Islam in the IS Age

March 17, 2015
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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.
The “IS-ification of Islamist politics,” in Khalil al-Anani’s felicitous phrase, has reshaped the ideological and strategic incentives for Islamist groups and their adversaries. It has also posed a new challenge to the categories, concepts and expectations of the academics who study them. In January, the Project on Middle East Political Science brought together more than a dozen leading scholars of Islamist movements to discuss the Islamic State and its effects on the broader terrain of Islamist politics. Some of the papers prepared for that workshop have been published on The Monkey Cage already and all are now collected into a new edition in the POMEPS Studies series “Islamism in the IS Age.”

The challenge posed by the Islamic State can be broken down into a number of discrete areas. First, there is the effort to understand the nature of the group itself: its ideology, its organization and its likely future prospects. Second, there are questions about its relationship and impacts upon other groups, from the very similar (al-Qaeda) to the essentially different (the Muslim Brotherhood). Third, there are important analytical questions about the relative significance of ideology, institutions and strategic competition. It is useful to be precise about which of the arguments that consume the public sphere, such as how “Islamic” the organization is, really matter. The same is true of whether the analytical categories such as the “moderate/radical” divide or the distinction between Salafi-jihadists and mainstream Islamists still offer useful leverage.

While its novelty and long-term significance may well be overstated, the Islamic State has indisputably reshaped the region’s strategic and intellectual agenda. Its rapid capture of territory through large swathes of Iraq and Syria and declaration of a new caliphate provoked a military response from the United States and have become the principle focus of a broad international coalition. It poses an intriguing ideational challenge to the norms of state sovereignty that underlie international society. Its penchant for broadcasting barbaric spectacles such as decapitations and burning alive of its hostages galvanized the attention of a horrified world. The Islamic State has built a seemingly robust proto-state in the territories it controls, and has seemingly established affiliates, with varying degrees of success, in areas such as Egypt’s Sinai and Libya. Its ability to attract foreign fighters and seeming appeal to certain radical trends has incited a new round of alarm over domestic radicalization and terrorist threats. All of those effects are exacerbated by the frenzied media coverage of these developments in both the West and the Arab world.

How novel is the Islamic State, really, and how significant will its emergence ultimately seem? A great deal of the popular analysis of the group has focused on its distinctive ideology, along with lurid accounts of its indoctrination methods, internal organization and claims to Islamic authenticity. Much of this analysis seems to proceed in an analytical vacuum, with little attempt to compare the details of the Islamic State to the experience of other insurgencies. It has become common to present the Islamic State as something unique in world history, an exceptionally ideological actor with unprecedented state-building capabilities and an uncanny ability to inspire new followers and recruits from around the world.
Yet, the Islamic State is hardly the first insurgency to seize territory and seek to govern it through the exploitation of local resources and the attraction of external support. In his contribution to the symposium, Quinn Mecham makes a compelling case that, ideology aside, the Islamic State has established a relatively high degree of stateness already. It is less obvious what to make of this, however. Controlling territory and behaving like a proto-state are, after all, entirely conventional insurgency behaviors. As Megan Stewart has found, since 1945 roughly one-third of all insurgencies have provided health care and education, and “once an insurgency acquired territory, nearly 49 percent would ensure that the civilian population received education or medical care.” Instead, we need to focus on what kind of insurgent governance this is, and how robust it is likely to prove. Zachariah Mampilly observes that ideology tends to matter less in determining the extent and nature of rebel governance than the conditions on the ground and especially the relationship between the rebels and the society over which it holds sway. On those grounds, things look less promising for the Islamic State. Ideology creates a “distinctive governance problem” for jihadist groups, argue Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Amichai Magen, that they “will struggle mightily to address in the longer term.” Reports of the growing use of intimidation to control restive local populations should be taken with several grains of salt, as strategic communications campaigns ramp up. Still, such reports seem like a leading indicator of declining legitimacy and consent, raising the costs of internal control and the likelihood of internal challenges.

Nor are the other key features of the Islamic State especially distinctive. Many non-state violent actors have deployed extreme, public violence for strategic purposes, whether to intimidate local populations and foreign enemies or to maintain the morale of its members. The indoctrination of members into an esoteric code of beliefs is a mainstay of insurgencies, from the Marxist-Leninist movements of the Cold War to Sri Lanka’s Tamil Tigers to the personalistic cults in many African rebellions. Perhaps the most novel element of the Islamic State is its ability to attract foreign fighters to its cause. However, as David Malet has shown in exquisite detail, even this has precedent in past insurgencies and could prove to be as great a weakness as an advantage as travel to its territories becomes more difficult and local populations grow resentful of foreigners.

This does not mean that the Islamic State is not formidable. Many of those earlier, similar insurgencies lasted for decades. But it is useful to recognize the Islamic State as far less unique than usually portrayed, with many of the same strengths and weaknesses of comparable territorially-rooted insurgencies. From this perspective, the Islamic State may be likely to crumble far more quickly than conventional wisdom suggests. As life in its territory grows harsher and lines of division emerge between foreign fighters and local populations, the Islamic State will likely have to expand the share of resources devoted to forcefully maintaining local control. The initial appeal of the Islamic State rested to a considerable degree on its momentum and carefully cultivated aura of invincibility, which seemed to confirm its divine provenance in the eyes of potential fighters. Now that it is mired in a hurting stalemate, losing ground in Iraq while grimly holding on in Syria, such appeals to invincibility are less persuasive. Its extreme savagery has increasingly alienated mass
publics, whom do not seem to share the conviction of Western analysts that it represents anything
to do with genuine Islam. This brutality does have the benefit of simultaneously mobilizing the
most radical potential recruits into action, however, as can be seen in the rising numbers of
reported foreign fighters flowing to Syria and Iraq. Whether the pool of admirers shrinks faster
than extremists are mobilized or replenished will be a crucial measure of the success of the Islamic
State’s strategy.

The collapse of the Islamic State would be something to welcome, of course. But this should not
be equated with either the disintegration of the underlying organization or with the disappearance
of broader jihadist ideas and ideologies. The organization may persist longer than its state, going
underground following the defeat of the state as its predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq did following
setbacks in the late 2000s. Its members, and the foreign fighters which fuel it, might simply transfer
their allegiance to one of the many available jihadist groups fighting in Syria’s grinding, fragmented
and multipolar civil war, leading to little real change in that conflict. The same is true for shattered
states like Libya’s or Yemen’s. Failed states, intense sectarian conflicts and repressive regimes are
fertile ground for the growth of jihadist movements, and all those ingredients seem likely to be
bountiful in the coming years. Variants of jihadist insurgency will almost certainly continue to fight
in these arenas regardless of the fate of the Islamic State.

It is in the realm of confronting jihadist ideology that trends are the least promising. The currently
favored strategy, which combines autocratic repression with the official promotion of “moderate”
Islam and the conflation of very different movements under the banner of “terrorism,” is likely
to make problems worse. Radicalization is driven less by Islamist ideas than by failures of both
governance and popular uprisings and the elimination of nonviolent alternatives. The Islamic State
gained traction, recall, in a distinctive regional political environment shaped especially by extensive
public regional mobilization in support of a sectarian Syrian jihad and the July 3, 2013 military coup
in Egypt that brought down the elected government of President Mohamed Morsi. The coup and
subsequent regional wave of intense repression of the Muslim Brotherhood ended an extended
period of the open political participation by mainstream Islamist movements, discrediting the
idea of such democratic inclusion for the foreseeable future and marginalizing the advocates of
mainstream political strategies. The regional environment after the failure and perversion of the
Arab uprisings is deeply hostile to any public role for non-violent Islamists and highly conducive to
radical movements of all flavors.

It is a potentially fatal flaw in the emerging strategy that the Arab world’s autocratic resurgence and
proxy wars are constantly replenishing exactly the pool of potential extremists which the counter-
IS strategy hopes to drain. The Islamic State’s appeal beyond Syria and Iraq should be understood
within the political context of the advantage of the chaos and poor decisions that followed the Arab
uprisings. The failures of attempted transitions toward democratic governance, along with the
region-wide repression of mainstream Islamists and secular activists, have been a strategic gift to
al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and other extremist trends. The failure of almost all of the Arab uprisings, with the sole and partial exception of Tunisia, has badly undermined the idea of the possibility of peaceful political change. The horrors of collapsed states and civil war in Libya, Yemen and Syria hang over all political life. None of the underlying drivers of those protests have been resolved and many – from personal insecurity to economic misery – have deteriorated. Focusing on Islam to the exclusion of these vital issues of governance, democracy and economic opportunity will guarantee failure. Encouraging or tolerating repression in the name of counter-terrorism will only fuel the grim cycle of repression, protest and radicalization. Put bluntly, the anti-Islamist campaign being waged by Egypt and the Gulf states that combines fierce repression with the promotion of “moderate” Islam is likely to badly fail: The Islamic messages will have no resonance with intended audiences, while abusive autocracy will continue to drive alienation and rejection of an illegitimate order.

The indiscriminate crackdown on Islamists of all stripes, as many of the essays in this collection point out, is likely to change enduring features of their organizations, ideologies and strategies. The crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its repression across the region has radically debilitated its organizational structure and discredited its ideology. That some of its members are now turning to, welcoming or inciting violence is hardly surprising given the political context; hopefully, some enterprising PhD student is currently doing a rigorous study of violence following military coups that might help determine whether Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood has been involved in more, less or about the same as is typical. What is clear, though, is that whatever firewall the Brotherhood once offered against violent extremism has now mostly crumbled, with the ideological underpinnings discredited and the organizational structure disintegrated. Khalil al-Anani notes that the rise of the Islamic State “coupled with the crackdown against the Brotherhood has created divisions and rifts within the Brotherhood, triggering intensive debates between the leadership and youth.” Mokhtar Awad and Nathan Brown point out the mutually reinforcing nature of state repression and this disaggregated extremist turn in Egypt. This plays out differently in diverse national contexts of course. In the Gulf, as Kristin Smith Diwan demonstrates, the regional crackdown is closing down long-standing channels for public engagement and political influence for mainstream Brotherhood movements, which already face challenges from Salafi movements in attracting youth. In Syria, as Raphaël Lefèvre observes, the Brotherhood has floundered as other more radical insurgency factions have taken the lead. Jordan’s Muslim Brotherhood has divided acrimoniously, while Yemen’s Islah movement has struggled to maintain what Stacey Philbrick Yadav calls its version of “Islamist Republicanism.” Few Islamist movements are likely to remain unchanged by the events of the last few years.

Current trends in public rhetoric do the anti-IS struggle no favors. The public conflation of groups such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Muslim Brotherhood in today’s political rhetoric contributes to the blurring of once clear lines and likely facilitates recruitment into new violent extremist movements. In some cases, such as the anti-Islamist campaigns in the Gulf and post-coup
Egypt, the conflation of distinct groups serves the strategic interests of regimes. In others, it represents genuine analytical confusion. As Anani points out, the equation of the Islamic State with other Islamist trends serves the interests of both hostile regimes and of the Islamic State. In either case, the potential risks are enormous – from the radicalization of previously mainstream groups to the triggering of unnecessary clashes of civilizations. The push to name the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization is an analytical step backward, one which the British government at least has reportedly declined to take. The Muslim Brotherhood, for all the many issues to be raised with its ideology and discourse, typically served as a competitor with and a firewall against recruitment into violent jihadist groups. Its tight organizational structure maintained discipline and ideological focus among its members. The Brotherhood, like most successful organizations, jealously guarded its place within Islamist politics against potential competitors such as al-Qaeda. Today, following Egypt’s military coup, that organization lies in tatters, with much of its leadership in prison and its strategy of democratic political participation discredited. As a result, as Awad and Brown observe, “a substantial reorientation of the Brotherhood may be underway, which could lead back to ideas its leaders had attempted to root out for decades.” This does not weaken jihadist movements such as the Islamic State, but rather strengthens them by removing a traditional mainstream alternative to jihadism.

The analysis here focuses heavily on institutions and political strategy. What about Islam itself? Ideology, identity, discourse and rhetoric do matter enormously in politics. High profile recent arguments over the authenticity of the Islamic claims of the Islamic State have not been especially edifying, however. Of course the Islamic State presents itself as Islamic and draws on an elaborate edifice of Islamic references to buttress its case, attract supporters and wage political war on its rivals. Some Muslims agree with all or part of its self-presentation, as Joas Wagemakers notes. But the more important reality is that the overwhelming majority of Muslims find the idea that the Islamic State or al-Qaeda represent their faith to be offensive and absurd. There is little evidence that Muslims view the Islamic State’s claim to represent a new caliphate as anything other than a bad joke. The response of Muslims themselves to claims about their religion should matter far more than textual exegesis. Ultimately, as Peter Mandaville might suggest, Islam is what Muslims make of it.

Muslims might someday be driven into a world in which the Islamic State represents their faith, but that is not today’s world. That has also been a core strategic problem for groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which generally understand that most Muslims don’t agree with its ideas, strategy, tactics or vision. Its acts of savagery sought in part to overcome the reality of their own marginality by inviting retaliation and polarization that remove the option of co-existence and moderation. Terrorism has aimed to drive a self-fulfilling prophecy of existential conflict from which Muslims, as much as non-Muslims, can not escape. As I noted in a recent appearance before the House Armed Services Committee, preventing a spiral toward a clash of civilizations should be a basic lodestar for an effective response to the Islamic State – and that means seeking
to quarantine its ideology and expose its marginality, not artificially inflating its claims, while working to address the underlying political and institutional problems really driving people towards extremism.

The essays collected in “Islamism in the IS Age” cover a wide range of arguments and perspectives. They do not all agree with my own analysis presented here. Taken together, they offer a rich and incisive collection of analytical perspectives on the current state of Islamist politics and movements. Read all the essays here.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
March 17, 2015
Why academics can’t get beyond moderates and radicals

By Jillian Schwedler, Hunter College and Graduate Center, CUNY

“This piece appeared on The Monkey Cage on February 12, 2015.

For much of the past decade, analyses of Islamist groups have been organized around a distinction between moderates and radicals. Analysts and scholars have never agreed on precise definitions of either, but the distinction has largely been used as a point of departure. In the post-Arab-uprisings Middle East, with sectarianism increasingly salient and the Islamic State (also called ISIS) altering the landscape of jihadism, scholars should ask whether these categories continue to provide the kind of analytic traction that made them valuable in the past. The constant pressure on scholars of Middle East politics to respond to a growing wave of Islamophobia has complicated efforts to rethink these categories. Public engagement is a vital part of the academic mission, but has our need to constantly reiterate in public that all Muslims are not Islamists and that most Islamists are moderate constrained our scholarly analyses by forcing us to retreat into the language of moderates and radicals?

Much of my own work on Islamists has embraced the idea that the distinction between moderates and radicals is both analytically useful and empirically accurate. In 1996, during an early stage of my research for Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen, a member of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood expressed exasperation with then-recent “regulations” promulgated by the Taliban in Afghanistan, including a law that a man must have a beard at least a fist in length. I hadn’t raised the topic, but he conveyed that he had been speaking with colleagues about the Taliban earlier that day, and he said to me, “Well I guess this means that I’m not a good Muslim!” Indeed, by that standard, most male members of the Muslim Brotherhood – for whom a mustache seemed to be a favored aesthetic choice for facial hair – were not “good” Muslims. For the whole of my period of field research in the mid- and late-1990s, moderate Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood and radical Islamists like the Taliban and al-Qaeda, were easily distinguishable and also highly antagonistic toward the other.

Hamas and Hezbollah raised a small conceptual bump: Critics who opposed describing them as moderate were quick to point to their use of violence, which therefore must put them into the radical category; others, myself included, noted that they were largely moderate in their domestic context and used violence only (at that time) against an external occupier (Israel). (In recent years, Hezbollah has turned increasingly toward using violence against domestic challengers.) Conceptually, most groups could still be situated fairly easily in the moderate-radical binary that held currently in the literature.

These concepts were then put to use in a range of analyses about moderate and radical Islamists. But many of the “puzzles” that animated that larger research agenda actually resulted from of the construction of the concepts themselves. By this I mean that once we (as scholars) settled on a common-sense distinction between moderates and radicals, a whole set of research questions flowed forth, largely about the morphing, transition or evolution from one to the other. Moderates and radicals were no longer concepts that facilitated understanding: They were empirical categories, and our scholarship focused on a range of questions stemming from that distinction. We examined the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, the exclusion-radicalization hypothesis, the exclusion-moderation hypothesis, auto-reform, the conveyor belt, the firewall, de-radicalization and so on. Each of these was primarily concerned with explaining either a group’s characterization and/or its movement from one position to another. My April 2011 review essay in World Politics underlined the staying power of this paradigm in scholarly literature, and the mass of manuscripts sent to me for review by journals and publishers suggests these debates are still thriving.
Great stuff, to be sure. But I have always felt uneasy with those categories and debates – even as I participated actively in them – because the empirical reality felt more like a complex spread of positions across multiple issues than a single continuum with moderate at one end and radical at the other. But because these analyses also spoke to policy concerns as well as liberal anxieties about “them” – anxieties sometimes held by scholars as much as policymakers and publics – the language of moderates and radicals thrived. At the very least, it worked well to distinguish groups that posed threats (to us or our beliefs, whatever that means) and groups that did not.

Along the way, of course, other concepts emerged, some taking a cue from how Islamists described themselves and others were devised more exclusively by scholars. Of the former, for example, we started employing the concept of jihadists (rather than radicals or extremists) for groups that prioritized a particular interpretation of jihad – some self-described as jihadi while others did not. Concepts like Asef Bayat’s use of “post-Islamism” emerged to capture what he argued was a significant change in Islamist politics in Iran: a form of political Islam that differed significantly from conventional definitions of Islamism as political actors who frame their projects in terms of the implementation of sharia in all aspects of life, including at the government level. Instead, Bayat saw a public that wanted religion to play a central role in public life but that embraced an Islam of pluralism and individuality rather than obedience and duties. When our existing concepts were not doing the heavy lifting, if you will, in capturing particular phenomena, we tried out new ones: quietist, Salafi-jihadi, quiescent jihadi, Wahhabi, Ikhwani, literalist, contextualist, accommodationist, non-accommodationist, centrist, wasati, reformist, revolutionary, conservative, traditional, pro-regime conservative, Islamo-liberal, state Islamism, official Islam, post-Islamism and so on. But despite all this conceptual innovation, the moderate-radical conceptual universe still dominates the discourse.

So why have these concepts stuck? In part, they have enabled us to produce an important and interesting set of debates, and they continue to make good sense analytically. But their persistence is also affected by the Islamophobia spreading rapidly if largely outside of the academy – on conservative news and talks shows, by certain think tanks and among a public aware (if not watching) the spectacles of fellow nationals being beheaded. (Beheadings, like many punishments adopted by the Islamic State, are also carried out by the regime of Saudi Arabia, a point not lost on academics but systematically overlooked in the mainstream U.S. media, as if posting a video of the event makes the act itself less barbaric.)

When people see the Islamic State they see “Islam,” and they are afraid. In response, we feel rightly compelled to use our positions in the academy and as published professors as platforms to fight the demonization of an entire faith due to the horrific acts of a tiny minority. Ethically, it is right that we should do so, and perhaps it is even our responsibility. But when I speak against Islamophobia to media, at public events, in student forums and so on, I find myself pretty consistently falling into the language of moderates and radicals, noting (correctly) that most Muslims are not Islamists and that most Islamists are moderate and not radical. It makes me sad and exhausted to even need to assert, yet again, that the vast majority of Muslims reject jihadi extremism – just as the vast majority of people of any faith reject similar violence done in the name of their faith. But extremist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have been a game-changer in terms of public debate, and we may sadly need to speak against Islamophobia for years to come.

Have the ways in which we frequently seek to respond to Islamophobia – that is, by reasserting the distinction between moderates and radicals – also unintentionally ensured the dominance of that framework in our scholarship? Put plainly, do the best terms for engaging as public intellectuals also provide the most promising frameworks for advancing scholarly analysis? I think probably not. Scholars already overwhelmingly agree that jihadi views are accepted by only a tiny portion of all Muslims, so we do not need to reassert that point in our scholarship. I have previously argued that we should stop citing Islamophobic arguments as if they reflect legitimate
and respectable arguments put forth by serious scholars. Although it still has currency in some circles outside of academia, Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations,” for example, is a sloppy piece of scholarship that has been taken to pieces in numerous reviews for its innumerable historical inaccuracies and its spurious causal assertions about clashing civilizations. When scholars cite such works in our scholarship, we elevate its status by treating it as if it demands a serious scholarly engagement. We need to stop allowing our responses to Islamophobia to hold back our scholarly work.

If we can put aside Islamophobia and have a conversation among scholars (who are not limited to those employed in academia or think tanks, or even to those with advanced degrees), where do we start? I see much happening in the region for which I do not find our existing frameworks and concepts entirely satisfying. In no particular order, here are some issues with which I think we need to contend:

*The Islamic State*: I am confident in labeling the Islamic State a radical and extremist organization. But there seem to be important distinctions among groups in the radical category that we want to attend to in our analyses. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are at odds with each other, so is “jihadi” still the right category? Should we speak of “caliphi jihadis” for IS and its followers and “non-caliphi jihadis” for al-Qaeda? Or should we just note that IS sparked a division among many jihadis around questions relating to shura and the caliphate? To pose a familiar but extremely useful research question, “What is IS a case of?”

