

## Egypt and Syria: Islamism as a Functioning Political Ideology

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*By examining recent conflicts in both Egypt and Syria, this paper examines whether or not Islamism has the potential to serve as a functioning political ideology. Through Middle Eastern countries previous attempts to Islamize politics, the existence of militant/radical Islamists, and western countries stereotyping of Islam, this paper argues that though Islamism cannot be ruled out as a valid political ideology; it is currently unable to be a functioning political ideology due to the fact that previous attempts to make Islamism the main political ideology have led to hindrance of democracy and violent uprisings across the Middle East that has yet to pacify.*

### Introduction

Though Islamism has the potential to be a functioning political ideology, based on the current events in Egypt and Syria it is not a viable political option. Political scholars identified Islamism as one of the most powerful ideological movements and also a great source of conflict for the Middle East (Stein, 2014: 149). Though it is a known fact that certain forms of conflict can be healthy in fostering appropriate competitive and strong relationships, it is clear that the conflicts in Egypt and Syria are not healthy, politically or otherwise. There have been previous attempts to make political Islam dominant, attempts that have only led to authoritarianism and further violent conflicts across the Middle East. This paper will use opposing views to conclude that Islamism, given the current political state of these countries, would not be able to serve as a functioning political ideology.

Before this paper continues it is important to address the difference between Islam and Islamism/political Islam. Islam is the religion that Muslim people follow and Islamism (used interchangeably with the term political Islam) is forcing Islam upon society. This paper is not an argument against Islam as a religion but is rather an analysis of the possibility of Islamism being a functioning political ideology. Much of this paper is focused on post-Arab Spring events and how those coupled with western imaginations of Islamism have prescribed political Islam as ineffectual.

## Islamism After the Arab Spring

The rule of Islam and its practice refers to how people should devote themselves to God's truth and that the law of God should be the law that governs people (Khan, 2016: 27). It is not that different from other religious affiliations in that the practice of religion includes being obedient to a higher power. In contemporary Islamist politics there are two forms that are the most widely recognized: radical Islamism and conservative Islamism. Salwa Ismail, Professor of Middle Eastern politics at the University of London, describes radical Islamism as the kind we frequently hear about on the news: violent and all about using Islam as an agent of aggressive social change. Comparatively, conservative Islamism uses existing institutions to preserve political norms while "Islamizing" society (Ismail, 2003: 28). She also notes a stark difference in ideology. Radical Islamism associates with a rejection of society and describes it as *jahiliyya*, which roughly translates to "an ignorance of Islam or God" and the conservative counterparts ideological foundation is pulled from public tradition regarding the practice of religion (28-29).

### Egypt and the Arab Spring

In 2011, the Egyptian military sought to approve various constitutional amendments using Islamism as the main agent of change. For Islamists, this was great because it would increase the Islamist voice by bringing their values to the forefront of the constitution (Brown, 2013: 47). Further elections resulted in an Islamist majority with Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood (an organization that advocates for the application of Muslim ideals at various social, economic, and political levels of society) being elected president. However, non-Islamists were fearful because they felt that Islamists were trying to gain a majority in order to push their political agenda, not with the goal of being the voice of the people (54). Islamist discourses in Egypt are very authoritarian. In 2011, Egypt began to experience an abundance of large-scale protests against authoritarian rule that continued after the Arab Spring and deflated the idea that Islamism could ever mollify Egypt. On July 3, 2013, President Morsi was forcibly removed from his position which not only signified the unsuccessful attempt to make Islamism a functioning political ideology but also Egypt's failure to transition into a democratic state.

Despite the unraveling of a potentially democratic government, that does not mean it is the fault of the Muslim Brotherhood or Islamism as a whole. Political scholar Ashraf El Sherif (2011) argues that Islamist groups are in fact assisting countries all over the Middle East with their transition to democracy because they are encouraging participation from those that participate in the religion of Islam. He says ex-radical/militant Islamist groups are active participants in Egypt's electoral process and that the democratization process as a whole gives Islamist reformists the opportunity to meet their long-term goals (El Sherif, 2011: 358-359). However, despite the fact that it was not the Muslim Brotherhood's fault that democracy crumbled or that Islamism does have place in the political realm, it does not mean that it can serve as a functioning political ideology. It is impossible to ignore that Islamism has been and continues to be a source of localized and international conflict.

The fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt showed that when faced with forms of counter-mobilization, the appeal of Muslim groups dissipates (Stein, 2014: 151). Egypt's failure to transition was not that the Muslim Brotherhood was antidemocratic, but rather the fact that their

interpretations of democracy were skewed after years of authoritarian rule (Brown, 2013: 50, 57). Their downfall was not realizing people's deep opposition to their role in politics. A key argument presented by a lot of scholars in the field is that Islamism has become hegemonic not because it projects the values of the people, but because the Egyptian military has been projecting it on the country since the 1950s (Stein, 2014: 151). This downfall coupled with the failure of the Arab Spring thrust Egypt into the grey zone, specifically in the form of dominant power politics. This showed that not all attempts to abandon authoritarianism lead to a democratic outcome. Dominant power politics describe countries with real political space that have basic institutional democracy but are dominated by one leader/party; have a dependent judiciary; and consist of regimes characterized by fraudulent elections, low levels of participation, and corruption. Much of the Middle Eastern States, including Egypt, meet these requirements.

