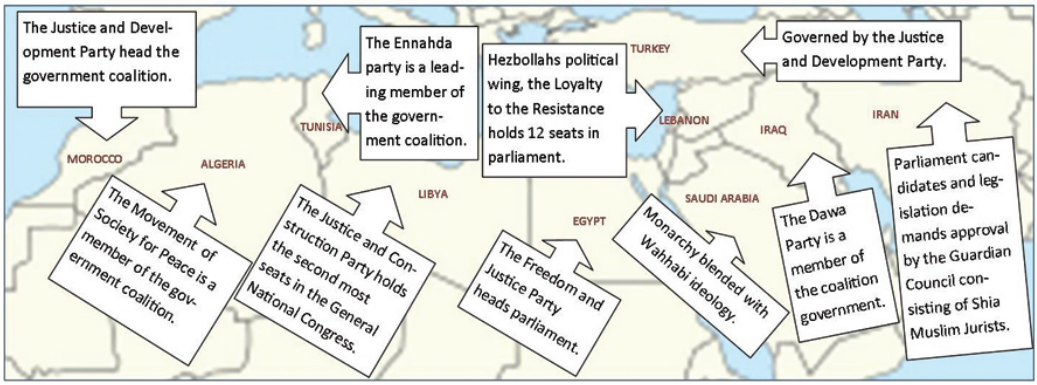
Some Salafis deny to follow all forms of taqlid, defined as interpretations originating from the four Sunni Muslim schools of jurisprudence (the Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi, and Hanbali), while those among them who do follow a school of jurisprudence often follow the Hanbali, also known for its most literalist interpretation of the religious sources. Jihadi variants of Salafism, al-Qaeda being the most notable example, belong to those who reject taqlid, thus reflecting a practice that claim to go directly to the sources. Many observers have noted that these interpretations are often very 'creative' and reflect a significant deviance from orthodox interpretations of warfare, because they do not recognize the legalist constrains on militant jihad.

followers were and are poorly educated as regards the corpus of Islamic studies. The movement is often linked to outright criminal networks, smugglers, and gangs, though with an active 'Islamic' vocabulary. Characteristic for the Talibs is that they do not have any religious manifesto or intellectual/ideological statement as their foundation. By their political actions they have generally asserted themselves in few, yet controversial, areas. First, since their inception in the 1990s the 'original' Taliban embraced an interpretation of sharia propagating a conservative view of true Muslim moral behavior cleansed of 'bad' influences, especially from TV and music (including cultural influences from the west). Second, they promoted a conservative view of what constitutes the appropriate dress code for females in public (the burka), and some but not all of the sub-groups are fierce opponents of female education and the participation of females in public and/or political life because they find it obstructive of tradi-

tional gender roles and family patterns. In Pakistan they created parallel 'justice systems' that signal zero tolerance towards criminals who do not follow the Taliban interpretation of sharia. Their use of stoning, whipping, and amputation of body parts are elements of their ideas about efficient justice and have been one of their main means to push towards a Taliban order. Thus cultural purification, gender roles, and efficient justice- and punishment systems are some of the main issues that are and have been on the Taliban agenda, both during their reign in Afghanistan between 1994 and 2001, and also in the tribal areas of Pakistan that they have seized since 2004.

The Taliban initially started out as an idealist reform movement to change the way that the ex-mujahedeen and warlords were mismanaging their power by fighting each other. They introduced the idea of divine law as the guarantor of peace and order, and thus pushed forward a highly legalist and formalist concept of sharia, which they placed at the very heart of Islam. The original Taliban were a group of student activists ('Talib' means student, from which the movement took its name) who were refugees from the Cold War scene in Afghanistan. Many of them started studies at the religious seminaries in the border area inside Pakistan, and the core of the foot soldiers went to Afghanistan and organized around Mullah Omar. The equivalence between Islam, the legalist concept of sharia, and its concrete implementation was their simple and relatively successful idea of how to unite a country that was divided along the lines of differences defined by affiliation to particular tribes, ethnic groups and clans.