*Public support for the Islamic State*: What do we make of the public opinion from the region that a non-trivial percentage of “ordinary” (non-Islamist) Muslims do not view the Islamic State as a terrorist organization? While scholars largely reject “terrorist” as a category of actors and speak instead of political violence as something certain actors do, we should not overlook the data itself. Do our existing frameworks really help us understand complex positions of public opinion? We might fall back on explanations of how terrible U.S. foreign policy decisions have played a role in the growth of certain such groups – a connection that is pretty unquestionable. But those arguments do not really advance our understanding of what is happening now.

*Salafi political parties*: One striking development during the Arab uprisings that began in 2010-2011 was the organization of Salafi groups into political parties, notably in Tunisia and Egypt. But as formerly quiescent groups that do not espouse the use of political violence, I am not sure how to categorize them other than as simply “Salafi political parties.” They meet the criteria for “moderate” of most if not all of the definitions, but it hardly feels right to put them into the same analytic cluster as the Muslim Brotherhood. Do we need new categories, or just more adjectives?

*Internal Muslim Brotherhood dynamics*: We have long known that the Muslim Brotherhood groups in different countries do not constitute a monolith, but all of them have been characterized as moderate. Scholars who follow the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have long asserted the need to distinguish between different generations or trends within the Brotherhood; scholars of the group in Jordan have written about the tensions and internal battles between Hawks and Doves. Do these internal dynamics render the overall term moderate less useful? As these groups are pulled in different directions, are different categories needed? If many of the wasati (centrist) and progressive members have left the Egyptian and Jordanian branches of the group, for example, is the remainder still “moderate” in the same way?

*State-led Islamic politics*: Numerous scholars have written about state-led Islamization, but this literature has not yet cohered into a larger set of propositions. How might we think of Islamist politics internal to states? For example, does it make sense to compare strong state Islamism (e.g., Iran, Saudi Arabia), weak state Islamism (e.g., Morocco, Turkey, Jordan) and the Islamic State’s attempt to actually create a new Islamist state? That sentence took me about 30 minutes to write because I was struggling with how to categorize different kinds of state-led “Islamist” projects. I am not sure that my categorization is adequate, but I think
some intellectual effort in thinking this through could be very exciting and fruitful.

Official Anti-Muslim Brotherhoodism: What are we to make of the vilification of the Muslim Brotherhood by so many regimes in the region? With Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates branding the group as a terrorist organization and supporting the violent repression of the Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan’s Brotherhood is struggling to hold itself together and maintain a “positive” relationship with the regime — a relationship that has never really been good since King Abdullah II took the throne. Following the burning to death of a Jordanian pilot in a cage by the Islamic State, the king may well find good reason to keep the Brotherhood closer in order to marginalize Islamic State supporters as threats to the regime. But the longstanding tolerance of the Brotherhood by some regimes is definitely breaking down. Does it still make sense to think of oppositional Islamist groups separate from the analysis of state-led Islamist projects? Can we speak of Islamized state repression?

Sectarianism: Sectarianism is on the rise and not going anywhere soon, sadly. Here is a hypothesis: States play as large a role in the production of sectarian tensions (think Saudi Arabia and Iran) as do non-state actors. Is that assertion correct? We have largely bracketed the discussion of sectarianism (e.g., studies of Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain) from discussions of political Islam, focusing instead on power rivalries (at the state and non-state level) and the impact of institutional arrangements in exacerbating sectarian tensions (the structure of parliament and other governing institutions, for example, in Lebanon and Iraq). Is it a mistake to drop the discussion of political Islam from discussions of sectarianism?

Tribal conservatism: I was always uncomfortable distinguishing “Islamist” and “tribal” branches of the Islah party in Yemen because many “Islamists” have tribal connections and many tribal members, hold highly conservative religious views. With the discussion of tribes growing due to events in Libya, Yemen, Jordan and Iraq, should we think more about the relationship between tribal and Islamist politics? As the Houthis take control of the Yemeni government, is this a case of competing power groups? Of contending visions of Islam in politics? Tribal politics? All of the above? None of the above?

Repression: The literature on repression and radicalism tells us to expect that President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi’s extreme repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt will likely lead to the emergence of a radicalized and militant underground Islamist movement over the next several years. Perhaps it might result from members who break away from the group, as it did in the 1970s with the Islamic Jihad groups departing from the Brotherhood’s moderate commitments to gradual reform. Or perhaps it will emerge from entirely outside of the Brotherhood. The collective wisdom of decades of scholarship on exclusion and radicalism tells us, however, that some kind of extremist movement will emerge. Is an end to state repression the only way to stop this process? What specific mechanisms might push trends in the other direction?

Beyond groups: The focus in the scholarship on groups and how they compare has produced important insights but also obscured many other processes. Here I want to reiterate a point that I have made previously: We should not exclusively make groups and movements the object of our studies of Islamist politics. It is certainly useful to distinguish differences between, for example, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State, but if we really want to shake up our assumptions, categories and theories — and thus generate the kinds of new insights that we can use to build and text new theories and propositions — we would do well to not only explore new typologies for Islamist groups, but to instead make different kinds of practices and processes as our objects of analyses. For example, we might study protests in general and allow the role of Islamists to emerge more organically in our analyses. We could examine questions of gender, neoliberal reforms and the spread of social media and see when and how Islamist groups or Islamist politics emerge into our analyses, rather than study Islamist views on gender, Islamist views on neoliberal reforms or Islamist use of social media.
I am not sure that our concepts and propositions should be abandoned entirely, nor am I arguing that no one should ever make groups and movements the focus of their analyses. Rather, I am hoping we can make explicit the ways in which certain categories have dominated our analyses and think through whether or not there is more insight to be gained by refining or by abandoning them. The uprisings have provided fascinating cases to advance the existing set of debates, but they have also afforded us an opportunity to shake up our approaches and, in particular, to ask whether many of the common-sense distinctions and concepts that structure our analytic frameworks should be revised or even retired. At the very least, we can weaken the effects of Islamophobia on our scholarship, even if we are forced to contend with it in other realms.

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Vanilla Muslims:
Decentering sects in the analysis of political Islam

By Peter Mandaville, George Mason University

It is commonplace for most contemporary analyses of the interface between religion, society, and politics in the Muslim world to focus primarily on particular ideologues, movements, sects, or religious leaders. And with good reason: These are important and influential actors, and they represent key constituencies and institutions in society. They are undoubtedly highly relevant and tangible points of entry for understanding Muslim politics. In this short paper, however, I want to raise some questions about what analysts might miss by over-privileging the centrality of movements and particular theological currents or groupings in the Muslim world. This is a particular important point to bear in mind at the present time given the renewed salience of sect and sectarianism in the Middle East.

At some level, the urge to think in terms of such categories is a product of how we are trained as scholars and analysts. Social scientists are taught to think in terms of ideal type categories that serve the heuristic function of reducing complexity to something more manageable – entailing, of course, inevitable trade-offs when it comes to accurately reflecting the nuances of social reality. But this whole question also reflects a deeper problématique that has occupied anthropologists of Islam for several decades now. How to think about Islam, and religion more broadly, as a category of social inquiry without granting it undue ascriptive power? I would contend that the basic contours of this debate also apply to how we think about and treat sects and sectarianism in Islam.

In a seminal article published in 1986, the anthropologist Talal Asad suggested that it would be most useful to think about Islam first and foremost as a “discursive tradition.”

That is to say, as a historically grounded and socially transmitted system of meanings and practices that, while varying in time and space, consistently invokes a common set of conceptual, textual, and historical reference points. The function and social significance of these referents is not seen to be static and unchanging but rather – as per any understanding of discourse – continually negotiated amidst changing relations of social power. These include but are by no means limited to the Quran, the Prophet Muhammad, sharia, etc.

Working in an Asadian spirit, I would suggest that we should think of sect in relation to “Muslimness” in much the same way as we think of Islam in relation to personhood. Just as saying that someone is a Muslim does not tell you everything about who they are as a person, the interjection of sect in matters of Islam similarly fails to account entirely for one’s Muslimness. We are this way also better able to make sense of the presence of significant variation within sect and sectarian identities. To treat Shiite Islam as a discursive tradition, for example, is to recognize that while Shiism does not possess a single, universal essence, it is certainly possible to talk about an inter-subjectively constructed historical experience of Shiite identity and practice that grants varying meaning and significance to a common repertoire of figures, events, rituals, etc. In other words – and trying now to better explain the heuristic work that the concept of discursive tradition performs – to invoke Shiism is not to provide a totalizing account of one’s Muslimness. Rather, Shiism understood as a discursive tradition helps us to identify some of the parameters that govern the ongoing process of Muslim being and becoming as particular Islamic meanings and interpretations are negotiated and renegotiated.

None of this is to deny the relevance and importance of sectarianism to understanding contemporary politics in the Middle East. Rather, it is about urging caution with respect to the question of how we position sect as an explanatory factor. The central take away here is the idea that role of sect can only be understood by looking at how sectarian formations intersect with the broader distribution of social power and political economy in a given society. In other words, we better understand the political valence of sectarian divisions when we understand how they relate to social geographies of access to power, privilege, and socioeconomic mobility.

While there is no doubt valuable insight to be gleaned from positing better ways of treating sect and sectarianism in academic discourse, we would be remiss here if we were to ignore the real world effects of particular ways of talking and thinking sect – particularly in light of recent events in the Arab world such as the rise of the Islamic State.

What I have in mind here is the importance of recognizing that when particular assumptions and understandings about the nature and significance of sectarianism begin to circulate amongst media pundits, policymakers, and even national security officials, the practical implications can be enormous.

Just as malignant ethno-religious entrepreneurs sought to mobilize forms of sectarian identity in the Balkans for political gain after the Cold War, the United States largely failed to understand how its invasion of Iraq in 2003 would enable the very same dynamics in the Arab world. One of the more alarming things to observe in the aftermath of that war was the ease with which some U.S. national security officials discussed sectarian violence in Iraq in ways that suggested that they understood this bloodletting to be rooted in centuries-old theological disputes rather than in the coincidence of sectarian boundaries and the uneven distribution of political and economic power in postcolonial Iraq.

Sect talk – particularly of the Sunni/Shiite variety – has been rampant over the past decade. With Iran’s growing influence in Iraq forefront in the minds of Western policymakers and regional leaders alike, Jordan’s King Abdullah pointed in 2004 to an emerging “Shi’a Crescent.” In 2007, noted academic and future State Department official Vali Nasr posited a “Shi’a revival” in which “conflicts
within Islam will shape its future.” More recently, in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the ongoing violence in Syria, quashed aspirations in Bahrain, resurgent Salafism, and the rise of the Islamic State (not to mention Iranian efforts to leverage all of the above) drive a current trend to read the aftermath of 2011 primarily in sectarian terms – particularly among Middle East watchers in Western capitals. At some level, references to new sectarian tension simply function as a proxy for the Iranian-Saudi rivalry that – despite the Saudi religious establishment’s virulently anti-Shiite orientation – has always been at root a conventional struggle for regional hegemony. As the battle lines are drawn, Washington D.C. seems once again to be tempted by sects and ready to accept such divisions as a given reality and natural starting point for constructing new political arrangements rather than asking tougher questions about the circumstances and methods through which sectarianism becomes a political tool.

So all this leads me, finally, to a plea for the decentering of sects in our efforts to understand and engage Muslim societies. In its 2012 survey The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that:

[S]ectarian identities, especially the distinction between Sunni and Shia Muslims, seem to be unfamiliar or unimportant to many Muslims. This is especially true across Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as in Central Asia, where medians of at least 50% describe themselves as “just a Muslim” rather than as a follower of any particular branch of Islam. Substantial minorities in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia also identify as “just a Muslim.”

Some sociologists of Islam are also starting to ask what we might learn about Muslim communities if we begin with the insight that the vast majority of the world’s Muslims do not regard themselves as part of any particular grouping, movement, or “denomination.”

So how can we think about and build space for the many millions of Muslims today who understand their religious identity in terms that reject – or perhaps fail to recognize altogether – sectarian limitations, requirements, or encumbrances? My own shorthand – and it might also sound a little offhand – for those who fall into this category is “Vanilla Muslims.” This kind of designation and the approach it signifies does not deny the relevance, presence, or reality of sect in Islam. Rather it simply invites us to consider what we might discover about how Muslimness comes into being by treating sect as merely one facet of a discursive tradition rather than as the natural starting point or ground zero for the making of Muslim identity. To decenter sect, or to un-assume the hegemony of sectarian sway, also provides a critical vantage point for understanding the nature of power relations within and between competing claims to Islamic normativity.

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3 See for example the various contributions to the Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies, Vol. 34, No. 7, a special issue on “Methods in the study of non-organized Muslim minorities.”
What I talk about when I talk about Islamists

By Ahmed Khanani, Indiana University

First, words are our tools, and, as a minimum, we should use clean tools: we should know what we mean and what we do not, and we must forearm ourselves against the traps that language sets us. Secondly, words are not (except in their own little corner) facts or things: we need therefore to prise them off the world, to hold them apart from and against it, so that we can realize their inadequacies and arbitrariness, and can re-look at the world without blinkers. Thirdly, and more hopefully, our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth making, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our arm-chairs of an afternoon—the most favoured alternative method.

– JL Austin

In 2011 analysts quickly hailed the Arab uprisings as a series of events that would usher in democratic governments across the region – even as many of pundits expressed concern about the rise of politically savvy, electorally successful islamiyun, including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahda in Tunisia, and the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco. The years since the uprisings have witnessed marked retrenchments of pre-existing regimes and the emergence of new, violent actors in the politics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), particularly the Islamic State (IS). Just as analysts were too quick to identify the uprisings as the progenitor of Arab democracies, analysts have brazenly rushed to conclusions about the post-2012 retrenchments and continued violence. Rather than focusing on specific instances of democratization, repression, or conflict, scholars and pundits ought to, instead, expend more energy exploring broader, slower-moving structural trends that allow us to better apprehend and anticipate trajectories and perhaps even specific events.

In this essay I focus on one such factor: language. By language I mean both the ordinary language of islamiyun and also the words that analysts employ to describe their subjects. The vast majority of analyses that explore the politics of the MENA attend to the actions and contexts of various groups (e.g., the violence enacted by IS in the context of the Syrian civil war or the electoral and military strategies of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in 1990s Algeria). While this is often productive, it can obfuscate the influence of broader, slower-moving factors, particularly the ways in which language can operate as something like a structural variable. Similarly, although the term “Islamist” presents as a neutral, reasonable concept, closer scrutiny of the word reveals troubling undertones and assumptions. Both of these issues are identifiable through the lens of ordinary language philosophy.

Ordinary language philosophy is grounded in an anti-essentialist orientation toward language: words are things to be used; they have functions in specific contexts and become nonsensical, or, at least, misused in others. In short, ordinary language philosophers hold that a word means what it is used to mean; differently put: words meanings’ accrue through patterns of use. By attending to ordinary language, analysts can move beyond right and wrong conceptualizations of words – the post-metaphysical, if you will – and, instead, into charting the ways words are used, thereby accounting for the meanings that words have in everyday conversations to users of specific languages.

1 Austin (1961, 129-130).

2 Ryle explains the analogy thusly: “If I know the meaning of a word or phrase I know something like a body of unwritten rules, or something like an unwritten code or general recipe. I have learned to use the word correctly in an unlimited variety of different settings. What I know is, in this respect, somewhat like what I know when I know how to use a knight or a pawn at chess. I have learned to put it to its work any-when and anywhere, if there is work for it to do” (1953, 179).
Ordinary language provides a rich, if underutilized, site for political analysis. Ordinary language is simultaneously the material from which all agendas are shaped and, also, sets boundaries on said agendas—we cannot think what we cannot say; we cannot aspire to the, literally, unspeakable. That words’ meanings accrue by way of use not only suggests that words’ meanings exceed those found in formal measures (e.g., dictionaries), it also allows for analysts to treat concepts as *dependent* variables and to explore patterns in how specific concepts are articulated and enacted as evidence of the range of meanings associated with a given word — roughly, a word’s grammar. This stands in contrast with much work in the social sciences and most mass media analyses, which typically *begin* with an understanding of, say, democracy and, having fixed the scope of the concepts, *then* explore how democracy influences outcomes or how particular variables impact democracy. In contrast, analyses inspired by ordinary language philosophy explore what words have come to mean. The task of the analyst is to chart the grammar of a word — to unpack the multiple, at times contradictory, uses of a word among users of a shared language. For example, a common mode of critiquing IS is to trouble the group’s “Islamic” credentials; an ordinary language approach would instead explore how the individuals in IS and the group as a whole *use* the word “Islam” to better apprehend what “Islam” means to them, and then put this in conversation with how critics use the word “Islam,” thereby rendering “Islam” the object of analysis, rather than a static entity that undergirds an ethical critique. When scholars and pundits contribute to ostensibly secular publications in order to question a

group’s “Islamic” credentials, these analysts contribute to the reification of the Muslim tradition into a static thing called “Islam” and also undertake (even if only implicitly) *theological* inquiry and critique, thereby resembling and putting themselves in conversation with religious clergy.

Thus, in moving to the anti-essentialist, post-metaphysical method of ordinary language philosophy, analysts can chart the ways that different groups of *islamiyun* embody and articulate their shared tradition, thereby identifying critical differences amongst so-called Islamists. While we need not conduct discourse analysis to conclude that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb embody radically different political projects, we *can* identify important distinctions between, say Hamas and the Moroccan PJD through attending to how they use the word *dimuqratīyya* and identifying overlap and difference. Moreover, by better understanding what salient words *mean* to people in the MENA (e.g., *deen, dimuqratīyya, kufr, or khilaṣa*), analysts can identify the range of reasonable practices at a given moment. For instance, as I have argued elsewhere, because *dimuqratīyya* is associated with *shura* in the language of Moroccan *islamiyun*, we should anticipate that Moroccan *islamiyun* will attempt to embody what they mean by *dimuqratīyya*. Ordinary language philosophy not only gestures toward the reification of the Muslim tradition into a static thing called “Islam” and also undertake (even if only implicitly) *theological* inquiry and critique, thereby resembling and putting themselves in conversation with religious clergy.

Indeed, the terms used to label the subjects of our inquiries are deeply contested. Specifically, in spite of its popularity, the term “Islamist” presents three broad issues. First, it conceals important heterogeneity among its referents (i.e., encouraging a comparison between IS and the Moroccan PJD rather than IS and, say, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) or Gush Emunim). Second, as discussed below, “Islamist” locates “Islam” and Muslims within a broadly Christian rubric (of “religion”) while simultaneously concealing important similitude between, e.g., Christian

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3 As discussed below, Frederic Schaffer’s work is an outstanding example of taking a word as an item to be explained—a “dependent variable” (1997; 1998); see also, e.g., Scotton, who preface his analysis of “a strongly charged Swahili political vocabulary” with the ordinary language insight, “a word acquires meaning because it is commonly used in certain situations and commonly stimulates certain responses belonging to the same linguistic community” (1965, 527).

4 There are countless examples to this effect; see, e.g., Nihad Awad, “ISIS Is Not Just Un-Islamic, It Is Anti-Islamic.” *Time* 5 September 2014 or see also Bashar Ja’afari’s contribution to the Security Council of the UN adopting Resolution 2170 condemning ISIS wherein Ja’afari “stressed that ISIS and other groups had no connection with Islam” (available at: http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11520.doc.htm).

5 Khanani (2014).
and Muslim political actors. Finally, “Islamist” harkens upon classical Orientalist tropes and normative commitments.6 Perhaps motivated by the analytic paucity of “Islamist,” analyses of socially conservative, Islamically inspired, politically active Muslims have used two alternative terms: fundamentalist and radical.7 Yet, as Bernard Lewis convincingly argues, since the term “fundamentalist” derives from an extremely specific meaning in an American Protestant group from the early 20th century, the “use of the term to designate Muslim movements is at best a loose analogy and can be very misleading.” The term “radical,” too, hampers analytic clarity because it implies a “good Muslim/ bad Muslim” binary, thereby harboring thinly concealed normative prejudices.8 Hence, I borrow from everyday Arabic idioms in dubbing our interlocutors “islamiyun.”

There are several reasons to use islamiyun when describing socially conservative, Islamically inspired, politically active Muslims. Perhaps the primary advantage to islamiyun is that it is used in everyday conversations and writings to describe this set of actors across the Arabic-speaking Muslim world, forging a linguistic bridge between Western analysts and their Arab counterparts. Analytically, islamiyun constitutes a tentative step toward decolonizing Western knowledge claims insofar as the term affords “native” activists and analysts, including those interpellated by the term, the opportunity to name themselves.9 Further, islamiyun avoids several of the pitfalls associated with the term “Islamist.” For instance, unlike Islamist, islamiyun avoids many of the trappings of Orientalism insofar as it is an Arabic neologism, and decidedly not a Western invention. Moreover, unlike the English neologism “Islamist,” islamiyun avoids the derogatory connotations associated with words that end with –ist.10 Additionally, insofar as those who islamiyun describes choose to employ the term, presumably the term reflects neither an inherently anti-islamiyun agenda nor Western aggression.

Perhaps more importantly, in addition to avoiding the Orientalist tropes of “Islamist,” islamiyun allows for analysts to study politically-active, Islamically-inspired Muslims without locating them in relation to Christianity. Thus, whereas the terminology of Islamism resembles the language of grouping (including “non-denominational”) in Christianity, Arabic speakers employ islamiyun to identify a religio-political phenomenon, not the emergence of denominations in the Muslim tradition. In other words, islamiyun highlights important differences between Islam and Christianity that ordinary and academic uses of “religion” elide — including the absence of (Christian) denominations amongst Muslims.11 In short, then, many of

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6 See, e.g., several of the contributions to the volume Islamism: Contested Perspectives on Political Islam edited by Martin and Barzegar (2009) for fuller critiques.