### Political Evolution in Syria

In 1963, the socialist Ba'ath Party was in power in Syria and in 1964 they banned the Islamic movement. The Muslim Brotherhood was a source of heavy opposition and declared Ba'ath policies to be an enemy of their values. In 1970, the Assad regime took over and conflicts began arising out of political repression, an unfortunately regular practice at the time. In March of 2011, Syria experienced the beginnings of a revolt against the Assad regime. This sparked what it is referred to as the Syrian Revolution that lasted for approximately two years. The defining features of this revolution were the fact that there was no military or political resolution following the various uprisings, and, the constant Islamisation of the revolution (Cepoi, 2013: 549).

In her article "The Rise of Islamism in Contemporary Syria: From Muslim Brotherhood to Salafi-Jihadi Rebels," Ecaterina Cepoi identifies several factors that explain the Islamisation of the Syrian resistance. First, the impact of conflicting ideologies in various international communities and Islamist regimes; the outside influence of countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia; and lastly, extremists attaching their values to that of the Muslim identity (Cepoi, 2013: 553). All of these identified factors describe a warrior mentality that has been created by a conflict between those who follow the religion of Islam and those engaging in militant Islam in Syria. This mentality has arisen not only from the previously described factors, but also from Islamist use of radical violence without regard for civilian casualties, the legitimization of violence by defining it as essential to survival, and the evolution of the armed jihad (560). The jihad is the act of implying force to spread Islamism/political Islam. In Syria and across the Middle East, jihad groups and other radical Islamist forces dominate the political realm by imposing their interpretation of Muslim ideals on the general public. Based on this, Cepoi says, "Islamist groups will be the main sources for insecurity and political instability" (149) in Syria and given the current crisis in the region, she has yet to be proven incorrect. Religious contentions are already fueling much of the conflict in Syria so if Islamism were to be enforced as the hegemonic political ideology, it is doubtful that it would function effectively or peacefully.

### Contemporary Views of Islamism

Ewan Stein identifies two common arguments as to why Islamism cannot serve as a functioning political ideology. The first is that the Islamist ideology and democracy are inherently not designed for

each other because the underlying goal of these groups is to create tyrannical Islamic states (Stein, 2014: 149). The second is that Islamism failed as a viable political ideology because Islamists abandoned true Muslim ideals, such as preaching peace (149). These claims however, are informed by western stereotypes of Islam and do not provide any relevant political evidence. After the events on September 11<sup>th</sup>, fear was understandably widespread and stereotypes of those that practice Islam-rooted faiths were becoming more prevalent. Osama bin Laden fueled active western imaginations that furthered this tradition of vilifying *the other* (Anders and Wörn, 2011: 14). The enemy became not only bin Laden but other Islamic people as well and western media outlets were eager to identify a foreign enemy. Western media and popular culture began spouting phrases like *the unstoppable tide of Islam* or referring to it as a *force*. However, these imaginative rhetorics were result of popular imagination and illustrate western media's obsession with mythologizing the Middle East (Stein, 2014: 151). This portrayal of contemporary Islamism has only furthered tensions between western states and the Middle East. It is also important to acknowledge that western liberal values are not always appreciated by "those who are at the receiving end of neo-colonial domination" (Anders and Wörn, 2011: 31) and that is something that western states, especially when attempting to install democracy abroad, need to take into consideration. Just because a state does not identify with western ideals does not mean that their ideals are wrong.

Rather than assuming a religion is fundamentally undemocratic, a more probably reason as to why Islamism cannot succeed in terms of being a functioning political ideology is because faith-based political narratives identify other religions as a threat to their religious and political understandings (Anders and Wörn, 2011: 26). Political Islam is not an alternative to other political ideologies such as liberalism or democracy. It is a contributing cultural variant that can be applied to any political ideological trend (31). Therefore, it cannot be a functioning political ideology.

### Concluding Thoughts

Islamism and Islamic values carry a huge social resonance both in regions dominated by the cultural practice and those that are not. Western states stereotypical interpretations of Islam have painted a negative picture of the faith and those that practice it. Though most who support Islamism fit those stereotypically radical depictions, the fact of the matter remains that jihadi groups and other radical Islamist forces dominate the political realm by forcing their interpretation of Islam on the general public (Ismail, 2003: 27). After the Arab Spring, the fight against authoritarian oppression combined with widespread religious contentions fueled violent conflicts in Egypt and Syria. Both Egypt and Syria have been deeply affected by the absence of the rule of law and until that is present politically and socially, Islamism will not be able to be a successful political institution. Additionally, because previous attempts to make Islamism the dominant political ideology have failed, it is unlikely that Islamism, whether forced on the people or democratically elected, will prove to be successful. It is also important to reflect on the idea that Islamism is a cultural variant that affects ideological trends and not an ideology in itself. This paper does not argue that Islamism could never be a functioning political ideology. It just cannot serve effectively at this time given past circumstances that have lead to two failed democratic states.

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