In the context of Pakistan the Taliban (namely the Tehrike Taliban Pakistan) side with those religio-political movements that are critical towards the state due to its failure to live up to what they see as its constitutionally bound religious commitments, namely the implementation of sharia. In fact, the processes of 'talibanization' in Pakistan can be seen as attempts to co-opt the state at the local level. Hence the Pakistani Taliban has developed an identity and battle that is different from that of the Afghan Taliban, though they are allied in their resistance against the invasion of Afghanistan. Within the Sunni branch of Islam, most Talibs follow the Hanafi School of jurisprudence like the majority of Muslims in Pakistan and Afghanistan (though parts of their jihad-discourses arguably deviate from classical



Islamist power holders in the Middle East

interpretations of the conduct of jihad). However, the Taliban also belong to the Deoband school of thought, which is ideologically a limited local/regional (Indian/Pakistani/Afghan) phenomenon that does not emerge in the same form other parts of the world. Together with the Barelvi (constituting approx. 60% of the Pakistani population) and the Ahl Hadith (constituting approximately 4%), the Deoband (constituting approx 15%) is one of the three dominant interpretational trends in Pakistan.

The name Deoband originally designates a city in India where an influential religious seminary tradition was initially established by the Darul Uloom Deoband. The theological position of the Deobands has been heavily influenced by the 18th century Muslim reformer Shah Wali Allah, who addressed what he saw as the moral degeneration reflected, among other things, in the increasing superstition among Indian Muslims, by approaching metaphysical issues with a rational interpretation. In contrast to the anti-theological stand of the Salafis, the Deobands are followers of systematic theology [maturidi], which grants human reason more space than some of the competing trends. Although they share the Salafis' critique of Western influence and the call to authenticity, the Deobands are strict believers in taqlid (imitation or adherence to prior legal rulings).

The religious scholars [ulama] related to the Deoband seminary in British India were concerned with the encroachment of Western culture, and called for resistance through adherence to authentic

Islamic values and rejection of customary practices that they believed had watered down true Islam. Like the puritan Salafis, the Deobands were not originally oriented towards the state, and still most remain focused on issues of spiritual education and missionary work.

The Taliban differs from the classical Deoband movement because they are political revolutionists. With the establishment of Pakistan in 1947 the Deoband movement was divided and only a minority joined the political project of Pakistan – the majority remained focused on the non-state project of spiritual education [tarbiyyat] and had the bottom-up approach like the Muslim Brotherhood in its early period. Within Pakistan, the Deoband movement is mainly represented by the Jamaate Ulamae Islam, which is a political party that – like many other islamist movements - has affiliated religious seminaries and undertakes social service functions. The Pakistani Taliban has roots in this movement but after the invasion of neighboring Afghanistan in 2001, and particularly between 2004 and 2007 it became an independent force that has embraced violence and defines itself in opposition to the Pakistani government and democracy.

Islamism and democracy

One of the main reasons why the Taliban initially had success in Afghanistan was that they represented a Pashtun force (Pashtun is an ethnic denomination and characteristic of the majority of the Afghans), and thus were an anchored part of the social fabric of the Afghan society. The case of the Taleban and the recent talks about reconciliation and re-integration of the Afghan Taleban into a future Afghan government raises some of the same questions that the case of the MB, and the al-Nour party's parliamentarian influence in Egypt: What would their policies be, and what dilemmas would it raise for Western governments trying to balance the dual objectives of democratic rule and liberal values. It also illuminates – like the case of the MB and the al-Nour party in Egypt – that political and religious positions can change over time. The Taliban movement has among other things changed in its position towards peace deals and reconciliation, by establishing an office in Doha in 2012 from where negotiations can take place. It is still to be seen how they would function in a potential future situation where they are forced to share power with other shareholders of the Afghan society.