7 For studies that use the term fundamentalist see, e.g., Monroe and Kreidie (1997); for largely polemical works that deploy the term radical see, e.g., Horowitz (2004). Munson, for instance, deploys the terms radical and fundamentalist in one text, offering a “rather crude typology [that is], useful nonetheless” wherein he distinguishes between “traditionalist... mainstream... and radical” fundamentalists (1991: 331).

8 Please see, for example, Mamdani for a discussion of the difficulties associated with this binary (2005).

9 My use of the term ‘interpellate’ is informed by Althusser’s work, and especially his famous example of the police officer who calls out: “hey you” to a person walking down the street. The person hearing this turns around, and in so doing is brought into a new subject position and, indeed, forms as a subject. Needless to say, the person exists, discretely and fully, without being hailed by the police officer, just as the people and groups identified as Islamist exist without being called Islamist. The point is that in calling this set of people and groups Islamist, the empowered observer is as much producing a group as identifying one.

10 See, e.g., Varisco, who observes, “for the past several decades the coinage of new –ists has shifted from signifying group labels (as in Calvinist) or a sense of expertise or a skill (as in dentist) to negative characterization (as in sexist)” (2009, 42; emphasis in original). As such, the connotations of Islamist are immediately located in a normatively negative domain.

11 To clarify: in likening the idea of Islamism to a denomination in the Christian tradition, and especially to Fundamentalist Christianity, scholars have produced fantastic claims that implicitly center a model of “religion” grounded in Christianity. For example, Lauzière writes “[W] hat truly distinguishes him [sheikh Yasin [sic]] is his religious discourse, which remained permeated with mystical elements, despite his conversion to Islamism” (2005, 245; emphasis mine). See, e.g., Asad (1993) for a rethinking of the category “religion” and its relationship to “Islam.”
the issues associated with “Islamism” are avoided by using the Arabic neologism *islamiyun*.

Of course, “*islamiyun*” is no panacea. Practically, the single biggest drawback is that *islamiyun* has yet to gain traction in Western media and academic texts. Indeed, the lack of awareness of the word *islamiyun* in the Western academy may well be indicative of Orientalist attitudes underpinning Western analyses insofar as the term has broad currency in the Arab world. Fortunately, this issue comes with a substantial silver lining: Unlike other salient terms, such as “democracy,” “Islamist,” or “terrorist,” for those of us in the Western academy, *islamiyun* has yet to be empirically overloaded precisely because the term has not yet been consistently employed with a particular range of referents. This referential openness, in the West, allows for the term to be aligned with patterns of use by Arabic speakers, thereby alleviating the imposition of categories by outside analysts and also reducing routinized epistemic violence in analyses of the politics of socially conservative, Islamically-inspired Muslim political actors.

Perhaps the most troubling issue with “*islamiyun*” is that, in Arabic writings, it us used to refer to the same breadth of actors as Islamist and thereby also brings together people and groups with important differences (e.g., the Yemen’s Islah and al-Qaeda and the Islamic Mahgreb). In many ways this difficulty stems at least partially from the reality that there are dozens of claims about how Islam can and should inform what is typically apprehended as political (or economic, or social, etc.) and, therefore, there is also tremendous diversity amongst people who self-identify as *islamiyun*. *Islamiyun* can be peaceful or violent, focused on transnational and/or national goals, salafi or Sufi-oriented, and so on. This suggests that, even as *islamiyun* avoids several of the pitfalls of “Islamist,” uses of *islamiyun* ought to, at minimum, require adjectives to be analytically useful (e.g. “peaceful *islamiyun*,” democratic *islamiyun*, etc.). More provocatively, whereas earlier I argued that we ought to expend more energy studying the ordinary language our subjects employ, I want to conclude by suggesting that perhaps we should, first, develop useful words to describe the diverse peoples we hope to better understand.

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12 For example, to the best of my knowledge no political science texts have used this term.

13 Said, in his masterful *Covering Islam*, argues that one mode of orientalism in the Western academy (and specifically of “orientalist attitudes”) is the lack of engaging texts in the Arab world (1997).
How much of a state is the Islamic State?

By Quinn Mecham, Brigham Young University

“This piece appeared on The Monkey Cage on February 5, 2015.

The group now commonly known as the “Islamic State,” which controls vast amounts of territory in Eastern Iraq and Western Syria, is unlike most Islamist militant groups in its demonstrated ability to control territory and establish a regularized system of governance. The growing aspiration for the creation of “Islamic” state institutions is reflected in the evolution of the group’s name, from al-Qaeda in Iraq, to the Islamic State of Iraq, to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and then simply to the Islamic State, with the June 2014 announcement of the formation of a caliphate.

The Islamic State group has many of the attributes of a new “start-up” organization that is entering the wider market of Islamist thinking around statehood. The group has attracted a great deal of attention because it has brought disruptive innovation into Islamic political thought, both in terms of ideology (using common Islamist concepts in new ways) and what it is doing on the ground (taking and holding wealth and territory). Incumbent Islamist actors have been rattled by the Islamic State’s material success and the group’s attraction for emergent jihadis. Much of this attraction is not due to the group’s “Islamic” ideology, which is bitterly contested, but because of its demonstrated success at building institutions and creating prosperity for a select group of its patrons.

Rather than assessing the “Islamic” qualities of the Islamic State group, I will focus instead on the “stateness” of this group as it has developed in early 2015. The contemporary name of this group implies both that it is Islamic and also that it is a state. My principal argument is that while the Islamic State does not have all of the characteristics that we usually attribute to states, it does have many of them, and that its trajectory to date is toward increasing levels of stateness. This matters a great deal, not only because it shapes the lives of the people who live within Islamic State-controlled territory, but also because it has implications for how outside actors should engage with this group. In particular, the more the Islamic State actually resembles a state, with its security provision and regulatory institutions, the less international actors will be able to “degrade” or “destroy” the group without also degrading or destroying the fundamental functions of the state. Attempts to degrade and destroy these emergent state institutions will likely lead to anarchy, which often comes with profoundly negative consequences.

Scholars and practitioners of international relations often view states as the primary unit of interaction within the international system and as legitimate components of the international order. To date, the Islamic State does not align well with this notion of statehood. A second, and in this case more productive, way of viewing states, however, rests in the understanding of states as institutions that carry out specific functions to be successful. Effective states have a wide range of functions, including “rule of law,” “administrative control” and “creation of citizenship rights,” among many others. For my purposes, I have divided the key functions of a state into six broad categories. These are organized around the roles that states play with respect to their citizens, including extracting resources (e.g., taxes, labor and loyalty) and providing benefits (e.g., security, social and economic benefits). The six functions, against which I measure the Islamic State’s performance as a state, are as follows: 1) tax and labor acquisition, 2) defining and regulating citizenship, 3) providing international security and managing international relations, 4) ensuring domestic security, 5) providing social services and 6) facilitating economic growth.

1 For the full June 29 announcement, see http://myreader.toile-libre.org/uploads/My_53b63f900cb03.pdf

How has the Islamic State performed on each of these functional measures of effective statehood to date? It is useful to consider neighboring capable states in the Middle East (Turkey or Saudi Arabia, for example) to see how the Islamic State compares. Based on the available evidence, I assign the Islamic State an approximate score on each of these functions as compared to these internationally recognized states.

#1 Tax and Labor Acquisition

Capable states have developed the means to extract wealth (in the form of taxes) and labor (in the form of military or other service) from their citizens. By all accounts, the Islamic state group has been highly extractive from the population in the territory it controls. It is extractive at widely differential rates, however, ranging from the complete appropriation of property from religious minorities and others that it sees as at odds with its vision for an Islamic caliphate, to the more modest collection of “zakat,” which its sees as an Islamic duty. The Islamic State has multiple large revenue streams, including from foreign sympathizers, oil revenues (at a rate of up to $2 million a day prior to airstrikes on oil facilities) and ransoms from kidnapping (estimated at $20 million in 2014). However, it has increasingly funded its operations through multiple forms of taxation of the population under its control, such as a “protection tax,” Islamic “zakat,” and utility fees, including up to $12 million a month in the Mosul region of Iraq. Likewise, the Islamic State’s media-based recruiting engine is robust, attracting potential fighters from many different national and class backgrounds and then making it very difficult for recruits to return home. The Islamic State thus has both dynamic recruitment and retention mechanisms that ensure a supply of military personnel. Score: 7/10


#2 Defining and Regulating Citizenship

Capable states invest significant energy in defining the rules for citizenship and in enumerating the rights and duties of their citizens. In the June 2014 announcement of the Islamic caliphate, there are some signs of an emergent set of norms around citizenship in the Islamic State, although it is not defined explicitly in those terms. In this document, citizenship appears to be based on an Islamic religious affiliation and is extraterritorial, applying to all Muslims who choose to align themselves with the caliphate. Citizens under the caliphate have the duty to forsake all other national obligations and pledge loyalty to the caliph, at the moment when the Islamic State’s military forces enter their territory. Loyalty to the caliph is the overriding obligation of those belonging to the Islamic State, and privileges of citizenship include the promise of honor, power and blessing from God. There have been some developments in the Islamic State toward the notion of citizenship, though it is hard to reconcile the aspirations of its rhetoric regarding the benefits of participation in the state with the realities of its abusive practices on the ground. Score: 4/10

#3 Managing International Relations

One of the core functions of a state is to manage relationships with other states in the international system and to provide security from external threats. This is an area where the Islamic State has done a very poor job of behaving like a normal state in the international system. Indeed, the Islamic State explicitly rejects the validity of the contemporary state system, which it views as based on un-Islamic notions of global governance established outside of the Islamic community (ummah) framework in which it articulates its mission. The Islamic State has bulldozed boundary markers between Iraq and Syria to emphasize its rejection of existing state boundaries, and has actively courted attacks from state actors both near and far. Despite this open rejection of the existing international system,
the Islamic State does play into international norms by directly challenging outside states, and therefore it engages directly in international relations, if in hostile ways. It also performs some of the international functions of states by developing routes to get its oil to market, attracting international “investment,” seeking “immigrants” from abroad, signaling its intentions to international audiences and threatening the interests and territory of neighboring states. Overall, however, the Islamic State acts least like a state when it comes to international affairs and performs both disruptively and poorly in this arena. Score: 2/10

#4 Providing Domestic Security

This is the area by which viable states are most often measured – can they exert an effective monopoly of violence and establish the rule of law over their territory? In the case of the Islamic State the answer is mostly, but certainly not completely. The Islamic State in early 2015 operates much more like a military organization than either a rebel insurgency or a local police force, although it also plays both of those roles. It has tactical units that report to a central command, that are highly metrics-driven and that are designed to clear and hold territory, ensuring subsequent security within that territory. In the Islamic State’s most recent report (al-Naba) of its military operations in Iraq, the extent of the organization’s military capacity is evident in remarkably delineated terms. Once military operations in a disputed area are completed, domestic security agents, including local police and specialized religious police play an increasingly important role. The Islamic State has often used an explicit strategy of subjecting some local parties to extreme and public punishments to create fear within the broader population of resistance to the group’s control. This has led to intense insecurity for some groups, such as tribes that have opposed its authority, but has also supported the maintenance of domestic security under much of its territory. As a result, this has created security protections that have led to calm in consolidated territory. Sharia courts are also widely established in consolidated territory to create a semblance of the rule of law and to hear grievances that may not have been effectively resolved under local tribal or Iraqi national rule. Score: 6/10

#5 Providing Social Services

Capable states provide a wide range of social services in addition to security, including health care, education, sanitation, utilities and support for the vulnerable. Additionally, Islamic groups are historically known for their investment in social welfare provision in their societies. How does the Islamic State group do on social service provision? It is clear that the group has attempted to use a portion of its extensive resources to provide social services in the territory that it controls, although it has not always had the expertise to provide those services in an effective or lasting way. These social services generally come with a clear ideological orientation, particularly the religious and educational institutions that it establishes or transforms in newly acquired territory. Within its territory, the Islamic State focuses on a variety of mundane state-like behaviors, such as getting the utilities and sanitation systems up and running, building out infrastructure projects and distributing food supplies. Upon taking a populated area, it immediately seeks to control municipal facilities and services in an effort to demonstrate that it can be a more egalitarian provider of existing governmental services than the previous government. It provides more intensive oversight of these services than many of the populations had come to expect, sometimes winning support for its effectiveness in resource distribution. Food and humanitarian assistance have been particular focus areas for the group, although the Islamic State has not been able to reach all parts of the population and has actively discriminated against some groups. It also has mixed success when it comes to infrastructure management, as

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seen in the considerable public service-based grievances under its rule in Mosul. Score: 5/10

#6 Facilitating Economic Growth

Finally, capable states have institutions that effectively manage the economy and facilitate economic growth over the long run. This is done through the establishment and enforcement of property rights, through market creation and regulation, through targeted investment in capital-intensive industries and through the regulation of public goods, such as the environment. Because the Islamic State has been flush with cash that has allowed it to create its own economy and because oil resources have provided substantial economic rents to the organization to date, it is difficult to measure its success in this area. However, there are a number of early indications that its economic policies are neither productive nor sustainable in the long term. The group has demonstrated a tendency towards authoritarian control, which extends to the economy and often seems oblivious to the role of market forces. For example, it heavily subsidizes a variety of staples and services, works to control the management and distribution of wheat and flour (in Raqqa) and has often violated existing property rights, sometimes appropriating homes and infrastructure with little or no consideration to the existing owners. While some of these policies may be rational in times of crisis and war, they will hinder the prospects for economic growth and individual investment in the medium term. It has officially established a central bank, the Muslim Financial House, which may help to set economic direction, and it would not be too surprising if the Islamic State developed its own currency, given the penchant for centralized control. While the Islamic State has a budget that is the envy of many poor states, there is yet a long way to go before it runs its economy in the systematic manner of the majority of recognized states. Score: 3/10

When taken in comparison with established neighboring states, the Islamic State’s performance across a range of core state functions is decidedly mixed. When compared with other Islamist insurgent groups, or even to where the Islamic State group was with regard to these issues one year ago, however, progress towards development on many of these functions is nothing short of remarkable. And despite regular airstrikes and a wide host of enemies, the current trajectory on a number of these functions implies more state building in 2015, rather than less. Although airstrikes have killed hundreds of Islamic State fighters and some ground battles have led the group’s fighters to retreat from previously conquered territory, territory maintained by the Islamic State group has become increasingly consolidated through active state-building.

If the Islamic State continues to look more and more like a state, there are two primary implications. The first is that it will effectively remove any potential competitors to its governance model and ultimately become the only game in town. The competitors to its governance model include remaining institutions from the legacy Iraqi and Syrian states, tribal leaders and family groups and pre-existing religious or civil society social networks. As these potential competitors are eliminated, either through violence or through co-optation, the populations living under the rule of the Islamic State will adjust to the new rules. This will create institutional realities that become the norms of governance and lead to social habits through the way that institutions order everyday life. Because these institutions become embedded in the way that people live, work, and create order and meaning in their lives, they will not disappear easily. Despite their initial imposition by violence, they may even come to be preferred by many individuals over the uncertainties of rule by other “outside” forces, particularly Shiites or Kurds, who have poor reputations for their treatment of Sunni Arab areas. As this happens, less force and fear is required to maintain the institutions as time goes on.

The second main implication of this state-building project is that attempts to degrade or destroy the Islamic state in areas where it has consolidated control will unavoidably become attempts to degrade and destroy the institutions

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of governance. As the Islamic State becomes the only game in town when it comes to rule of law, market regulation and the provision of social services, attacks on its institutions will lead to the degradation or collapse of these institutions with the attendant negative consequences for the population. In other words, a strategy by international actors to destroy the Islamic State is not just the destruction of an unwanted and deeply distasteful militant group, but has the potential to create a state of anarchy that is deeply harmful to those who experience it. In a region awash with weaponry, as well as ethnic and sectarian divisions, institutions of the rule of law and domestic order – as heavy-handed and appalling as they may be – are critical to the welfare and survival of communities. A strategy that is based primarily on the destruction of these proto-state institutions, without a robust operation to build replacement state institutions, risks doing further lasting harm.

Opponents of the Islamic State are therefore caught in a difficult policy quandary, as it has become virtually impossible to eliminate the profoundly negative consequences of Islamic State rule without harming the remaining institutions necessary for the provision of basic human needs. When opponents of the Islamic State come to recognize that they will only be successful in eliminating the group by offering a more compelling model of governance (which should not be impossible to do, given the Islamic State’s mixed record), they may begin to reduce the remarkable influence of these violent state-builders.

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The Islamic State’s model

By Aaron Y. Zelin, King’s College London

*This piece appeared on The Monkey Cage on January 28, 2015.

The Islamic State announced several months ago that it was “annexing” territory in Algeria (Wilayat al-Jazair), Libya (Wilayat al-Barqah, Wilayat al-Tarabulus and Wilayat al-Fizan), Sinai (Wilayat Sinai), Saudi Arabia (Wilayat al-Haramayn) and Yemen (Wilayat al-Yaman). It is likely that the Islamic State plans to pursue a similar approach in Afghanistan and Pakistan following its announcement of accepting pledges of allegiance from former members of the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban to also try and “annex” territory there under the framework of a new wilayah called “Wilayat Khorasan.” On its face, this bold declaration of an expanding number of wilayat (provinces) resembles the announcements by al-Qaeda of creating numerous franchises in the mid-2000s. The Islamic State’s “wilayat” strategy differs in significant ways from al-Qaeda’s “franchise” strategy, however.

The academic literature has shed great light on the al-Qaeda franchising strategy. In a recent article Daniel Byman highlights a number of key factors within the al-Qaeda network regarding motivations for affiliation and franchising. Typically, affiliates joined up with al-Qaeda as a result of failure. Affiliation helped with financial support; offered a potential haven that could be exploited, along with access to new training, recruiting, publicity and military expertise; gave branding and publicity; and opened up
personal networks from past foreign fighter mobilizations. It in turn helps al-Qaeda with mission fulfillment, remaining relevant, providing access to new logistics networks, and building a new group of hardened fighters.

But, Byman argues, those franchises often became as much a burden as an asset as local interests and views diverged with those of the parent organization. Leah Farrall argues that al-Qaeda increasingly came to view franchising “warily” in part due to its inability to always control its new partners such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and al-Qaeda in Iraq as well as because of backlash from unsuccessful cooptation of organizations such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group or Egyptian Islamic Jihad. This is one of the reasons why, prior to Osama bin Laden’s death, the Somali jihadi group Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen was not given franchise status. Bin Laden had apprehensions about the group’s utility due to past clan infighting and lack of unity. Following the death of bin Laden though, his replacement, Ayman al-Zawahiri, brought Shabab into the fold, but the results have been quite disastrous; Shabab has declined and also was in an internal feud between its foreign and local members. Will the Islamic State’s wilayat pose a similar burden?

There is one key difference between al-Qaeda’s and the Islamic State’s model for expansion. Al-Qaeda wanted to use its new franchises in service of its main priority: attacking Western countries to force them to stop supporting “apostate” Arab regimes, which without the support of Western countries would then be ripe for the taking. This has only truly worked out with its Yemeni branch, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). On the other hand, while the Islamic State does not have an issue with its supporters or grassroots activists attacking Western countries, its main priority is building out its caliphate, which is evident in its famous slogan baqiya wa tatamaddad (remaining and expanding). As a result, it has had a relatively clear agenda and model: fighting locally, instituting limited governance and conducting outreach. This differs from al-Qaeda’s more muddled approach – it hoped a local franchise would conduct external operations, but many times franchises would instead focus on local battles or attempts at governance without a clear plan, as bin Laden had warned. Moreover, the Islamic State has had a simple media strategy for telegraphing what it is doing on the ground to show its supporters, potential recruits and enemies that it is in fact doing something. This accomplishes more, even if it appears that the Islamic State is doing more than it actually is, in comparison with al-Qaeda’s practice of waiting for a successful external operation to succeed and then claiming responsibility after the fact.

How is this strategy working? So far, Libya and the Sinai appear to be the locations with the most promise, though the Islamic State’s presence in these areas should not be overstated. It certainly does not command the amount of territorial control as its base in Mesopotamia. That said, the Islamic State’s wilayat in Libya and the Sinai are following the same methodology on the ground and in the media as the Islamic State’s wilayat have in Iraq and Syria.

By contrast, its wilayat in Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen have yet to show any signs of activity. It is certainly possible that the Islamic State is playing a long game and preparing its soldiers and bureaucrats for future jihad, governance and dawa (propagation of Islam), but there are reasons to be skeptical as well. Following Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s announcement of the expansion of the Islamic State in mid-November, its media apparatus took over the media departments of all the local wilayat outside of Mesopotamia. This highlights that, at least on the media level, the Islamic State is in full command and control.

In Algeria, there were some signs of action that have since petered off. The leader of Wilayat al-Jazair, Abd al-Malik Guri (Khalid Abu Sulayman) was killed by the Algerian military on Dec. 22. Further, while northern Algerian-based jihadis have certainly conducted attacks over the years, they have had a difficult time operating or conducting sustainable campaigns that have resulted in gaining territory. Moreover, there have been no signs that Wilayat al-Jazair has conducted any military operations since it beheaded the French tourist Hervé Gourdel on Sept. 24, which was prior to the Islamic State accepting
the group into the fold. It has also not been involved in any type of governance or dawa activities.

There have also not been any formal military or governance activities carried out by the Islamic State’s wilayat in Saudi Arabia or Yemen. The Saudi government claims the Islamic State was involved in an attack that killed several Shiites in al-Ahsa on Nov. 3 and Islamic State supporters claimed responsibility for an attempted assassination of a Danish businessman through a drive-by shooting on a highway in Riyadh on Nov. 22. The Saudis have a history of dealing with insurgency against al-Qaeda on its territory from 2002-06 so are ready for any fight if the Islamic State attempts to start a campaign there.

As for Yemen, AQAP is the strongest jihadi presence and took major issue with Baghdadi’s announcement of creating a wilayah in Yemen. On Nov. 19, AQAP’s top sharia official, Harith al-Nazari, released a video rejecting the Islamic State’s claims and calling for the dissolution of all groups so as to pledge baya (religiously binding oath of allegiance), stating: “We reject the call to split the ranks of the mujahid groups” and “exporting the fighting and discord [in Syria] to other fronts.” As a result, although there are indeed some supporters of the Islamic State in Yemen, they have yet to show any sign of activity. It is possible that the jihadi dynamics in Yemen might change after the Houthis coup, but unless the Islamic State is able to take the reins of the AQAP apparatus from the inside, it has an uphill battle due to AQAP’s roots going back a decade. Therefore, it is unclear how the Islamic State hopes and plans to operate in those environments.

This leaves the Sinai and Libya as the primary models for the Islamic State’s expansion. In the first six weeks since Baghdadi’s announcement, it appeared that the Islamic State in Sinai was continuing to operate in a similar manner to how its predecessor in name Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis was acting by conducting attacks against the Egyptian military as well as gas pipelines. Since the beginning of 2015, there have been small signs of an expanded program including elements of Islamic State governance present elsewhere. For example, on Jan. 2, Wilayat Sinai burned marijuana after detaining drug traffickers and on Jan. 7 it distributed funds to residents of Rafah after the Egyptian military demolished their homes to create a buffer zone near the border with Gaza.

On top of these inchoate steps, similar to the promotion of Syria and Iraq as lands of opportunity for locals and locations for foreign fighters, the Islamic State has pushed similar narratives regarding the Sinai. When Baghdadi made his November announcement he stated that “we ask every individual amongst them to join the closest wilayah to him, and to hear and obey the wali [governor] appointed by us for it.” This further push illustrates the seriousness of this endeavor for the Islamic State. First, on Dec. 1, its semi-official media agencies al-Battar and al-Jabhah al-Ialamiyyah released the pamphlet “Come to the Sinai to Elevate the Foundations of Your State,” by Abu Musab al-Gharib, which echoes Baghdadi’s call. Further, on Jan. 16 the Islamic State’s official anashid (religiously-sanctioned a capella music) and Quranic recitation outlet Ajnad released a nashid titled “The Land of Sinai,” exhorting fighters and wannabe recruits to go forth. The Islamic State also has highlighted how it has scuttled gas deals, killed spies and built a foundation for tawhid (pure monotheism). Most recently, on Jan. 21, it released an ideological video, but it was not a stern lecture like those posted by al-Qaeda-styled groups. The video showed individuals in Wilayat Sinai hanging out together around a campfire, showing the life of a mujahid and the camaraderie involved, imbuing a particular ascetic for future members who join up.

Moving west, the Islamic State’s activities and operations are even more sophisticated and closer to how it operates in Syria and Iraq, though on a smaller scale. Libya has the most potential to replicate the Islamic State’s model in Mesopotamia if things go right for it. Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam, based in Derna and the named used prior to the Islamic State’s formal acceptance of its baya, was already involved in a variety of military, governance and dawa activities. Though in reality it only truly controls some neighborhoods in Derna, the activities have only increased and the Islamic State now also operates in Benghazi, Sirte, and Tripoli, and has created the self-styled Wilayat
Islamism in the IS Age

al-Barqah in the east, Wilayat al-Tarabulus in the west, and Wilayat al-Fizan in the south. There are also some signs that the Islamic State has siphoned off some of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya’s members, which could help accelerate its rise similar to how the Islamic State absorbed defecting Jabhat al-Nusra members in Syria.

Beyond the military fighting the Islamic State is doing in Derna and Benghazi, as well as its military parades in Sirte and an attack in Wilayat al-Fizan, it has also claimed to have executed two Tunisian journalists (though this has since been disputed by Tunisia’s ambassador in Libya), kidnapped 21 Christian Egyptians, and conducted an attack on the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli. In terms of governance types of activities, the Islamic State in Libya has primarily only focused on cultural symbolism. For example, it has conducted a number of hisbah (accountability) patrols in markets in Derna and Sirte making sure they are sharia-compliant and are not selling rotten or spoiled food, taking away stores selling hookahs since they view smoking tobacco as against Islam, and telling stores to stop selling their products when it is time for daily prayers. The Islamic State in Libya has also conducted some dawa activities, the largest was the forum “The Caliphate Upon the Manhaj [methodology] of the Prophet” on Nov. 25. It has also provided aid to the poor and needy and given gifts and sweets to children in Benghazi. The Islamic State now is attempting to impose regulations on locals within the health industry, specifically those in pharmacies.

On top of this, unlike the other wilayat there are clear signs that there is a foreign fighter presence in Libya. This is not to the same extent as in Syria or Iraq, but the fact that there are foreigners there illustrates the theater’s appeal. Although the Islamic State’s official presence in Libya did not begin until November, jihadi foreign fighters have been coming into Libya since 2012 when Algerians from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb began to make it another base of operations and a safe haven. There have also been a number of foreigners that have been members of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya in part due to the relationship and connections with its sister organization in Tunisia as well as its training for individuals to go fight abroad in Syria.

Most confirmed foreign fighters have come from surrounding countries to Libya, such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Sudan. Though there have also been cases of Saudi and Yemeni foreign fighters, as well as rumors of Palestinians and Syrians. It is difficult to know the total number of foreign fighters since some have left for other fights in Syria or the Sinai after receiving training or returned home to carry out attacks in Egypt or Tunisia. It is believed though that Tunisians make up the highest percentage of foreign fighters in Libya and that up to 20 percent of the jihadi fighters in Libya are of foreign origin.

Another sign of the importance and emphasis the Islamic State is placing on foreign fighter involvement in Libya is that its official media apparatus is beginning to announce martyrdom notices, as it has done in Iraq and Syria. Since it began two weeks ago, it has announced 10 cases, including six Tunisians, two Egyptians, one Saudi and one Sudanese all who died in the battles of Benghazi. Further, to encourage more emigration, the Islamic State released a story about how one Saudi fighter, Abd al-Hamid al-Qasimi, traveled to Libya to embark on the building of the “caliphate” in Wilayat Tarabulus. More importantly, and in line with the Islamic State’s media methodologies in Mesopotamia, it released a video message on Jan. 20 from two ethnic-Tuareg members of the Islamic State in Wilayat Tarbulus calling for individuals and jihadis in Azawad (a term used by some locals as a name for northern Mali) to pledge baya to Baghdadi and make hijrah (emigration) to the Islamic State in Libya. One of the men, Abu Umar al-Tawrigi, stated: “I call my Tuareg brothers to migrate to the Islamic State and that they give baya to emir al-muminin [leader of the faithful] Abu Bakr Al- Baghdadi.” Dozens of similar videos have come from the Islamic State’s foreign fighters based in Syria, from Bosnians to Canadians to French to Indonesians to Moldovans, among others that have produced videos in a similar vein.

The Islamic State does therefore seem to be attempting to follow the same tactics and strategies on the ground in Libya (and to a lesser extent in the Sinai) as it has already...
There is still a long way to go before either is consolidated in terms of territorial control or full monopoly on governance and security. Libya has the highest likelihood of success since there is no state, though there are limitations too since there is a multi-polar devolution of a variety of armed actors. The Islamic State will likely have more problems in the Sinai since the actors are stuck between two strong military states in Egypt and Israel as well as a Hamas-led Gaza government that fears the jihadis’ threat to its legitimacy. That said, if the Egyptian government continues to operate in a brazen manner militarily it will create new local recruits that could sustain the Islamic State in north Sinai. How this all ends is impossible to predict, but as of now, the Islamic State has indeed set itself up on a limited base in the Sinai and has established a growing movement in Libya more than two months following the announcement of its expansion.

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**Does the Islamic State believe in sovereignty?**

*By Richard A. Nielsen, Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

“This piece appeared on The Monkey Cage on February 6, 2015.

The Islamic State – which I refer to by its Arabic acronym, Daesh – has many of the attributes of a state.¹ To call Daesh an insurgency gives too little attention to its ambitions for territorial control, and to call it a state gives it a false air of legitimacy, but it falls somewhere between the two. Daesh, I contend, is an unusual state indeed because it does not believe in state sovereignty. Its ideology puts it fundamentally at odds with the norms of Westphalian sovereignty that have developed in the international system over the past three centuries.

One of Daesh’s goals is to erase political borders, starting with bulldozing barricades separating Syria and Iraq.² This border is particularly offensive to Daesh because it was created as part of the Sykes-Picot agreement between Britain and France that carved up the Ottoman Empire – the last caliphate in Daesh’s eyes – in the waning days of World War I. "We don’t believe in the Sykes-Picot agreement,” a Daesh spokesman explained while bulldozing the border.

Daesh’s border-free ambitions do not stop there. A map circulating on the Internet, purports to depict Daesh’s vision of its Islamic caliphate. While the provenance of this map is unclear, it is consistent with statements by the leadership of Daesh about what they see as the legitimate territory that Daesh should hold (note that the white borders within the black are administrative subdivisions.

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¹ Daesh is a transliteration of an Arabic acronym which stands for al-dawla al-islamiyya fi al-Iraq wal-Sham (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). I prefer Daesh because Daesh hates this moniker: http://motherboard.vice.com/read/why-isis-isnt-isis-or-islamic-state-and-what-we-should-really-call-it. For more on Daesh’s attributes of a state, see Quinn Mecham in this series.

as imagined by Daesh, not international borders). Perhaps beyond the borders of the black – what Daesh sees as traditionally Muslim lands – there might be some notion that other states have some form of sovereignty, but any sovereignty that infringes on these “historically Muslim lands” is illegitimate. Daesh might recognize sovereignty outside of these boundaries for precisely the reasons that it does not recognize sovereignty within them: God may have sanctioned these borders by not allowing Islam to ever spread beyond them.

Daesh claims that its attempt to assert exclusive political control over wide swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria is legitimate, but Daesh’s brand of sovereignty is very different from the existing international norms. Robert Jackson characterizes sovereignty as “a foundational idea of politics and law that can only be properly understood as, at one and the same time, both an idea of supreme authority in the state, and an idea of political and legal independence of geographically separate states.” Daesh demands recognition of its supreme authority, but it cannot, for religious reasons outlined below, recognize the legal independence of other states. This one-sided sovereignty is hardly a recognition of sovereignty at all.

Jihadist groups such as Daesh reject sovereignty primarily because of religious ideas. It is not merely a matter of political or military strategy, although Daesh’s willingness to flaunt international norms has brought it some temporary advantages. There are multiple religious justifications for Daesh’s position, but a common line of argument is that (1) God alone is worthy of worship and worship of anything else constitutes idolatry, (2) God has given humankind rules governing all aspects of life for individuals and societies, (3) following rules not established by God constitutes worship of those rules, (4) state sovereignty is a man-made rule that separates Muslims from each other by man-made borders, therefore (5) recognizing state sovereignty is a form of idolatry. Although Daesh rejects sovereignty on the basis of its religious ideas, this does not imply that Islam is incompatible with sovereignty. Islam as a unified, doctrinal entity is a fiction -- a more accurate statement is that Daesh’s interpretation of Islam rejects sovereignty, while other interpretations may or may not.

The ideology of Daesh is merely the latest incarnation of jihadist rejection of sovereignty, which Barak Mendelsohn details in his 2009 book. “The jihadi movement,” argues Mendelsohn, “goes beyond the targeting of specific states for specific grievances to a rejection of the foundations of the Westphalian state-based order.” To test whether he was right about how these jihadists thought about sovereignty, I searched for the term “sovereignty” and “Sykes-Picot” in a collection of 5,000 documents posted on the largest jihadist web-library on the Internet. Over 500 documents mentioned sovereignty and 130 mentioned “Sykes-Picot,” suggesting that these are not fringe concerns. A few examples from this collection give the flavor:

I exhort all Muslims: support the Mujahideen in Palestine with your souls, your money, materiel, information, opinion, and expertise, in spite of international resolutions and in spite of the borders of “Sykes-Picot.” (Ayman al-

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4 See Wagemakers, Joas in this series.

Zawahiri, “Facts of the Struggle Between Islam and the Infidels,” translation by author

We here are not striving for a handful of dust, or imaginary borders drawn by “Sykes” and “Picot,” and we do not strive to replace the Western tyrant with an Arab one. Rather, our Jihad is higher and nobler – we strive that the word of God be sovereign and that all judgment be God’s. (Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, “Our Legal Position on the Government of the ‘Karzai of Iraq’” translation by author)

Jihadists’ rejection of sovereignty goes back at least to the ideology professed by 20th-century Islamist intellectual Sayyid Qutb. In his 1964 book “Milestones” Qutb justifies jihad precisely because humans have embraced earthly, rather than heavenly, sovereignty; “The whole world is steeped in jahiliyya [ignorance]…based on rebellion against the sovereignty of Allah on earth. It attempts to transfer to man one of the greatest attributes of Allah, namely sovereignty, by making some men lords over others.” This idea is Qutb’s central argument in the main chapter on jihad, and Qutb explicitly states that the sovereignty of God requires eliminating sovereignty by humans:

Any system in which the final decisions are referred to human beings, and in which the source of all authority are men, defies human beings by designating others than Allah as lords over men. This declaration means the usurped authority of Allah be returned to Him and the usurpers thrown out – those who by themselves devise laws for others, elevating themselves to the status of lords and reducing others to the status of slaves. In short, to proclaim the authority and sovereignty of Allah means to eliminate all human kingdoms and to announce the rule of the Sustainer of the universe over the entire earth.6

Jihadists are not the only Islamist actors in the region who reject sovereignty on religious grounds. For example, Hakim al-Muteiri, an assistant professor at Kuwait University’s College of Sharia and Islamic Studies – not a jihadist – went on Al Jazeera’s popular show “Sharia and Life” in 2012 and had this exchange with the host, Uthman Uthman:

Uthman Uthman: As I understand you, the current jihad in Syria is obligatory. Is it obligatory only for Syrians living in Syria, or for Syrians elsewhere, or more generally for Muslims in the region?

Hakim al-Muteiri: The house of Islam is one, and the legal rulings are one. This map that was imposed by Sykes-Picot and imposed by the Western occupation is of no consideration legally.7

There are many groups around the globe that are unhappy with state borders as they currently exist, and it is tempting to view Daesh as another of these groups. However, there is a fundamental difference. Many groups make their territorial claims on the basis of existing norms of sovereignty, asserting that current borders are illegitimate because they violate the right of a people to collective self-determination. Such groups are challenging existing borders, but not underlying norms of sovereignty. In contrast, Daesh is not just dissatisfied with the current borders, but rejects the possibility of borders at all.

Some scholars have argued that Daesh will start to “believe in sovereignty” once the group consolidates territory and starts governing. The argument posits that pragmatic governance issues could lead Daesh to moderate its radical rejection of the legitimacy of international borders and the international system. After all, it could be hard to govern while perpetually provoking war with great powers. Such arguments for the power of structure to change behavior and ideology are common, for instance, the claim that Islamist parties moderate once they come into power or that states become more responsible once they acquire nuclear weapons.8

6 Qutb, Sayyid. 1964. Milestones. 47.

7 Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRFZu8TdO-k or text: http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/religionandlife/2012/8/2/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87, translation by author.

However, it is not a given that Daesh will adopt more traditional norms of sovereignty as it becomes expedient and it is unlikely that Daesh will begin respecting norms of sovereignty as it begins to govern. Daesh will be adamant about defending its own territorial integrity: Its religion-based doctrine practically forbids it from recognizing the sovereignty of other states even if doing so would be strategically advantageous. Religious beliefs are “sticky,” and Daesh’s ideology is at the core of its identity.

Daesh’s rejection of sovereignty is more than strategic. Daesh’s disbelief in norms of international sovereignty means that it is likely to be a maximally expansionist for some time to come. This makes it difficult, or probably impossible, for other states to bargain with Daesh, because maximally expansionist goals effectively eliminate the range of possible bargains. Add to this the idea that Daesh is doctrinally committed to the illegitimacy of all such agreements and it becomes unlikely that normal international relations could ever occur, even if Daesh carves out a state in northern Syria and Iraq. Daesh’s existence poses a fundamental challenge to international order, not only to the people under its rule.

Salafi ideas on state-building before and after the rise of the Islamic State

By Joas Wagemakers, Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands

*A version of this piece appeared on The Monkey Cage on January 27, 2015.

Salafis, who I define as the Sunnis who claim to emulate the first three generations of Muslims (al-salaf al-salih) as closely and in as many spheres of life as possible, do not have very detailed views on how to build a state. This is partly because of the position they have in society. If one limits oneself to quietist Salafis and Jihadi-Salafis, as I do in this memo, it becomes clear that the former stay away from direct political involvement through parliamentary participation, demonstrations or other contentious political action altogether and, instead, simply want to focus on studying and teaching the message of Islam. Their apolitical focus on the propagation of Islam (dawa), which is the feature that causes me to call them “quietists,” makes Islamic state-building irrelevant to them for the moment and postpones taking action in this regard to an indefinite point in the future.

For Jihadi-Salafis, the idea of an Islamic state is quite important and directly applicable since this is what their efforts are geared toward in the short term. Their excommunication (takfir) of the rulers of the Muslim world as apostates (murtaddun) and unbelievers (kuffar) and their contention that jihad may thus be waged against them, which I see as Jihadi-Salafis’ defining feature, makes Islamic state-building a real and relevant issue to them. Yet Jihadi-Salafis also lack detailed views on how to set up an Islamic state, precisely because they believe they first need to get rid of all the “apostate” regimes ruling the Muslim world. Their alternatives to the Muslim world’s
current rulers therefore mostly go no further than “Islam” or “the application of the sharia,” as if such “solutions” are self-evident and will simply work themselves out. This memo focuses on quietist and Jihadi-Salafi views on state-building: how they differ, where they converge and what the rise of the Islamic State (IS) tells us about these ideas.

**Differences in State-Building between Quietist and Jihadi-Salafis**

Despite the diversity of quietist Salafis, all of them have in common that they refuse to get involved in contentious politics: Whatever their activities, they are never subversive or working actively in opposition to the ruler. Either through their implicit approval of the regime by shunning political activism or their explicit agreement with the ruler by rubber stamping decisions, quietists support their rulers. The only active political involvement one could ascribe to them is their willingness to counsel the ruler through discrete and private advice (nasiha). This does not mean that quietists believe politics to be alien to Islam. On the contrary, quietist Salafis see politics as an integral part of Islam. It is just that they view today’s societies as not yet ready for a truly Islamic state, which is one reason they stress the need for dawa: Society needs to be prepared and educated for the Islamic state that will eventually come, some day.

The quietist attitude toward politics, regimes and an Islamic state seems far removed from that of Jihadi-Salafis and, in a sense, it is. The latter strive for setting up an Islamic state from the top down by declaring the rulers of Muslim countries to be kuffar for their alleged unwillingness to apply Islamic law (sharia) in full and their often friendly military, political and economic ties with non-Muslim countries, which Jihadi-Salafis describe as an illegitimate form of loyalty (wala) to unbelief (kufr). The opposite of this loyalty – disavowal (bara) – cannot be expressed in a more explicit way than through jihad. The “man-made laws” (qawanin wadiyya) and the illegitimate loyalty of “apostate” Muslim rulers must therefore be countered by jihad to topple these regimes and set up Islamic ones in their stead. Although Jihadi-Salafi scholars often do not actively call upon their followers to wage jihad against regimes in the Muslim world everywhere and all the time, they do believe that such a revolutionary strategy – though perhaps not always wise – is legitimate in principle. As such, the way to achieve an Islamic state as espoused by Jihadi-Salafis – the violent overthrow of existing regimes – could not be further removed from the obedience and advice to rulers promoted by quietist Salafis.

**Similarities in State-Building between Quietist and Jihadi-Salafis**

Although the way to get to an Islamic state may be quite different in quietist and Jihadi-Salafi circles, the end result is not. Both believe in an Islamic state about which little more is known than that it should be led by a pious Muslim leader who, as a shepherd (rai), will guide his flock (raiyya) by means of his just rule, through which everything will then presumably fall into place. Such ideas have long been part of Islam and have been expressed by prominent mediaeval scholars such as al-Mawardi, Ibn Jama’a and Ibn Taymiyya, for whom subservience to the pious ruler was of paramount importance. Both quietist and Jihadi-Salafis agree that such a situation has not been reached yet, but that it should be attainable in the future. The concrete idea of an ideal Islamic state – a state with a pious Muslim ruler guiding the Muslim community (umma) by means of the just application of the sharia – is thus no different for quietist and Jihadi-Salafis. The fact that the latter believe this can only be achieved through Islamically inspired revolution and quietists contend that rulers can be advised and nudged into the direction of this ideal does not fundamentally alter their shared view of what an Islamic state should look like.

Similarly, Salafi views on state-building among both quietists and Jihadi-Salafis rely on concepts that a) date back to the time of the different Islamic caliphates and b) all pivot around the position of the leader. Although the history of Islam shows that the caliph was not always the ultimate leader over Muslims because, in practice, local rulers or sultans often usurped his power, in theory the caliph did enjoy his subjects’ loyalty, which was expressed
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through a personal pledge of fealty (baya). The caliph himself was ideally appointed on the basis of consultation (shura) by “the people who loosen and bind” (ahl al-hall wa-l-aqd), a vaguely defined group of notable scholars. Although these terms are hundreds of years old, are derived from a system of governance that no longer exists and all revolve around the person of the caliph, they are nevertheless the definite means of achieving an Islamic state in the eyes of Salafis. For quietists, such concepts may not be directly relevant right now for reasons explained above, but they nevertheless accept these notions as deciding factors in appointing a caliph just as much as Jihadi-Salafis do.