The situation in which Western governments and the international donor community need to balance democracy and liberal values, raises a dilemms with several dimensions. At the heart of the dilemma is how to engage with Islamist movements that have democratic legitimacy, but draw extensively on religion in areas that a Western enlightenment discourse is cleansed from religious reasoning – thus causing discomfort. One dimension of this dilemma is the fact that some Islamist movements – like the MB and the Taliban - have at times engaged in violence. Another issue that often comes up in debates on engaging with Islamists is their attitude toward minorities and women: two issues that are widely regarded as the basic tenets of liberal democratic politics. Though Islamists do not promote uniform policies, Islamism has mostly manifested itself as conservative towards the role of women in public life and restrictive towards the rights of religious minorities. A third issue that is reinforcing the dilemma is whether Islamists embrace the idea that religious authority should have a veto on the democratic process. In 2007, the MB in Egypt for example suggested the establishment of a higher council of religious scholars to evaluate government decisions according to Islamic law. In the present Egyptian context the question of what role the Al-Azhar University is going to play in deciding what counts as sharia in Egypt remains open, and overall it points at the presence of a 'fourth' power to be considered vis-à-vis the traditional three powers of state government.

This constellation is among other places known from Pakistan, where the Sharia courts have occasionally played such a role, and from the political setup in Iran after the revolution. In these instances the presence of Islamist groups have advocated boundaries on democratic decisions, and thus also accentuated the question of whether Islamists – if in a position of power – would accept pluralism to the standards set up by Western governments and decision- makers.

It is however impossible to give clear prognoses of the policy outcome of Islamists in power. Both in the case of Egypt and the scenario of a future Afghan coalition government with the Taliban, policy outcomes depend on compromise and negotiations among different power holders where Islamists are only one part. In the democratic processes and in coalition situations Islamists like any other party have no special advantage, even if they refer to the

ultimate political authority of God, and insist that they advocate this authority. In any case the practical implementation of laws is the only area where consequences of Islamists in power would be felt if they differ from the implementation under secular predecessors.

Rules for differentiating between variants of Islamism

For Western governments and the international donor community the dual criteria of theological/jurisprudential orientation and political practice are instructive, when disentangling the complex landscape of Islamism. Expanding on this, three important rules can be derived from this brief overview:

1. The theological/jurisprudential orientation of Islamist movements can never stand alone as a criterion for categorizing the various strands of Islamism, since ideological commensurability does not translate into concerted political practice. When using the criteria of democracy, the Salafism of the MB in Egypt is in practice different from the al-Nour Party variant, and the more puritan variant that completely rejects democratic participation as religiously legitimate. This is why analyses of contemporary Islamist movements need to carefully evaluate what practical consequences different groups and movements draw from their ideological commitment to an authentic Islamic past.
2. Islamist claims to authenticity do not make them more religious, if we imagine there is such thing as a neutral barometer of religiosity. To perceive Islamists as being more religious than competing practices of Islam helps to confirm their claims of authenticity and marginalizes other manifestations of Islam that are not based on the same sort of exclusivist religiosity. This is important to note because we risk – involuntarily – engaging in a battle over the right manifestation of Islam if we do not approach the Islamist claim to authenticity critically.
3. Islamist movements can change over time and they splinter. Though typologies can be instructive, any particular subcurrent of Islamism should not be addressed a-historically. The MB started as a reform movement, was engaged in violent revolution for a limited period of time, and it is some

places known for being a political pragmatic movement. The Salafi groups in Egypt were prior to the last Egyptian elections known to be anti-democracy, considering parliamentarian engagement to be a harmful innovation. The al-Nour party's participation in recent elections reflects that their concept of bida has recently changed, and the change in context, i.e. the fall of the dictator and the prospects for influence, led to a change in their attitude towards democracy. Even though the Taliban genealogy can be traced back to the Deobands, the majority of the Deobands in India does not share the political revolutionism of the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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