The Impact of the Rise of the Islamic State

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) set itself apart from most other radical Islamist groups by actually settling in a certain territory and establishing a state there. In June 2014, the group even declared a caliphate and changed its name simply to “the Islamic State” (IS). Even al-Qaeda, which has long had similar ambitions to establish a caliphate encompassing all Muslims, has never achieved this. In its justification for the announcement of its caliphate, IS has made use of precisely those classical Islamic concepts mentioned above: its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had been vetted by a group of scholars described as the ahl al-hall wa-l-aqd, was found by them to be a pious Muslim ruler who fit all the criteria set for a caliph and was therefore worthy of believers’ bayaa.

Apart from the genuine belief among IS-supporters that this is the way to found an Islamic state or caliphate, one could obviously argue that such concepts provide a certain amount of legitimacy for a project that is widely doubted (and even ridiculed) in the Muslim world. Interestingly, however, Salafi opponents of IS – while highly critical of the group’s violent policies – do not fundamentally argue about these concepts as such. Quietist Salafis dismiss IS altogether as a modern-day form of the early-Islamic “extremists” called the Khawarij, but Jihadi-Salafis opposed to IS readily engage in debates about bayaa and the ahl al-hall wa-l-aqd. In these debates, they do not contest

the use of these concepts or their legitimacy, but only their application. IS’s ahl al-hall wa-l-aqd, for example, are described by some Jihadi-Salafis as consisting of only a small group of minor scholars unrepresentative of the people they are supposed to serve. Similarly, al-Baghdadi is seen as not ruling over a sufficient amount of territory or not widely known enough to justify giving him one’s bayaa.

Since such a pledge of fealty is a contract between two parties – the ruler and the people – one cannot simply take shortcuts to a caliphate by dismissing the latter if they are not ready for it yet, critical Jihadi-Salafis argue.

The alternative to IS that Jihadi-Salafis critical of that organisation come up with in their debates about founding an Islamic state is therefore not principally different, but only procedurally. As such, one can conclude that Salafi ideas on state-building in general only diverge from those espoused by the supporters of IS in the details. This means that, despite the fierce criticism that Salafis of various types level against IS, they actually resemble one another quite a lot with regard to state-building. Still, the rise of IS has made clear to Jihadi-Salafis that for an Islamic state to work, it needs the support of the people, who must be ready and willing to tolerate such a project. This makes dawa as a means of preparing people for the ultimate goal of Islamic statehood all the more necessary. Although some Jihadi-Salafis have recognised this for some time, quietists have obviously taken this long-term approach for decades. As such, the rise of IS may have contributed to a greater realisation among Jihadi-Salafis that founding an Islamic state requires sustained efforts and, in general, is no sinecure.

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The Islamic State identity and legacies of Baath rule in Syria’s northeast

By Kevin Mazur, Princeton University

* This memo was prepared for the "Rethinking Nations and Nationalism" workshop hosted at the University of Southern California, February 6, 2015.

The rapid territorial expansion of the Islamic State and the obedience of populations under its control in Syria owe much to the group’s military and economic resources and the fear they engender. But no authority can rule through pure force or pure charisma in perpetuity, which raises an important question: What are the prospects that a religiously inspired state strikes root in the areas of Syria currently controlled by the Islamic State? Because the Islamic State’s takeover is hardly a year old and fighting is ongoing in much of this territory, it is too early to say definitively whether local populations will absorb the severe ideology of their rulers.

Yet any entity seeking to control Syria’s northeast will have to either displace or adapt to the set of state-society relations formed by the Baath regime’s indirect rule and penetration of the tribes in this area. While the Islamic State is working to forge a ruler-ruled relationship in line with its vision of society, it has also has to work through these existing structures, suggesting that its project will be no simple task.

Syria’s northeastern region, stretching from just east of Aleppo to the Iraq border, is primarily inhabited by semi-sedentary and recently sedentarized people of Sunni Arab, tribal extraction. They share the Sunni and Arab identity of the leaders of the Islamic State, but that does not mean that there is an organic solidarity between the local society and an authority claiming Islamic religious legitimacy.

Compared to their non-tribal (though also Sunni Arab) neighbors, Syrians of tribal background tend to be engaged in more mobile occupations (e.g., livestock grazing and long-distance trucking) and have greater mutual obligations and duties among extended kin. Religion has historically played a weaker role in structuring their social life, though linkages to the Gulf diminished this difference in recent years. Before the coming of the Islamic State, for example, women’s dress was less tightly controlled and religious practices and discourse carried less symbolic power in Manbij, a primarily tribal city, than they did in al-Bab, a nearby primarily non-tribal city.1 On the other hand, labor migration and tribal linkages to the Gulf have been a conduit for more austere forms of religious practice to make their way into northeastern Syrian society.2

It is, at the present moment, difficult to judge the extent to which the Islamic State’s ideology has been absorbed by the populations under its rule. Social actors have an incentive to hide their true preferences when they deviate from those of the prevailing political authority, a behavior that Timur Kuran refers to as “preference falsification.”3 There have, however, been instances where local populations reveal their hostility toward the Islamic State in spite of the reprisal this position invites; clashes have broken out in several cities under Islamic State control between local populations and Islamic State forces when the latter have confronted local women who refuse to wear the niqab (face veil).4 Such exceptions to the rule of preference falsification provide some indication that the absorption of the Islamic State’s political vision has been uneven at best.

The cultural distance between ruler and ruled, and the skirmishes it engenders, would be unmistakable if the Islamic State were displacing an authority that had long been firmly rooted in the local society and its customs and traditions. Yet the disconnection between the ideology of


central political authorities and the practices of the local populations in Syria's northeast is nothing new. Rather, it is one of the techniques by which the Syrian state ruled the region. The Baathist state never attempted to penetrate society and shape it according to its developmental vision as it did in other areas of the country. As a result, leaders of local communities became accustomed to the sort of preference falsification required to project allegiance to an ideological regime while making minimal alterations to life unobserved by that regime. In contrast to the other regions of the country, the Syrian state’s presence—in terms of public services, presence of security forces, and general efforts to “modernize” or remake society in its image—was relatively light. Little effort was made to develop direct relations between subject and state in this region, and political relations between state and locality were run primarily through wujuha, the leaders of local communities. For example, outside of the major cities of Hassakeh and Deir al-Zor, police and the state justice system would handle petty crime but routinely allow tribal leaders to adjudicate major crimes like rape or murder.

The Baath government managed the northeast through a policy of divide-and-rule, empowering particular tribes at the expense of others and building linkages to lower level figures outside of the formal structure of tribes. By apportioning seats in the Parliament for tribal leaders and providing access to lucrative jobs in the military and security services, the regime purchased the loyalty and assistance of many tribal communities. For example, outside of the major cities of Hassakeh and Deir al-Zor, police and the state justice system would handle petty crime but routinely allow tribal leaders to adjudicate major crimes like rape or murder.

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The work of the Baath to encourage competition among elements within a single tribe is part of a longer historical process by which tribal populations have come under the influence of the central Syrian state. For much of the Ottoman period, city-based authorities did little to regulate the activities of tribes except as they bore upon the safety and trade of the city. Under French Mandatory rule (1918-1946) and during the post-independence republican period (1946-1958), tribes were gradually drawn under the purview of the Syrian state. State-tribe bargaining took place primarily between governmental officials and heads of tribes as representatives of putatively bounded, unified social groupings during this period. The policies of Baathist governments (1963-present) toward tribes, including land reform, military and security recruitment among tribal groups, and the granting of subsidies to livestock grazing cooperatives, began to touch parts of tribal society below the sheiks with whom governments had formerly negotiated. These contacts between tribal members and the state at points below the leaders of whole tribes encouraged the competition characteristic of the Baath period.

Seen in this light, the Baath penetration of tribal structures represents not a collapse of internally solidary tribes that had previously existed in a stateless vacuum but the continuation of a slow-moving process by which the external pressure of central state authority molds local tribal society. With this history as a guide, we should not be surprised to see new relations and practices to appear under Islamic State rule, but we should also not be surprised if the intra-tribal competition for access to state power characteristic of the Baath period continues. This prediction is borne out by the available evidence, with the Islamic State working through existing networks to exploit (and be exploited by) competition among tribal leaders. In several cases, one local


branch of a tribe has joined the Islamic State as a form of competition with and protection from a rival neighbor that had joined Jabhat al-Nusra, the Salafist jihadist group from which the Islamic State split. This sort of rivalry was one of the precipitating factors in the dispute between members of Shaitat tribe in Deir al-Zor province and members of the Islamic State in August 2014, which escalated to the killing of 11 Islamic State members and several hundred members of the tribe. Struggle over oil revenues and harassment of Shaitat members for un-Islamic behavior, such as smoking, figured into the confrontation, but its immediate catalyst was the Islamic State's arrest of a man who recently returned to his village after receiving assurances that he would be protected. The arrest came at the behest of another local tribal community, exploiting its closer relationship with the Islamic State to settle an inter-group feud. 9

The competition to secure the loyalty of local populations in Syria’s northeast has been cast in terms of overarching national, ethnic, and religious identities, some of which challenge not only the right of the current regime to rule but the notion of Syria as a legitimate territorial entity. Patterns of allegiance and compliance on the ground, however, suggest that far more parochial interests are shaping this competition. In the first year of the uprising, President Bashar al-Assad made repeated visits to Syria’s northeast to bolster relations with local sheiks and wujuha. In his November 2011 visit to Raqqah to celebrate Eid al-Adha – an unprecedented trip to the periphery for the head of state – Assad proclaimed that the tribes “were always the national repository of the traditions and authentic positions in their wataniyya and qawmiyya dimensions.” 10 These visits culminated with pledges of loyalty from several important tribal leaders in Raqqah and Deir Al-Zor, who implored their populations to stay out of demonstrations. Yet many of the earliest pledges of loyalty by societal actors to the Islamic State came from these same tribes. 11 Similarly, Islamic State foreign fighters have complained of the fickleness of the local communities that are nominally allied with the group. The success of the regime in winning a major battle with the Islamic State near Deir Az-Zor in February 2015 can be attributed to fighters from local clans firing RPGs at Islamic State fighters from behind their lines. 12

The local communities encountered by the Islamic State are neither peak organizations with which a state entity can simply contract to buy the compliance of its subjects nor a set of disconnected individuals lying in wait for a sufficiently convincing ideology around which to structure their political and social lives. Rather, 50 years of Baath divide-and-rule policies laid the groundwork for the shifting alliances that we observe today in Syria’s northeast. The first year of Islamic State control has shown us that local groups in Syria’s northeast are, first and foremost, interested in defending their communities and will partner with the group most likely to make this happen. Any political entity that seeks to gain the sustained, widespread compliance of the area’s local populations will have to work from this inheritance.

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Islamism in the IS Age

The ISIS-ification of Islamist politics

By Khalil al-Anani, Johns Hopkins University and George Washington University

* This piece appeared on The Monkey Cage on January 30, 2015.

The rapid emergence of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS and by the Arabic acronym Daesh, has increasingly led to the “Daeshification” (or ISIS-ification) of Islamist politics. Scholars of Islamist movements and the movements themselves have been forced to redefine their ideologies, strategies and rhetoric in the face of this new force. It might be difficult, at least for now, to gauge the actual popularity of the Islamic State among other Islamist movements, particularly “veteran” ones such as the Muslim Brotherhood and its sisters. However, it is clear that these groups have been forced to adapt. The Islamic State’s rise has had both direct and indirect effects on the internal politics and debates of Islamist movements, particularly after Egypt’s coup of 2013 and the unprecedented repression and animosity against Islamists across the region.

This pressure has been reinforced by the tendency among media, policymakers, think-tankers, commentators, etc. to blur the lines between Islamist groups. Politicians and policymakers, particularly in the Middle East, are keen to link the Islamic State to other Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in order to vilify and demonize the latter. For these politicians, the “threat” is not the Islamic State, but rather those movements that contest elections, have social networks, respect the rules of the game and seek power. Hence, the “war on terror” is the political bandwagon that validates their narrative about Islamists. Such rhetoric serves the interests of the Islamic State, which aims to represent itself as the most authentic and realistic alternative for Islamists. By declaring a caliphate (khilafa) and creating a state, they claim to have achieved what other Islamists failed to do. It is in the Islamic State’s interest to show other Islamist movements as reckless and less “Islamic” in order to delegitimize them and recruit more supporters. The blurring of the lines between different groups aids their cause by facilitating outreach to disaffected members of other groups, and magnifying its perceived strength.

The broadest effect has been what I call the “Daeshification” of the Islamic terrain. Islamism, as a political ideology, resembles a fashion market where Islamists can promote and sell their ideologies and ideas. Over the past three decades, this market has witnessed the ups and downs of different types of Islamism starting with the “revolutionary” Islam after the Iranian revolution in 1979 and moving to the “awakening Islam” (al-sahwa al-Islamiyya) during the 1980s and 1990s. During the 2000s the so-called “light Islam” was propagated by the new preachers, and now we are in the moment of the “unruly” Islamists in places such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Egypt’s Sinai, Libya, Nigeria and Europe. Throughout these waves, Islamists have competed, fought and outsmarted each other. They are involved in a battle over “hearts and minds” to expand their constituencies and increase their appeal among young Muslims.

The Islamic State is seizing the current moment to present itself as a role model for young Islamists around the globe, pushing them to adopt its ideology and emulate its tactics and strategy. The Islamic State hopes to become a hegemonic socio-religious force by capitalizing on the failure of the so-called Arab Spring, the weakness of the Arab states and the decline of moderate Islamists. Its appeal reflects not only the young Islamists’ mistrust in other Islamist movements but also their admiration of the Islamic State’s boldness and capabilities. Despite its brutal and barbaric behavior, The Islamic State’s support is growing across the region from Yemen to Algeria. Indeed, it is through this barbarism and aggressiveness that the Islamic State can attract and persuade supporters to join its ranks and to experience its boldness themselves as if it is an entertaining game.

Therefore, in order to understand the paradox of the Islamic State’s brutality and appeal among young Islamists and Muslims, scholars need to consider the role of emotions in studying Islamism. As Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper have argued, emotions form the
raw materials for [social] movement sympathy and recruitment. It is also important to integrate social psychology and passionate politics into the study of Islamists, particularly of radical Islamists. To understand how and why some individuals act in the extreme — such as Amedy Coulibaly, who was involved in the kosher supermarket attack in France, or Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who is on trial for the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing — their motivations and psychology need to be unraveled.

Despite the enormous differences between the Islamic State and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the former’s rise and boldness coupled with the crackdown against the Brotherhood has created divisions and rifts within the Brotherhood, triggering intensive debates between the leadership and youth. These debates anchor around three key issues: the viability of political participation, the use of violence and the relationship with the current regime. However, this is not to say that the Brotherhood will follow the Islamic State’s path or adopt its ideology, but rather to shed light on the movement’s current crisis and examine its consequences on the movement’s future.

After decades of participating in formal politics, contesting elections and vying for public office, many of the Brotherhood’s youth members seem to be abandoning this path in favor of street politics and protests. Driven by frustration and despair, youth members have lost faith in formal politics and view it as leading to nowhere. One year and half since the removal of President Mohamed Morsi, the movement maintains its weekly protests relentlessly. With many first- and second-tier Brotherhood leaders in prison or in exile, the youth have become more influential and are now running the movement’s activities. True that protests reinforce the organizational cohesion of the movement, but it also denotes that the movement has abandoned its old ways of doing politics. Its youth seem to have reached the conclusion that power doesn’t necessarily stem from the ballot box but it can also be gained from defiance and rebellion.

Despite the fact that the Brotherhood had denounced violence decades ago, the brutal repression and regime humiliation renewed the debate over the use of violence. While the movement’s leadership remains committed to peaceful protests, some of its youth have considered using “tactical” violence against police forces. Until now, the use of violence in this context is more political than religious. It is driven mainly by the frustration and disenchantment of the Brotherhood’s young members. The political and security pressure against the Brotherhood has put its leadership in a tough position between the regime and the youth who have become increasingly angry and dissatisfied with the movement’s tendency to accommodate regime repression.

One of the longstanding features of the Brotherhood is compromise with the regime. However, this has not been the case since the July 3 coup. The Brotherhood has replaced its flexible and accommodative character with a more rigid and confrontational one. Members and leaders of the movement seem to be determined to challenge the regime despite its brutality. As a result, the Brotherhood is involved in a collision course not only with the military but also with other institutions including the judiciary, police, media and state bureaucracy. For the first time since it returned to political life in the 1970s, the Brotherhood is rejecting the rules of the game and seeking to change them. The bold and defiant attitude among the young Brotherhood reveals a stark generational gap.

While these debates are not likely to be settled soon, they reflect the ongoing transformations and changes occurring within the Brotherhood in a time of unprecedented repression. These debates may lead to more cleavages within the movement, particularly between the leadership and the youth, and could put the future of the Brotherhood at stake. Furthermore, the rise of the Islamic State combined with the repression against moderate Islamists opens wide gates for radicalization and extremism in the region and could reshape Islamist politics for years to come.

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Mutual escalation in Egypt

By Mokhtar Awad, Center for American Progress, and Nathan J. Brown, George Washington University

* This piece appeared on The Monkey Cage on February 9, 2015.

Since the overthrow of former president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, Egyptian political rhetoric has been overheated. But something different seems to be afoot in both camps. Among the Muslim Brotherhood’s supporters, subtle excuses for political violence are giving way to more open calls. On the side of the regime of now-President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi, there is an attempt to move the religious apparatus of the state from acceptance of the suppression of Islamists to enthusiastic support while using the media to direct anger at jihadists to all Islamists.

Both sides blame the other for the escalation, while each seems to believe that its own moves serve its self-interest. In doing so, the parties show a worrying abandonment of any acceptance of responsibility for their own words and deeds. Their mutual stridency may soon become a self-fulfilling prophecy that ensures the escalation of conflict in a country that is already experiencing some of the worst political violence of its modern history.

The rhetorical escalation has been quite striking. In a broadcast from Istanbul, for example, a slick haired television presenter on the Muslim Brotherhood funded and managed Masr al-An (Egypt Now) channel recently delivered an ominous message, “I say to the wife of every officer...your husband will die, your children will be orphaned...these kids [“revolutionaries”] will kill the officers in Egypt.” This was not an isolated incident of open incitement on Masr al-An. Three other Turkey-based pro-Brotherhood channels (al-Sharq, Mukammilin and Rabaa) echo similar incendiary rhetoric and cheer on the “popular resistance,” hunkering down for confrontation with the regime. Meanwhile, in Cairo, there is a similar level of vitriol, with the regime-driven media linking the Muslim Brotherhood with the Sinai-based Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis – which refers to itself as the Sinai Province of the Islamic State. The regime has labeled the Brotherhood as an enemy of the Egyptian state, which must be combated, and blames it for various plots against Egyptian interests.

The Islamist and Brotherhood embrace of confrontational rhetoric was evident in a recent “Message to the Ranks of Revolutionaries: ‘and Prepare’” uploaded to an official Web site of the Brotherhood. After a helpful reminder that the group’s logo of two swords and “Prepare” are all “synonyms of strength,” the message continued to remind, “Imam [Hasan] al-Banna [Brotherhood founder] equipped jihad brigades he sent to Palestine to fight the Zionist usurpers. And the second Guide, Hasan al-Hudaybi, restored the ‘secret apparatus’ [paramilitary] formations to attrit the British occupiers.” It concluded, “We are at the beginning of a new phase where we summon our strength and evoke the meaning of jihad, and prepare ourselves, our wives, our sons and daughters and whoever follows our path for relentless jihad where we ask for martyrdom.” While this controversial essay did not directly call for violence, many Egyptians interpreted it as a departure.

This is significant, but the Brotherhood’s embrace of more pugnacious sentiments may not yet amount to a total repudiation of the political track taken since the 1970s and 1980s, when Umar Tilmasani led the group to embrace gradual change and disavow revolution and violence. There are signs that the more confrontational attitude of rank-and-file youth in Egypt is creeping up the hierarchy, however. Since Morsi’s ouster, Brotherhood leaders have insisted that their “strategic” decision was non-violence, but that they were unable to restrain angry youth, especially those outside the movement, or that their own “counter-violence” is an expected reactionary response. Ongoing developments indicate that these are no longer merely rhetorical positions. The recent reported restructuring of the organization – which favors decentralization and a greater role for youth (many of whom urge confrontation) – and embrace of such statements suggests that this is not just a matter of
Brothers being angry for the moment but suggests that a substantial reorientation of the Brotherhood may be underway, which could lead back to ideas its leaders had attempted to root out for decades.

The Brotherhood remains a diverse movement with many tendencies. The ideas of Sayyid Qutb and Abd al-Qadir Awda (who rejected the legitimacy of any system not based on the Islamic sharia) have never disappeared from the movement. But they have been interpreted in non-violent ways and kept under tight control by the movement’s rigid hierarchy. In the period since Morsi’s ouster, the top leadership of the movement seems to be losing a bit of its grip as well as some of its will to contain the tougher turn. And it certainly holds no sway over those who used to sympathize with the Brotherhood but never joined the movement’s ranks and subjected them to its discipline or broke off. Neo-Qutbist youths who fully embrace jihad and decry democracy began to emerge shortly after the Rabaa massacre in August 2013 when Egyptian security forces killed hundreds of pro-Morsi demonstrators, but were at first actively sidelined and even ridiculed. Some infamous youth, like Ahmad al-Mughir and Abd al-Rahman Izz, were initially accused of being tools of Egyptian intelligence because of their relentless calls for violence. But now their ideas are taking hold.

This is exacerbated in that the Brotherhood, in its bid to make its cause a pan-Islamist one, has allowed radical former Brothers and other Islamists to join it on the platform. Inflammatory preachers like Wagdy Ghoneim – who virtually beat everyone else to the punch by deeming Sissi an apostate even before the Rabaa massacre in August 2013 when Egyptian security forces killed hundreds of pro-Morsi demonstrators, but were at first actively sidelined and even ridiculed. Some infamous youth, like Ahmad al-Mughir and Abd al-Rahman Izz, were initially accused of being tools of Egyptian intelligence because of their relentless calls for violence. But now their ideas are taking hold.

refrain after the Brotherhood’s endorsement of the radical call for a “Muslim Youth Intifada” in November 2014. The attempt to make the current conflict one about Islam was casually explained only months following the coup as part of a strategy to rile up quietist Salafis.

Pro-Brotherhood channels also help increase the profile of radical conspiracy theorists like journalist Sabir Mashhur who labels the army as “occupiers” and “crusaders” fighting the “Egyptian Muslims.” He offers such violent advice to the “revolutionaries” that if they hit the first and last tank in the column with rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) the division will melt away. Furthermore, he echoes other increasing calls to follow the path of the Iranian revolution.

Over the past year groups calling themselves “Popular Resistance,” “Execution Movement,” and recently a group called “Revolutionary Punishment,” have carried out everything from drive-by shootings of police officers, sabotage of public utilities and private businesses, to planting small improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that are increasingly deadlier and more sophisticated. In the weeks leading up to January 25, the fourth anniversary of the Egyptian revolution, the pro-Brotherhood channels fully embraced these groups and even called on them to execute pro-regime media figures. These groups may be violent but are non-jihadist in ideology and discourse, although this may change.

The somewhat intentionally ambiguous statement on the official Web site, signed by an anonymous “Knight of the Revolution,” and the use of proxy satellite channels may be a still conscious attempt to maintain some distance and deniability with regard to calls for violence, but the feistier statements are becoming thicker and the effort to explain them away is wearing thin. Brotherhood leaders continue to insist that these calls must be put into “context” of inflammatory rhetoric on the pro-government side. In one private conversation, a Brotherhood leader, when confronted about the reality of radical ideas creeping into his organization, seemed resigned to being powerless to push against the tide and engage the base, though he continued to lay the blame on the regime.
The regime, for its part, is hardly trying to quiet things down. Media personalities and religious officials increasingly deny any distinction between the openly jihadist Islamic State-affiliated Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis on the one hand and the wavering and formerly governing Muslim Brotherhood on the other. Some pro-regime media figures have maintained the bloody rhetoric from 2013, such as demanding that the minister of interior become a “killer.” Others called for special forces to intervene in the Matariyya district when it served as the site of a recent attempted Islamist sit in. Amr Adib, a famous television host, used the occasion of the Islamic State burning of the Jordanian pilot to tell viewers that this is what “the children of the Brotherhood look like.” There have not been wide scale instances of vigilantism directed at Islamists mobilized by such rhetoric. But a policeman recently shot dead a Muslim Brotherhood youth charged with planting an IED, saying that he was moved by Sissi’s anti-terror speech. Also, a vigilante group claiming to avenge the dead soldiers in the recent attacks in the Sinai burned the car of Muslim Brotherhood Supreme Guide Mohammad Badie’s son while another in Fayyoum calling itself “The Popular Deterrence Battalion” on Facebook promised to “burn or blow-up” any Brotherhood businesses as revenge for the January Sinai attack.

The authorities seem to revel in the Brotherhood’s now visible embrace of “popular resistance,” seeing it as vindicating proof of their claims of Brotherhood violence rather than a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Brotherhood’s decision to embrace violent elements and radical rhetoric is squarely its responsibility, but the fertile environment for such extremism afforded by the regime’s brutal crackdown and lack of de-escalation cannot be ignored. The radicals will continue to find excuses but prisoner abuse and heavy-handed security measures only fuel those dreaming of confrontation. In an interview, a top security official said his police force has no issue with “law-abiding” Brothers and that his ministry leaves unmolested the many non-violent Brothers that even hold jobs in the state bureaucracy. Yet publicly, the state insists on spreading unproven allegations that the Muslim Brotherhood is behind the deadliest of violence in the Sinai.

In one sense, the level of state vitriol is nothing new after labeling the Brotherhood a terrorist organization in December 2013. Indeed, for a while, this seemed to be a political tactic to justify the crackdown, but the mobilization of the media and imams to denounce the attacks now seems to be a strategic shift that treats all Islamists alike. And it has been repeatedly endorsed by Sissi in stark terms. Immediately after the Sinai attack on Jan. 29, Sissi said: “Those who helped you…we know and see them, and won’t leave them,” meaning the Brotherhood, as he earlier relayed a story he often tells of an unnamed Brotherhood leader who threatened violence if Morsi was removed. In another speech hosted by the Egyptian Armed Forces he said, “I will not restrain your hands to avenge Egypt’s martyrs” it was directed at the Armed Forces and police, but many – especially the Islamists – have interpreted it as a message to all Egyptians, which is something Islamists allege is a call for civil war.

But in its most dramatic, if little noticed, escalation the regime has shown not only an intolerance for dissent and a valorization of the state (and of its security forces) but also an increasing determination to bring the religious establishment into lockstep. After Morsi’s overthrow on July 3, 2013 there was an attempt to police the minbars and mosques – barring unauthorized preachers, giving instructions for anodyne sermons, and subjecting Salafi imams to examination. The effort was to eliminate oppositional politics but allow pro-regime sentiments. But neutrality or an apolitical stance was an option. There are now indications that the effort is changing.

Sissi’s speech at al-Azhar, viewed internationally as a plea for moderation, was nothing new ideologically for the top leadership of al-Azhar, which has been trying to send the same message about the need for a centrist interpretation of Islam that is peaceful and appropriate for the needs of a modern society without abandoning fixed principles. But it was remarkable that a president with a military background was publicly lecturing al-Azhar and its sheikh on their mission. And the sheikh himself has pushed back in an oblique way by saying that those who criticize al-Azhar – both radicals and those who see it as un-
modern – do not understand what the institution is saying or what its role is. The mufti has similarly shown some disinclination to involve himself in political support for the regime, occupying himself with foreign travel and scaling back some of the death sentences submitted by courts for his review.

But Minister of Religious Endowments Mukhtar Guma has embraced the new regime without reserve, moving not simply to silence the opposition but to send directions for sermons that are supportive of the regime and its security forces and organizing demonstrations in support of them and against “terrorism” – the term so firmly welded to the Brotherhood in official discourse that there seems to be a mobilization of those parts of the religious establishment in support of the regime and its policies in a manner unseen in decades. In a recent conference the minister directly accused the Brotherhood along with “imperialist powers” of plotting to divide Egypt. There is no telling how pious parts of the public are reacting, but opposition to the regime has always been stronger in specific pockets, such as the Azhar student body, some neighborhoods and some mosques. It is uncertain if these fiery sermons can keep the peace between pro- and anti-Brotherhood worshipers.

Over a year and a half after Morsi’s overthrow, there is no sign that the rhetoric on either the side of Brotherhood’s supporters or that of the regime will de-escalate. In fact both sides seem to be girding for further confrontation. Both deny responsibility over their own rhetoric and actions, explaining that they are only reacting to the other side. And in a sense they are both right: Every escalation in vitriol vindicates the harsh voices on the other side. A growing number of Islamists no longer frame their battle as over Morsi or “legitimacy,” but instead the conflict is about Islam, identity and vengeance for over a thousand killed. It is not uncommon to see ordinary Islamists reveling in the death of officers who are presumed guilty of abuse or atrocities. There is now a troubling warm embrace of “popular resistance,” and some dallying with a move in the direction of armed insurgency. Supporters of the government are at best indifferent to police killings of Islamists, many cheer it on. Cooler heads have not prevailed.

The war of words feeds a cycle of violence that drags on with each side’s refusal to back down only growing stronger, acting as if more blood must be spilled to achieve justice. Some analysts have rhetorically described the fight as “existential,” but these worrying indicators of a shift and mutual escalation of rhetoric signify that Egypt may be upon a new and deadlier phase in which the extremists on each side fulfill their prophecies of a fight to the death between good and evil.

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Brotherhood activism and regime consolidation in Egypt

By Steven Brooke, University of Texas at Austin

* This piece appeared on The Monkey Cage on January 29, 2015.

The Egyptian military’s July 3, 2013 deposition of President Mohamed Morsi triggered a wave of Muslim Brotherhood mobilization, and in these spaces a multifaceted internal debate over the future of Islamist activism has sprung up. However, the Brotherhood's subsequent strategy of street protest also intertwines with larger processes of regime formation and consolidation that are currently underway in Egypt. Ironically, both the regime and the Brotherhood seem to judge the protests useful to help resolve issues that stretch beyond the specific regime-Brotherhood confrontation. On the one hand, the Brotherhood’s tight focus on protests demanding the reinstatement of Morsi helps the group maintain unity and forestall difficult internal debates. On the other, the regime exploits the Brotherhood’s street mobilization and civil society activism to justify a series of more and less violent interventions in Egyptian life. In practice, these efforts are serving to embed a more invasive police state than the one the Arab Spring protests so recently displaced.

A year-and-a-half out from the military coup that ended the term of Morsi, the Brotherhood has shown little sign of deviating from their strategy of continued protest. Their insistence on reinstating Morsi and returning to a pre-July 3 political system is puzzling, given that these demands are clear nonstarters for Egypt’s military regime. It is unclear if there is a better alternative for the Brotherhood. Both in terms of allowing the Brotherhood to generate advantages vis-à-vis the group’s ongoing conflict with the regime and to resolve internal contradictions, protest seems to offer the best of a generally bad array of options.

Whatever the initial strategy behind the Brotherhood’s adoption of street protest, the activity does seem to be generating a series of positive benefits that suggest its durability. In terms of their relationship with Egypt’s military government, so long as the Brotherhood continues to sustain human chains, rallies, sit-ins and other high-profile protest events, it keeps the possibility of an eventual bargain on the table. By demonstrating the organization’s strength, the Brotherhood is likely striving to convince the regime that they must be taken seriously, as an equal to be negotiated with rather than a minority to be exterminated. Further, as long as the Brotherhood embraces clamorous street activism, they serve to highlight the regime’s (and its western backers’) absurd pretense at a democratic transition.

In terms of the Brotherhood’s internal dynamics, sustaining risky activism increases morale, maintains connections between members of the network and imbues a sense of purpose in Brotherhood activism. Further, emphasizing protest seems to offer a type of “best response” to managing internal conflict. As Ibrahim el-Houdaiby has argued, the organization’s grass roots lean toward confrontation with a regime that has committed such violence against their compatriots. The leadership, meanwhile, cannot allow the group's strategy to transform into out-and-out violent confrontation. A protest-centric strategy simultaneously satisfies, at least for the time being, the grass roots’ desire for street activism and confrontation, while preserving the possibility of later reintegration.

The outstanding question, of course, concerns the future path of the Brotherhood. While the equilibrium currently seems stable, the movement’s current disassociation limits the organizational barriers should clusters of members turn toward more violent activism. In other words, the organization’s official calls for non-violent resistance may simply not resonate with those Brothers on the front lines, bearing the brunt of the security services’ repression.

At the same time, there seem at least three strong arguments to be made for why the group will, eventually, reintegrate into Egyptian politics. First, the group has sunk
a tremendous amount of intellectual energy into political contestation and will likely find it difficult to construct new avenues of societal engagement that neglect electoral mobilization. Second, from the regime’s perspective a scenario in which the Brotherhood participates in essentially uncompetitive elections would be ideal. It is telling, for example, that the regime’s key demand in negotiations seems to be that the Brotherhood field candidates for elections rather than boycott the proceedings.

Finally, the regime is steadily constricting the Brotherhood’s options for alternative forms of activism. For instance, there have been predictions that the Brotherhood’s future lies in refashioning itself as a social, religious or charitable association and retreating to interstices further from regime control. Yet it is unclear if there is anything to retreat to. The regime has already targeted the Brotherhood’s medical facilities, schools and community associations. In addition, the funds of prominent Brotherhood businessmen have been frozen. Now that those schools, medical facilities, community associations and entrepreneurial networks are under regime control, the ability of the Brotherhood to use activism in these realms to reach segments of Egyptian society will be sharply curtailed.

The Egyptian regime’s efforts to cow the Brotherhood are nested in much broader efforts to control and monitor sites that have served as areas of independent activism in the past. This process is best described as a re-corporatization, in which the new regime is tightening and fortifying the Gamal Abdel Nasser-era vertical relationships that had since loosened and frayed. For instance, one key effort is the passage of a draconian law extending state control over NGOs. This law, according to Human Rights Watch will “sound the death knell” for independent organizations in Egypt. An invasive new university law is tightening regime control over these redoubts of activism. A similar process is at work inside Egypt’s religious institutions. Amr Ezzat describes how:

The new ministry (of religious endowments) issued administrative decrees referring dozens of other imams to internal investigations, suspending or firing them, and revoking the licenses of thousands of preachers. The ministry took other draconian, unprecedented steps, such as unifying the topic of the Friday sermon in every mosque and declaring that all mosques would be brought under the ministry’s administrative control.

The above civil-society based efforts mark one, relatively less-violent, track of the regime’s strategy to control potential sites of independent activism. As Joshua Stacher has argued, however, there is a parallel process in which Egypt’s rulers are busy inscribing new patterns of coercion and violence into relations between regime and society. And just as regime efforts to control Brotherhood activism in the civic realm are part of a larger strategy to neutralize non-Islamist opposition there, the Brotherhood’s continued mobilization of supporters generates a constant justification for this type of violence against non-Islamist dissenters. For instance, the 2013 protest law, ostensibly passed to counter Islamist mobilization, soon became a key tool with which to take liberal activists off the streets. Or witness the regime’s efforts to stir up macabre episodes of “moral panic” to generate support for activist policing that, in reality, represses political and social discontent.

So long as the regime retains the ability to link any public expressions of dissent to the Brotherhood – and rely on the media to buttress their narrative – they will possess a particularly effective tool for defusing opposition and cementing their own rule.

The Brotherhood’s strategy is fundamentally reactive, then, hostage to the more and less violent processes of regime formation and consolidation currently underway in Egypt. Yet it is important not to lose sight of how and why perpetuating of the status quo seems to benefit both parties. For the regime, the continuing existence of a protest movement as vibrant and extensive as the Brotherhood’s creates multiple opportunities for the use of violence. Critically, this violence is not targeted at the Brotherhood alone but directed more broadly, in order to inscribe a particular relationship between state and society, even stretching into the realm of private relations between individuals. The regime complements
this violence by revitalizing corporatist relationships in
the realm of religious institutions and NGO activism.
For the Brotherhood, not only does sustained pro-Morsi/
anti-coup mobilization place pressure of the Egyptian
regime, it allows the organization to delay answering more
painful and difficult questions about the organization and
its goals going forward. For now, these demands seem to
have generally retained their mobilizing potential inside
the Brotherhood. So long as they remain relevant, the
Brotherhood will be able to counteract centripetal forces:
be they toward de-politicization or defection to other
forms of activism- either Islamic or not- on one side, or
violent activism on the other.

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How Egypt’s coup really affected Tunisia’s Islamists

By Monica Marks, University of Oxford

“This piece appeared on The Monkey Cage on March 16, 2015.

Conventional wisdom in academic and policy
circles asserts that Tunisia’s Islamist party, Ennahda,
compromised only after, and as a direct result of, the
July 2013 coup that deposed Egypt’s then-President
Mohamed Morsi. The assumption often accompanying
that Egypt-centric projection presumes Ennahda would
have necessarily adopted a Muslim Brotherhood-style
maximalist approach had Islamists won a numerical
majority in Tunisia’s 2011 elections. Both propositions
dismiss critical specificities of the Tunisian scenario,
including Ennahda’s historically long-termist logic, the
importance of domestic anti-Islamist pressure from leftists,
secularists and groups associated with the former regime,
and the extent to which Ennahda ceded key compromises
well in advance of formally handing power to Mehdi
Jomaa’s caretaker government on Jan. 28, 2014. Rather
than fundamentally altering Ennahda’s overall strategy,
the coup that toppled Morsi and subsequent crackdown
on Brotherhood-oriented groups reinforced pre-existing
postures of pragmatism and gradualism inside Ennahda
that have been crucial to its survival in Tunisian society.

Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, which took a
majoritarian approach to power in the wake of Egypt’s
revolution, Ennahda adopted a number of farsighted,
participation-oriented positions that evinced a much
thicker understanding of democratic politics. In early
2011, for example, when Tunisia’s transitional body,
known colloquially as the Ben Achour Commission,
began debating what type of electoral system Tunisia
would have, Ennahda’s leadership contributed to creating
the conditions for coalition-building – and their own
electoral marginalization – by supporting a proportional
representation (PR) over a Westminster-style first past the
post (FPTP) system. Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi,
who experienced FPTP elections first hand during his
22 years of exile in London, correctly predicted that
deploying this system in Tunisia would result in a coalition
and democracy-inhibiting landslide victory for Ennahda.
Political scientist Alfred Stepan has written as well that a
Westminster-style FPTP system would have resulted in
Ennahda sweeping approximately 90 percent of seats in the
October 2011 elections, instead of the nearly 40 percent
plurality it won. Ghannouchi and other Ennahda leaders
instead supported a PR system that benefitted smaller
parties, reducing Ennahda’s own share of votes in the 2011
For Ghannouchi and other top leaders in Ennahda, the touchstone moment shaping this minimalist decision was Algeria’s 1990 and 1991 elections, when the Islamic Salvation Front’s (FIS) dominance in municipal and the first round of parliamentary elections spooked the regime, which then canceled elections and initiated a broad crackdown against Islamists. That experience, and the bloody civil war that ensued in Algeria, powerfully impacted Ennahda’s thinking during the 1990s and 2000s. Survival, Ennahda leaders surmised, meant stepping slowly and strategically, careful to reassure vested interests and society at large that it did not intend to wrest control of democratic institutions to impose something resembling an Islamic state. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) failed to internalize the lessons of Algeria. Squeezed by the judiciary and elements of the military that made governance fraught with difficulty, the FJP opted to double down in its attempts to assert authority. As in Algeria, powerful demonstrations of Islamist force fueled opposition rhetoric auguring an Islamist takeover. In Tunisia, however, Ennahda leaders practiced more restraint. Regularly referencing the experience of FIS in Algeria, they remained sensitive to suspicions that Islamists would instrumentalize electoral victory as a means towards illiberal, majoritarian dominance. Ennahda therefore adopted a more minimalist approach and, unlike the Brotherhood, stayed true to its pre-election promises of supporting coalition governments and not running or officially endorsing presidential candidates in 2011 and again in 2014.

Immediately after Tunisia’s 2011 elections, in which Ennahda won an approximately 37 percent plurality, the party moved to form a coalition government. After reaching out to various secularly-oriented parties, it ultimately partnered with two: Congress for the Republic (CPR), led by long-term human rights activist Moncef Marzouki, and the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties, known in Tunisia as Ettakatol, led by opposition politician Mustapha Ben Jaafar. Though accusations were made that Ennahda marginalized its partners, this three-party “Troika” coalition stayed together from 2011 to 2013. During the Bardo crisis of August 2013, in which protests led by unelected leftist, secular and former regime oriented figures threatened to dissolve Tunisia’s Constituent Assembly, CPR and Ettakatol stood alongside Ennahda to preserve the institution of the Constituent Assembly until constitution writing was complete.

Importantly, Ennahda’s coalition with CPR and Ettakatol didn’t coalesce de novo after the 2011 elections, but rather had roots in a long series of cross-ideological talks between Tunisian opposition actors in the 2000s. These talks involved dozens of independent opposition activists, human rights-defending civil society groups and political actors opposed to the regime of then-President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, including leaders of Ettakatol, CPR and Ennahda. In documents produced in Aix-en-Provence and Rome in 2003 and 2005, parties to the talks signed onto core principles – including commitments to create a democratic political system with popular sovereignty (saydet al-shaab) as the sole source of legitimacy (ka-masdar wahid lil-sulta) and to realize equality between men and women. In 2007 these actors – who in 2005 formed a movement called the October 18 Collective – released a document titled “Declaration on the Rights of Women and Gender Equality” strongly reaffirming support for Tunisia’s 1956 Personal Status Code, which prohibits polygamy and gives women the right to divorce. Ennahda leadership’s willingness to not just talk across the table with secular actors, but codify key commitments with them – such as the primacy of popular sovereignty over sharia, excluding any mention of Islamic law – was therefore expressed formally through a series of negotiations and signed agreements well in advance of both the 2011 elections and Egypt’s 2013 coup.

Ennahda’s stint in power following the 2011 elections tested its leaders’ commitments to pragmatism and gradualism. During decades of oppression and exile, Ghannouchi – who wrote for three decades on the compatibility of democracy and Islamic political thought – along with a handful of other leaders, had elaborated a flexible, ethically based understanding of sharia that
prioritized social justice over specific rules (*hudud*). Soon after the revolution, key figures in Ennahda’s leadership, including Ghannouchi and veteran negotiators of the cross-party 2000s negotiations, stressed that Ennahda would not seek to codify the word *sharia*. The concept was “*shumuli*,” or broad enough, to encompass a democratic polity that respected core principles of popular sovereignty, social justice and human dignity. Not all Ennahda members, however, understood or agreed with the views of Ghannouchi, whose writings were banned and largely inaccessible in Tunisia throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Following Tunisia’s revolution, Ennahda therefore began an arduous process of becoming re-acquainted with itself personally, ideologically and organizationally. This process played out very publicly, as a more inflexible, maximalist wing inside Ennahda, led most vocally by former MPs Sadok Chorou and Habib Ellouze, agitated for restrictive interpretations of constitutional language concerning key issues, such as whether or not to tighten wording that would have defined Tunisia as an Islamic state and whether to criminalize blasphemy.

As the drafting process began in early 2012, suspicions that Ennahda secretly harbored fundamentalist, even fascistic aims, ran high amongst leftist and secularly oriented segments of Tunisian society – demographics that are much larger in Tunisia than in Egypt, Algeria and many other Arab countries. Determined and vocal pushback from such citizens, backed by well-networked Tunisian civil society groups, some of whose leaders held similar reservations about Ennahda, put popular pressure on the party to compromise on more permissive formulations of constitutional articles. Such important pushback prompted swift responses from Ennahda leaders, including Ennahda MPs who re-caucused in the Constituent Assembly and even the party’s governing Shura Council itself, whose 150 members sometimes held meetings to discuss and vote on whether and how to reformulate more controversy-creating positions.

Throughout four successive constitutional drafts, Ennahda – affected by popular pressure, debates within the drafting committees and the advice of Tunisian and international experts – softened or walked back its most problematic positions, compromising on a number of important issues long before the Egyptian coup. The language that ultimately made its way into the constitution – the final version of which was ratified by an overwhelming 200 out of 217 total votes on Jan. 26, 2014 – reflected compromises on both political and ideological issues. Ennahda leaders had ceded ground on their core issue of contention: whether Tunisia should have a parliamentary system, as Ennahda wanted, or a presidential system, as opposition parties had sought, ultimately supporting a mixed parliamentary-presidential model in which the president possessed more powers than Ennahda leaders had intended. Compromises on ideology-oriented issues had also been made: The constitution defines Tunisia as a civil rather than an Islamic state and omits proposed language that would have criminalized blasphemy and asserts men and women’s roles “complement one another within the family.” The bulk of these compromises had been worked out in fall 2012 and spring 2013 and were already written into the third draft of the constitution, released in April 2013 – months before the coup.

Egypt’s July 2013 coup did, however, have knock-on effects in Tunisia: It emboldened opposition activists, some of whom formed a copycat Tunisian Tamarod (Rebellion) movement in an effort to force the Troika government to leave power. These activists argued that the Troika had lost all legitimacy and should hand over power to an apolitical, technocratic government immediately. Sensing opportunity, unelected leaders of the main opposition party, Nidaa Tounes, issued calls to dissolve the Constituent Assembly and replace the Troika with a government of technocrats. The Tamarod movement and corresponding calls to dissolve the Assembly, however, remained somewhat marginal until Tunisia experienced its second political assassination: the July 25 murder of Mohamed Brahmi. Brahmi, a low-profile Arab nationalist politician, hailed from the same electoral coalition as Chokri Belaid, a prominent leftist whose assassination just five months earlier, on Feb. 6 2013, shook Tunisian society. Belaid’s assassination provoked huge demonstrations against political violence and spurred widespread
speculation in Tunisia that the Troika government and particularly Ennahda, which Belaid had often criticized, was directly or indirectly responsible.

If the success of Egypt’s Tamarod movement and deep-seated disillusionment with the Troika’s ability to govern provided the fuel, Tunisia’s second political assassination – that of Mohamed Brahmi – lit the fire. Throughout August 2013, tens of thousands of protesters gathered outside the Constituent Assembly in the Bardo district of Tunis to demand dissolution of the Assembly and resignation of the Troika government. Dozens of opposition MPs resigned. This was a time of great test for Ennahda and its coalition partners. On Aug. 6, Mustapha Ben Jafaar, then-President of the Constituent Assembly, made the controversial decision to temporarily suspend the Assembly’s work and began spearheading the Troika’s efforts behind the scenes to find a negotiated path towards compromise. Members of Ennahda and CPR opposed Ben Jaafar’s decision, viewing suspension of the Assembly as a capitulation to street protesters’ anti-democratic demands. Ben Jaafar himself felt differently. In an interview with Stepan and myself on Nov. 4, 2014, Ben Jaafar explained that decision as a strategic step necessary to preserve the institution of the Constituent Assembly against the anti-democratic demands of pro-dissolution protesters. “Putting the Assembly on recess wasn’t giving the pro-dissolution camp legitimacy,” he said. “These people weren’t as democratic as they said. Instead it showed that I’m sticking with rule of law, I’m sticking with this Assembly... I protected the Assembly.”

For Ennahda’s supporters, the Bardo protests represented an attack on the Troika’s electoral legitimacy and an attempt to place power in the hands of unelected technocrats in Nidaa Tounes’s orbit who might then roll back old regime policies. Ennahda’s base tended to oppose their leadership’s decision to negotiate with Nidaa Tounes and other protest supporters, arguing that such negotiations would legitimize the demands of unelected, anti-democratic forces. Against such opposition, however, Ennahda party leaders – with the crucial mediation of Tunisia’s prominent trade union, UGTT, and three other members of the so-called negotiation “quartet” – worked out a plan to complete the constitution, select an elections board and transfer the reins of government to a technocratic caretaker cabinet. On January 28, 2014, just two days after signing Tunisia’s new constitution into law, Ennahda Prime Minister Ali Laarayedh officially handed over power to technocratic Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa.

Such a technocratic solution to diffusing tensions was itself not without precedent. Cajoled by the heterodox leadership of Ennahda member and then-Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, Ennahda ceded a number of key government ministries to technocrats in March 2013. Opposition to Jebali’s decision was initially widespread in the leadership ranks of Ennahda, with some individuals suspecting him of being pressured by figures close to the old regime. Still, Ennahda’s eventual acceptance of Jebali’s decision, demonstrated by the imposition of a mixed technocratic-political government months before the Morsi coup, represents another piece of evidence that Ennahda’s concessions – both political and ideological – were part of a pragmatic pattern that preceded the Morsi coup.

To be sure, the overthrow of Morsi had a palpable impact on Tunisia, emboldening the Tamarod protests, fueling – though not actually sparking – the eventual fire of the Bardo protests, and reminding Ennahda just how unique and fragile its position as a free, democratically elected Islamist party really was. Ennahda party leaders, who had been critical – even derisory – toward the Muslim Brotherhood from 2011 to 2013, characterizing the movement as retrograde, uncooperative and recalcitrant, were deeply moved by the attack on Brotherhood sympathizers in Cairo’s Rabaa Adawiya square. These party leaders began voicing messages of sympathy, saying that no matter their mistakes in power, the Brotherhood did not deserve its undemocratic ouster or the rights-abusing crackdown it received.

The coup may have also softened Ennahda MPs overwhelming support for lustration, which would have excluded persons who held position in Ben Ali’s Constitutional Democratic Rally party (RCD), which had
been officially dissolved in March 2011, from running in Tunisia’s 2014 elections. Ghannouchi and other key leaders’ ultimate opposition to lustration legislation was motivated more by long-term commitments to political inclusion and gradualism grounded in the lessons of Algeria and the spectacular failure of Libya’s lustration law than the coup in Egypt. Convincing core segments of Ennahda’s leadership who supported lustration, however, that excluding large swaths of old regime-oriented figures (including the leading candidate for president, Beji Caid Essebsi himself) could create coup-friendly conditions likely became easier after Morsi’s ouster.

Rather than terrifying Ennahda into transforming itself overnight from a maximalist actor into a meek collection of scared and chastened Islamists as is sometimes implied, the coup against Morsi reinforced and offered new justification for Ennahda’s pragmatism, gradualism and support for long-termist compromise – tendencies manifested in Ennahda’s historical negotiations and internal evolution, as well as the key compromises it made after the 2011 elections. It is therefore ahistorical to characterize Ennahda’s compromises, particularly its decision to formally relinquish power in January 2014, as mere byproducts of the “Egypt effect,” or to assume that Ennahda would have necessarily adopted the Brotherhood’s domineering, maximalist approach had Islamists held a higher proportion of seats following the 2011 elections. Ennahda’s logic of long termism and track record of cross-ideological compromise indicate that its leadership’s operative logics have been crucially different than the Brotherhood’s. The vocal pushback from secular civil society organizations, the leftist trade union and unelected old regime-associated actors between 2011 and 2013 likewise indicated that Tunisia’s more anti-Islamist oriented social topography created a very different matrix of opportunity constraints for Ennahda outside the halls of elected office than the Muslim Brotherhood faced in Egypt.

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**Why Tunisia didn’t follow Egypt’s path**

*By Sharan Grewal, Princeton University*

*This piece appeared on The Monkey Cage on February 4, 2015.*

The contrast between the Egyptian and Tunisian transitions has been the foundation for a remarkable number of comparative analyses. The yawning divide in the outcomes makes such comparison inevitable: Egypt’s democratic experiment ended in a military takeover and extreme state violence; Tunisia’s produced a consensual constitution and a second peaceful transition of power. Although the consolidation of Tunisia’s democracy is by no means assured, its progress thus far raises the question: Why has Tunisia’s transition to democracy been more successful than Egypt’s?

Many of the most commonly cited explanations are clearly contradicted by available evidence. The usual argument for Tunisia’s exception emphasizes its small and homogenous population and absence of deep ideological divides. But, in fact, ideological polarization was just as severe in Tunisia as in Egypt. Tunisia’s transition, like Egypt’s, suffered from
a debilitating Islamist-secularist divide, reflected in two political assassinations and months of political deadlock. Survey data from the Arab Barometer suggest that despite Tunisia’s alleged homogeneity, secularists in Tunisia were as distrustful of their ruling Islamist party as they were in Egypt:

![Percent of Secularists with “Absolutely No Trust” in Islamists](image)

Data from the Arab Barometer (Sharan Grewal)

Other analysts highlight socioeconomic differences, arguing that Tunisians are more educated, secular and wealthier than Egyptians, all common correlates of democratic attitudes. But again, the evidence suggests that disillusionment with democracy was just as deep in both countries. Arab Barometer data reveal that by 2013, majorities in both countries no longer thought that democracy was suitable for their country:

![Democracy is NOT Suitable for My Country](image)

Data from the Arab Barometer (Sharan Grewal)

Other scholars claim that Tunisia benefited from a roughly equal demographic balance between secularists and Islamists, whereas Islamist candidates in Egypt swept 70 percent of the vote in the first elections. Egypt’s secularists, the argument goes, chose to thwart democracy out of fear that they would never win a future election. However, the Islamist domination of the Egyptian political scene was short-lived: Islamists had lost much of their initial appeal by the 2012 presidential elections, where voting was split 52 to 48 percent for the Islamist and secularist candidates. In the lead-up to the July 2013 coup, Egypt’s Islamist President Mohamed Morsi had only a 32 percent approval rating. His prospects for winning another election appeared dim. Secularists in both countries should therefore have had sufficient confidence that they could win future elections.

Finally, some contend that Tunisia’s ruling Islamist party, Ennahda, was more moderate than the one in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result, Ennahda governed more inclusively toward the secular revolutionaries and the remnants of the former ruling party. However, despite Ennahda’s more moderate behavior, the Tunisian opposition still called for Ennahda’s ouster just as the Egyptian one called for the Brotherhood’s. In both countries, disillusioned revolutionaries joined the supporters of the former regimes in calling on state institutions to undermine the Islamists, whether moderate or not.

What these explanations seem to overlook is that during the summer and fall of 2013, the Tunisian transition was on the verge of following Egypt’s path. Mimicking the June 30 protests in Egypt that led to the July 3 coup, the Tunisian opposition organized massive rallies demanding Ennahda’s ouster and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. The real answer to Egypt and Tunisia’s divergent trajectories may therefore lie in the responses of each country’s state institutions to the calls to thwart the democratic transition. In Egypt, the military and judiciary heeded and even welcomed these calls. The opposition in Egypt was able to appeal to the judiciary to dissolve the democratically elected parliament and to
the military to oust the democratically elected president. In Tunisia, by contrast, the judiciary was unable and the military unwilling to perform these functions. Without state institutions to partner with, the Tunisian opposition ultimately had no choice but to come to the negotiating table with Ennahda, facilitating consensus.

Let’s begin with the judiciary. Just five months after Egypt completed its first free and fair elections, Egypt’s judiciary nullified those elections on a technicality, leading to the dissolution of the democratically elected parliament. The Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) had exercised its power to nullify elections twice before (in 1987 and 1990), and appeared eager to perform this function again against the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt’s then-President Hosni Mubarak had successfully packed the judiciary in the 2000s with pro-regime and anti-Islamist judges. Tahani el-Gebali, for instance, vice-president of the SCC, reportedly urged the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to delay the parliamentary elections, fearing they “would bring a majority from the movements of political Islam.” Ahmed al-Zend, head of the Judge’s Association, went further, arguing that with the Brotherhood coming to power, “Egypt is falling. We won’t leave matters for those who can’t manage them, with the excuse that we’re not people of politics. No, we are people of politics.” The Egyptian judiciary was thus both willing and able to side with the anti-Islamist opposition to dissolve the democratically elected parliament.

Why did the Tunisian judiciary not follow suit and fulfill the opposition’s demands to dissolve the constituent assembly? The main reason is that there was no judicial body in Tunisia with the jurisdiction to nullify elections. Tunisia’s Constitutional Council had gained that power in 2002, but having been notoriously weak under the former regime, the Council was dissolved in March 2011. The highest judicial body in Tunisia during the transition was thus the Court of Cassation, which did not have the jurisdiction to rule on the constitutionality of electoral laws. Even if the Tunisian judiciary wanted to undermine Ennahda, it was unable to do so to the same extent as its Egyptian counterpart.

Ultimately, it was the military that delivered the final blow to Egypt’s democratic transition, ousting the democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, on July 3, 2013. Why did the Tunisian military not emulate its Egyptian counterpart and oust the Ennahda-led government? The Tunisian military had a comparable opportunity to intervene: paralyzed political institutions, multiple assassinations and a massive number of people in the streets calling for Ennahda’s ouster. Yet, the Tunisian military had little motivation to oust Ennahda. The military in Tunisia has historically played a much less prominent role in politics than its Egyptian counterpart. Sidelined by former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali since 1991, the Tunisian military never developed the economic or institutional interests that would drive it into politics. While the Egyptian military could not afford to let the transition get out of hand and thus took an active role in managing it, the Tunisian military had little stake in how the transition unfolded, retreating to the barracks after Ben Ali’s fall. Under Ennahda’s rule, moreover, the military gained in importance and social status, giving it little grievance with Ennahda.

The Egyptian military, on the other hand, had plenty of reason to oust the Muslim Brotherhood. While the Brotherhood respected many of the military’s interests, continuing to defer to the military for key ministerial and governorship appointments and conceding on military trials of civilians, several issues remained. A difference in worldview between the military’s nationalism and the Brotherhood’s perceived pan-Islamism, the devaluing of the military’s economic holdings as a result of Morsi’s mismanagement of the economy, and the personal ambitions of then-Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi all played a role in his decision to intervene.

The Brotherhood’s biggest mistake, however, may have been to encroach on the military’s historic monopoly over national security decisions. The National Defense Council, composed overwhelmingly of military figures under the SCAF, became majority-civilian under Morsi (and tellingly reverted back to majority-military in the 2014 Constitution). In December 2012, the Brotherhood
raised more red flags by allegedly backing a Qatari-Palestinian scheme to buy land in the Sinai. The military balked, claiming that “Sinai is a red line” and Sisi took the unprecedented step of issuing a decree (typically the president’s prerogative) limiting the sale of this land. Wael Haddara, an advisor to Morsi, told me about another incident in December 2012 when he and two other Morsi administration officials were sent to Washington to meet with the Department of Defense. Intentionally or not, the Egyptian embassy in D.C. failed to inform the defense attache of their meeting, contributing to fears that Morsi was sidelining the military.

The clincher came two weeks before the coup, when Morsi severed ties with the Syrian regime and announced his support for a no-fly zone. At the same time, Brotherhood leaders called on Egyptians to go on jihad in Syria, while a presidential aide insisted they would not be penalized upon their return to Egypt. The specter of experienced jihadists returning to Egypt, as well as the clash with Sisi’s more neutral stance on Syria, may have been the last straw of the military’s toleration of the Brotherhood.

With the military and judiciary willing and able to undermine the Islamists, the opposition in Egypt had little incentive to negotiate with the Brotherhood. There was no reason to compromise with Morsi when the opposition could instead kick him out with the help of state institutions. In Tunisia, by contrast, the opposition realized after months of protest that there would be no judiciary or military to come to its aid. Ultimately, it realized that it had to back down on its demand for the dissolution of the constituent assembly and instead negotiate with Ennahda on the way forward. The Tunisian “success story,” then, is not that all sides wanted democracy, but rather that all sides had no choice but to settle for democracy.

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The future of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf

By Kristin Smith Diwan, American University and George Washington University

“This piece appeared on The Monkey Cage, February 10, 2015.

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is going through the most difficult stage in its political history since the Nasserist period. However, unlike the 1950s and 1960s, the Brotherhood can neither count on political support from nor find a safe haven in the conservative monarchies of the Arab Gulf. An intra-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) feud that pitted the pro-MB Qatar against the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia has come down decisively in favor of the anti-MB forces. Combined with the significant challenges that the MB in the Gulf was already facing from disaffected youth cadres and Salafist competitors, the current hostile environment will make it impossible for the MB to maintain their previous level of social and political influence inside the Gulf countries.1

The MB has a long and influential history in the Arab Gulf. It was brought to the region during the MB’s earliest days, in some cases through personal contacts with the MB’s founder, Hassan al-Banna. The group deepened its presence in the 1950s and 1960s as crackdowns on the MB

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organizations in Egypt and Syria forced activists to seek refuge in the Gulf. Their influence grew as governments found them suitable allies in countering Arab nationalism and manning rapidly expanding state ministries. Brotherhood members organized in informal networks and where possible established societies for social reform along with Islamic charities. In those states that had political openings and active parliaments – Kuwait, Bahrain – the MB formed political societies which competed in elections and came to increasing political prominence in the 1990s. While their experience varies significantly from country to country, it is fair to say that the MB played a substantial role in shaping Gulf societies and had a significant impact on national politics.

Despite this pivotal role, MB influence in the Gulf was not unchallenged. The entry of Salafis into politics in the 1980s introduced new Islamist rivals who competed with and at times surpassed the MB in parliamentary elections, government posts and societal influence. Throughout the 2000s, the MB faced disparagement from a growing Salafi trend accusing them of political opportunism and questioning their commitment to Islamic doctrine.

At the same time the MB faced challenges in recruiting the younger generation. In contrast to the more informal Salafi networks, the MB has a hierarchical structure based upon deference to elders and compliance with the decisions of the organization. The MB's lengthy process of admission and advancement has appeared more onerous as alternatives for public engagement and entertainment outside of religious societies have increased in the expansion of public spaces such as restaurants and cafes and virtually through social media. The openness and diversity of views found in these spaces and expanding media has increased the disaffection with the secrecy and discipline of MB organization. Some youths also chafed at the unwillingness of the MB to adopt more confrontational methods to achieve political change.

Indicators of the younger generation’s frustration with the culture and gradualist policies of the MB can be seen in the emergence of independent blogs by MB youths, the issuance of independent statements by MB youth cadres taking positions that diverge from the MB organization and in the prominence of ex-MB youths among Gulf opposition organizations and networks that emerged around the time of the Arab uprisings of 2011. At the same time, social media enabled new means of organization outside of Islamic organizations, empowering new unaffiliated youth movements in the Gulf.²

Gulf MB organizations have begun to adapt to these cultural changes. Evidence of this adjustment includes the shortened recruitment protocols implemented by Saudi Brotherhood networks; the proliferation of open volunteerism programs across the Gulf, some instrumentalized by the MB to capture a broader cross-section of youths; the more creative use of video and popular music by MB-affiliated initiatives; and new programs crafted especially for youths within the MB organization. Nonetheless, the broader generational challenge remains.

In addition to these competitors and challenges, the MB has faced a less permissive environment in the Gulf since the events of Sept. 11, 2001. International scrutiny of Islamist movements and their financing understandably increased, but that is not all. Gulf ruling families also began to shift their political calculations. This rethink began in Saudi Arabia in the mid-1990s as the Saudi ruling family faced their most serious challenge since 1979 in the form of the Islamic awakening or Sahwa that openly challenged it, albeit in limited mobilizations. It became clear that the ruling family resented the Muslim Brotherhood for this counter-politicization of the religious field in the bitter comments of then-Interior Minister Nayef bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in 2002, blaming all of Saudi Arabia’s problems on MB betrayal. Meanwhile, political successions in both the UAE and Kuwait brought new and much less sympathetic leadership – and in the case of Abu Dhabi emirate, outright hostility – toward the MB organization.

There are exceptions to this trend: The Qatari leadership has been supportive of the MB abroad, and the Bahraini

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leadership needs the support of Sunni Islamists to counter the Shiite opposition. Still, when the Arab uprisings initially appeared to empower the MB, goodwill among Gulf leaders was absent or contingent and mistrust was plentiful.

In several Gulf countries the MB sought to use the regional wave of popular mobilization to establish new political constraints on Gulf ruling families. MB members joined public petitions in the UAE and Saudi Arabia calling for political reforms to include elections for the Federal National Council (FNC) and Shura Council. In Kuwait, the MB has consistently been in the coalition of political societies protesting initially for the resignation of the prime minister and later for constitutional amendments to further empower the parliament toward the creation of a full parliamentary monarchy.

The crackdown on the MB was initiated in the UAE, where the government arrested nearly 100 Emirati members of the MB-inspired al-Islah organization with the charge of “forming a secret organization plotting to overthrow the regime.” This hardline position gained traction across the Gulf as the regional dynamic shifted with the overthrow of the MB-led Mohamed Morsi government in Egypt. MB activists in both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were public in their criticism of their governments’ political and financial support for Egypt’s new military-led government. They also were openly supportive of the rebels in their deepening civil war in Syria. Both positions likely contributed to the decision of the Saudi government to adopt a new anti-terrorism law in early 2014 which took the extraordinary step of specifically naming the MB among a list of banned terrorist groups. The UAE followed with its own anti-terror law in November 2014, officially designating the MB and significantly its civil society organizations in the West as terrorist organizations. The UAE and Saudi Arabia also pressured Western governments to follow suit, leading to an official inquiry into the MB organization in Britain.

The UAE-Saudi campaign to delegitimize and diminish, if not destroy, the MB was then brought to bear on regional maverick Qatar. The strength of the UAE and Saudi Arabia’s resolve can be seen in their hardline tactics, including the withdrawal of ambassadors from Qatar and the threat of economic blockade. Their demands focused on Qatar ending its support for Egypt’s embattled MB but significantly also pressed for the cessation of support for MB dissidents within the Gulf region in line with a security agreement signed by GCC interior ministers in 2012. According to leaked copies of that unpublished agreement, it commits Gulf states “to cooperate with each other to hunt down those who are outside law or the system, or who are wanted by states, whatever their nationality, and to take necessary action against them,” to include active pursuit across borders and extradition.

These new legal frameworks – implemented at both the national and GCC level – place MB members under continuous risk of prosecution. In practice, with the exception of the UAE, there have not been campaigns of arrests against the organization. Nonetheless, the comprehensive nature of the laws – the Saudi terrorism law deems not only belonging to the MB a crime, but also associating with it at home or abroad or showing any support or sympathy for its causes via any form of media – act as a check on MB activities.

Even in those countries without such terrorism legislation, the threat of prosecution or extradition via the GCC security agreement remains. This has dampened the once open and extensive campaign in support of the former Morsi government and jailed MB members in Egypt. It has also prevented Gulf MB activists from supporting each other: Several Kuwait MB members faced possible extradition after a case brought by the UAE accusing them of materially supporting the Emirati al-Islah. More recently, a former MB member of Kuwait’s parliament had a case filed against him by the Kuwait parliament for criticizing Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi.

The extent of the political challenge for the MB across the Gulf is on view in Kuwait and Bahrain, where the

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Islamism in the IS Age

MB openly maintains political societies. Despite the unquestioned loyalty of Bahrain’s MB and its key role in standing by the ruling family in Bahrain’s ongoing political crisis, the government undertook electoral redistricting in September 2014 widely perceived to be to the MB’s disadvantage. In the November parliamentary elections, the MB won only one seat, while they did not even choose to run candidates in municipal elections where they previously had good representation. They also had their ministers in the cabinet dropped and are having their influence curbed in Bahrain’s Ministry of Education.

Kuwait’s Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the political wing of Kuwait’s MB, has observed an opposition boycott of the parliament since the emir unilaterally changed the electoral system in 2012. This has been a costly strategy, depriving the movement of the benefits that accrue from legislative presence, both in publicity and in access to government revenue streams, jobs and contracts. It has also left them without the parliamentary platform to confront policies damaging to their future such as the current purge of MB from the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs and constraints placed on MB and Salafi charitable activities.

The threat of political retribution against its numerous charities and civil society organizations has led the Kuwaiti MB to take the momentous decision to separate the political apparatus represented by the ICM from the nizam or mother organization. While this is expected to be an ongoing process the ICM already has independent decision making authority and has plans to accept non-MB members in the future.

The MB’s troubles have redounded to the benefit of their Salafi competitors. In Bahrain, Salafi candidates gained on the MB in Bahrain’s parliamentary elections of 2014 and now hold 50 percent of the municipal council chairmanships. In Kuwait, Salafi loyalists maintain representation in parliament and enjoy excellent relations with the Kuwait government.

While the Gulf’s MB groups – with the exception in the UAE – have been spared the massive crackdown witnessed in Egypt, they face an uncertain future. The antagonistic political and legal environment should significantly hamper recruitment and the functioning of their many civil society organizations. Moreover, as the Islamist movement most committed to and dependent upon political participation, the MB will suffer more than their Salafi competitors from the growing intolerance for Islamic political activism. At the same time, a retreat to a less public position – the secret society model – is less viable in today’s networked era.

Yet it remains an open question whether Gulf political authorities have provided sufficient alternative pathways for engagement with MB’s constituencies. State-affiliated ulama have been losing credibility for decades, and new formations to counter the MB such as the Emirati-based Muslim Council of Elders have yet to prove their popular appeal. This leaves the Islamic political field up for grabs at exactly the time it faces its most ambitious suitor: the Islamic State.

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5 Salafis in Kuwait have split: there are activist Salafis who have joined the political opposition and the parliamentary boycott in Kuwait.
The Syrian Brotherhood's Islamic State challenge

By Raphaël Lefèvre, University of Cambridge

After three decades in exile, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has been working in recent years to rebuild its influence within Syria. An important part of this effort has consisted of trying to gain a foothold in the military struggle against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In 2012, Brotherhood leaders encouraged the creation of the Commission of the Shields of the Revolution (hayat duru al-thawra), a moderate rebel umbrella gathering dozens of small and mid-size brigades, which started being effective on the ground in 2013.

By early 2015, however, the military activities of the Shields have considerably dwindled. Infighting within the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has hampered the expansion of the rebel umbrella. Moreover, Shields brigades have faced financial difficulties as result of Saudi Arabia's hostile stance against the Muslim Brotherhood. In 2014, some Shields battalions defected and joined other rebel groups. So far, few battalions have pledged allegiance to the more extremist groups that are currently on the rise in Syria, such as the Nusra Front and the Islamic State. But this could be about to change.

The Rise of the Shields

A handful of armed factions close to the Brotherhood started forming in response to the Assad regime’s crackdown on protests that erupted in March 2011. Most factions were centered in Idlib, a province in northwestern Syria, where, despite their lengthy exile, members of the organization had kept close ties to friends and families as well as to militant networks. As the government’s crackdown continued, these rebels organized and started spreading to other areas of the country. The process came to a head in September 2012 when the Brotherhood gathered all these groups under the more formal umbrella of the Shields. Officially, Brotherhood leaders are still reluctant to acknowledge their special relationship with the Shields. Off the record, however, figures close to the rebel platform admit to taking direct orders from the Brotherhood’s leadership.

In the galaxy of Syrian rebel groups, the Shields belong to the Islamic center. The rebel platform’s founding statement asserts the primacy of opposition bodies recognized and backed by the West, such as the Free Syrian Army and the National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. It also stresses that the Shields’ political orientation follows a “moderate and centrist Islamist” approach. This means, in its words, that the group supports the advent of a Syria based on a “democratic and pluralistic institutions” in the context of a political system that would include an “Islamic reference” but would allow “all citizens to enjoy the same rights” regardless of religion or ethnicity. In a bid to clearly disassociate itself from the rhetoric of extremist groups, the Shields’ founding statement also insists on its members’ commitment to “reject all calls of takfeer” and to “limit revolutionary activities to the borders of the Syrian state.”

Throughout 2013, the Shields acquired sophisticated weaponry, including Man Portable Air-Defense Systems (MANPADS), mortars and some tanks. At first acting locally and autonomously from each other, Shields brigades started to coordinate better on the ground and to carry out military operations together. Influential in the countryside of Idlib, Homs and, to a lesser extent, in Aleppo, Hama and the Damascus suburbs, the Shields took on a more pronounced military role in the Syrian conflict. They played a significant role in battles against regime forces in late 2013 and early 2014 on the Homs-Idlib axis with a particular focus on the cities of Khan Sheikhoun, Heish, Morek and in the Qalamoun region at the border between Syria and Lebanon.

The Brotherhood’s Failures

Since then, however, the military activities of the Shields have significantly decreased. A major reason for this has been the toxic state of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood’s internal politics. A decades-long leadership struggle between the group’s Hama and Aleppo factions, the two blocs vying for power in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, has hampered the expansion of the military platform. Indeed, the Shields, whose creation was encouraged by Riad al-Shuqfah, a Hama-born figure who was leader of the Brotherhood until last summer, was initially opposed by most of the group’s Aleppine figures. Instead, these members chose to either support already existing moderate Islamist rebel groups, such as Liwa al-Tawheed, or to dismiss military work altogether to focus on activities such as dawa, media, charity or politics.

These internal disagreements along Hama/Aleppo lines effectively slowed down the Shields’ expansion in Aleppo and created geographical discrepancies in the way military operations could be carried out. Today, for instance, the Shields can merely count on three brigades based in Aleppo province while it has two dozen rebel groups acting on its behalf in Idlib province. This has prevented the Shields from acting as a coherent national platform. More generally, leadership tensions within the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood have also contributed to reducing the appeal of the Shields inside Syria by highlighting the petty disputes, advanced age and lengthy exile of the Brotherhood’s leaders.

In addition, the Shields have faced severe funding difficulties in the past year. Until recently, most of the funds the Brotherhood channeled to the rebel platform originated from the Gulf, where the group could rely on the support of wealthy individuals. But Saudi Arabia’s March 2014 decision to ban the Muslim Brotherhood and to declare it a “terrorist organization” effectively halted the Syrian Brotherhood’s fundraising campaign and it plunged the group in a financial crisis. Shields leaders suggest that the Brotherhood’s financial support for military activities has considerably dwindled to the extent that the group is now merely providing brigades with clothing, food and limited weaponry.

The Risk of Radicalization

It is in this context that a growing number of brigades have left the Shields for wealthier rebel platforms. So far, most of those which defected have joined other moderate Islamist groups such as Faylak al-Sham and Ajnad al-Sham. This, however, could soon change. Since late 2014, extremist rebel groups have been on the rise precisely in the areas where the Shields have some presence — and the financial resources at their disposal could make joining them an attractive option for a growing number of Syrian rebels. The Nusra Front now controls vast swathes of Idlib province while the Islamic State is on the rise in the Homs countryside and in the Qalamoun mountain range between Syria and Lebanon.

Beyond the growing need for money and weapons, other factors could lead to a radicalization of Shields brigades. Ideologically, clerics from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood have struggled to come to terms with the emergence of the Islamic State. They criticized the hasty and unilateral way in which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the “caliphate” in June 2014. Yet they haven’t fundamentally questioned his extremist approach to governance nor his troops’ massacre of ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and Syria. Politically, it has also proved difficult for the Brotherhood to criticize the Islamic State in the wake of the U.S. aerial intervention against jihadist targets in Syria and Iraq. Preachers associated with the Shields have focused much of their rhetoric on targeting the United States, the “world’s leader in terrorism,” and in one video they accused the United States of starting its campaign against the Islamic State “to rescue Bashar al-Assad’s regime” and “to break the will of Muslims and destroy their hope of leading a


Yemen’s Houthis and Islamist republicanism under strain

By Stacey Philbrick Yadav, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

* This piece appeared on The Monkey Cage on February 2, 2015.

A Houthi, an Islahi and an independent Islamist walked into a bar. Okay, actually, it was a conference room. It was 2012, and these three youth leaders from rival movements stood together across from a group of similarly diverse secular youth, debating the possibility of a madani (civil) state in Yemen built on an Islamic foundation. In that moment, they were what I call Islamist republicans, more than they were Shafai or Zaydi Muslims (let alone Sunni or Shiite), or members of any particular political organization. By this I mean that they shared an ideological convergence made possible by the upheavals of 2011. That solidarity has been largely (but not entirely) eroded by events over the past two years. But in that moment, those commitments were real and sensible in the context of Yemeni politics. The erosion of the concept of Islamist republicanism in Yemen over the past two years of “transition” has troubling implications for the ability to sustain many Yemenis’ dream of a civil state.

Yemen’s current spiraling crises can be read in light of the proxies and flows of interests outside of Yemen as much as within it. This is not to say that domestic politics aren’t primary – they establish the basic terrain of conflict, without a doubt. But since 2011, Yemen’s politics have been continually negotiated by a complex (often opaque) web of actors stretching from Riyadh in Saudi Arabia and Tehran to Washington and London. This has entailed both qualitative and quantitative shifts in the nature of foreign interest and action in Yemen, much of it driven by anxieties over or misunderstandings of Islamic republicanism. In the face of the transitional government’s resignation on Jan. 22,
it became less clear than ever who is actually in charge of what in Yemen.

Following the dramatic “fall” of Sanaa in September 2014, many American and European analysts have offered explanations of Yemen's political breakdown. These explanations point to the sectarian conflict between partisans of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah), a long-standing staple of Yemen's opposition politics and participant in the transitional government, and the militias of the Houthis, a Zaydi Shiite movement originating in Yemen’s far Northern Saada province. As the Houthis successfully compelled the government to renegotiate the terms of the transitional agreement originally brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 2011, American and European media framing has suggested that Yemen's future (or at least the future of central state institutions) was being shaped by Shiite militants bent on eliminating their Sunni rivals. As Sheila Carapico and I, and several others, have argued, this was then and remains now a blunt oversimplification of sectarian dynamics that masks important institutional power-politics.

Analysis of the Houthi movement and its conflict with the Islah party has largely been characterized in terms of military capability or sectarian composition, not substantive ideology (at least beyond noting the Houthis’ anti-American rhetoric and slogan proclaiming “a curse on the Jews”). This has been a mistake, given that it is the Houthis’ substantive political claims that make its relationship with Islah so difficult to disentangle. As Jillian Schwedler argues in this series, it is dangerous to overemphasize nominal difference (in this case, in sect) over substantive difference (in access to institutional power, for example), especially when this leads analysts to overlook substantive convergence (in ideological claims).

What does it mean to say that Yemen experienced a convergence around Islamist republicanism? Republicanism has often been dismissed by scholars as a logic of governance in the Middle East and North Africa, owing in part to its discursive appropriation by populist authoritarian regimes. Islamic modernism, drawing upon incipient nationalisms in the late colonial period and seen as central to the development of contemporary Islamism, has been taken more seriously. What has not always registered, however, is that identifiably republican claims have been central to the ideological core of Islamic modernism. In recent decades, the concept of Islamic republicanism has been primarily associated with post-revolutionary Iran, and the ideological claims of the former supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in particular. This fails to appreciate the inherent republicanism among Islamists elsewhere in the region, an intellectual blind spot that has had some real effects.

Islamists in the Arab Middle East have often called for states that serve their citizens on the basis of accountable governance and at least some measure of political equality. They typically limit their calls for equality and citizenship in procedural terms such as electoral suffrage and due process, rather than more wide reaching forms of legal equality. In the 2000s, even such limited republican claims proved challenging to existing regimes, which were for the most part either insufficiently Islamic in orientation (as in the secular military regimes) or insufficiently accountable to citizens (as in the monarchies) or both. This made Islamist republicans a staple of the opposition landscape in most countries in the region in the 2000s and facilitated meaningful Islamist-secularist cooperation in protests and civil society in Morocco, Jordan, Egypt and elsewhere.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 – and the suppression of Islamist republican dissent since then – highlight the strain that this specific ideological trend puts on regional regimes, particularly when it cuts across the putatively unbridgeable Sunni-Shiite divide. The uptick in sectarian mobilization today is, in part, a response to the suppression of just such convergence. While Islamists played little leadership role in the Arab uprisings, the logic of accountability that undergirded each of the populist movements was recognizable and resonant. But from Syria to Egypt to Yemen, when republicanism has been endorsed by Islamists as a specifically Islamic republicanism, it has faced dual resistance by Arab and non-Arab foreign actors and organizations alike.
On the one hand, the anti-republicans in the Gulf have typically managed the threat of republicanism through a combination of cooptation, coercion and the manipulation of a citizenship (or subjection) that has allowed the exclusion, suppression and ultimately denaturalization of republican dissent. On the other hand, European and American liberals who are critical of Islamism on the basis of its illiberalism have offered at best tepid support for their inclusion in the political process. The 2011 uprisings presented a challenge to both groups, bringing to the fore a populist demand for citizen accountability among people for whom Islam is one of several resonant mobilizational frames. Islamist republican claims were not in 2011 and never have been an automatic choice among mobilized Muslims, but neither have they been irrelevant. In “tipping the balance,” outside actors and institutions have been important arbiters of domestic political struggles.

It is the Houthi movement’s republican claims – which focus on accountable governance, legal equality and anti-corruption – that have helped attract prominent “Sunni” figures, such as the Shafai muftiof the city of Taiz, Saad bin Aqil, who has delivered Friday sermons to gatherings of Houthi loyalists. At its base, the Houthi movement makes a claim for limited government, and has resisted the consolidation of power that characterized the regime of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and was repackaged by the 2011 GCC framework. The claim flows naturally from the Zaydi intellectual elite’s move in the 1980s and 1990s to adopt constitutionalism as a means of political survival as they faced encroachment from a populist Left and a Salafi right. In the 2000s, Zaydi thinkers like the recently-assassinated Muhammed Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil were at the forefront of a constitutionalist opposition, and their claims formed a critical bridge between the Houthis and republicans among Islah’s center, as well as others in the smaller but intellectually significant parties of the Left. Such thinkers – and the broader transformation of political discourse they helped to bring about through cross-sectarian and cross-partisan activism in the 2000s – helped shape a language of dissent that contributed to the 2011 uprising and made it possible for Islamist republicans of diverse stripe to recognize one another’s claims and the republican claims of their fellow (non-Islamist) citizens.

The work was not done only by Zaydi thinkers. The republican commitments of a cohort of Islah leaders have also been obvious, if nonetheless complex and dynamic. The Islah party cannot be glossed as a simple facsimile of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, though many party leaders studied in Egypt and are otherwise influenced by the movement. It would similarly be a mistake to consider the party a front for the wider Salafi movement, as some of its critics do, though the party counts prominent Salafis among its numbers. And then there are the tribal figures (some from well-known Zaydi families) who have served as kingmakers, adjudicating disputes between the Brothers and the Salafis, and between the party and the regime. But it is the Brothers who form the ideological core of the party, producing its public materials, crafting the speeches of most of its leaders and chairing and staffing its policymaking apparatus. This group has a longstanding commitment to republican governance, consistently articulating a version of limited government that would, in the eyes of one party member, produce a constitution that would be the envy of Plato.

So if the possibility of Houthis and Islahis converging around a shared republican agenda seems far-fetched today, it was not always so. Young members of both movements, as well as some independents, came out of the 2011 protest movement with an invigorated commitment to (civil, i.e., non-military, non-tribal) republicanism, though they differed from many prominent activists on whether secularism was a requisite attribute of such a republic. Young leaders from both groups professed to see no contradiction between the concept of a civil state, and a republican regime with an Islamist orientation. So what happened?

Two factors – one domestic, one regional – exerted a pull on this convergent republicanism in a way that has divided Yemen’s Islamist republicans. The GCC transitional mechanism, which was fronted by authoritarian regimes to promote stability, initially empowered Islah, and Houthi
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militants waged war on Salafi evangelists in Dammaj. Together, these two developments put tremendous strain on the Muslim Brothers in Islah, and left Islamists far more deeply polarized.

Both as a hedge against possible Iranian influence over the Houthis, and because Islah was the leading party in the existing opposition coalition, the GCC transitional framework apportioned governing power to Islah and excluded the Houthis. Meanwhile, the framework failed to deliver on the anti-corruption or transitional justice demands made by Houthis, which helped them to retain their relevance among Yemeni citizens. Escalating violence between Houthis and Salafis also unfolded in Dammaj, around the issue long-standing issue of Salafi evangelism and cultural encroachment. This fighting led to an exodus of thousands of internally displaced Salafis who recongregated in Sanaa. Though these Salafis are not necessarily Islahis – many are not even Yemeni – they have strained the possibilities for convergence and contributed to an escalating rhetoric of sectarian animus. A bete noire for centrist Brothers, Yemen’s Salafis have little institutional power under the transitional agreement and have piggybacked on the party, leaving it the most obvious target for Houthis excluded by that agreement and eager to play a more direct role in reconstituting power in a post-Saleh Yemen.

Meanwhile, Gulf countries’ toleration of Islah became more difficult to sustain in the aftermath of the coup against Mohamed Morsi in Egypt and the subsequent suppression of Muslim Brothers there and in the Gulf. The Houthis’ move into Sanaa in September 2014 and forcible rewriting of the transitional agreement was countenanced not because external actors recognized their republican claims, but as a means of clipping Islah’s wings. Yet it is precisely the Houthi movement’s political claims – and its resistance to details of the proposed federal restructuring in Yemen’s draft constitution – that escalated the most recent crisis.

International “openness” toward the Houthis in September, while legible in terms of dual Gulf and European and American anxiety about (Islahi) Islamist republicanism, has had disastrous consequences, just as the earlier exclusion of Houthis from the governing compact did. As the International Crisis Group’s most recent report suggests, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is the only beneficiary of the January 2015 crisis. No matter how poorly conceived the GCC framework may have been, the events in September communicated clearly that agreements could be rewritten by force, a process now underway again. This time, however, Yemen stands more polarized in sectarian terms, with Islamist republicans from Islah and the Houthi movement unlikely, if not unable, to realize their substantive convergence.

Understanding the processes that “undid” this possibility is essential to any hope of its recuperation.

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