

Fault Lines of Islamism: Negotiating Progress, Participation and Patriarchy

This research project takes as its departure-point an understanding of Islamism as a modern social movement for reform. The project seeks to explore the tension between Islamism and political and social modernity as it is normatively understood in the West as a condition characterized by freedom, democracy and equal rights. How thorough is the Islamists' adoption of democracy as a governing principle? What conditions the choice of violence or peaceful activism as the operational tool for persuasion? How do Islamists picture the role of non-Muslims in a state governed by Islamic principles? How do Islamists view the role of women in society and politics? Through in-depth studies conducted in specific countries, the projects presented below aim to present new material that address the last three questions.

The first, general question - about the limits of democracy - will partially be answered by the individual studies. It will simultaneously serve as the core theme for cooperation in the research group. Through seminar discussions, with the help of previous research and the insights of the reference group (see below), the project will seek to provide an answer as to where this question stands today, and to what is the tendency over time in the Islamists' view of democracy and its practice. By relating the findings of the three projects to a tentative, common framework for the understanding of Islamism, as indicated, the project will also seek to develop a more holistic understanding of the complexity of Islamism's relationship with modernity and modernization.

Field of Research

The project seeks to contribute to greater clarity in the understanding of how important moderate Islamist movements in the Middle East relate to modernization in its social and political aspects. Gaining deeper understanding and knowledge in this field is of paramount importance, not only for academic insight, but also in order to establish a robust and long-term strategy concerning the question of establishing political relations with these movements.

In earlier works we have argued for the view that Islamism, in a meta-perspective, should be seen as a current that actively seeks to develop Muslim majority countries into more advanced knowledge-societies and to increase their technological understanding in order to lay the foundations for improved standards of living for their populations and simultaneously to build a platform for equal participation in global society. What gives the movements their specific identity compared to modern social movements in general is the intertwining of two strong impulses. First, Islamism is a cultural revolt to defend one's own religious and cultural *identity* against what is viewed as the threat from a western-dominated globalization. Secondly, Islamism is an expression of a desire to submit rapid social changes to the control of a revitalized morality, based on Islamic religious tradition. The tensions in relation to modernity therefore arise where social development trends seem clearly to oppose what is conceived to be central elements of Islamic morality. Similarly tension is caused by the perceived adoption of Western ideals at the cost of known, authentic habits and customs. In

deeply patriarchal societies like those of the Arab world, this is especially evident in the question of gender relations (see below).

The study of Islamism as a social and political factor must be based in the factual, historical, social and cultural context of the societies where Islamist movements operate. Without employing this approach, it would be impossible to fully appreciate the kind of power Islamism represents. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the polarization in the political debate on Islamism spills over into the scientific field. On the one hand there is a tendency among some social scientists to view Islamism, at least partly, as a modernizing and constructive force, and to avoid or smooth over difficult questions on the Islamists' view of women. On the other hand, those who focus on the problematic aspects of Islamism, tend to present a static picture of Islamism as a reactionary force. There is therefore a great need for research that combines the ability to see Islamism in its context with a non-apologetic approach to real lines of conflict. The clearest fields of tension is found, as mentioned, in three fields: 1) the limits of democracy and the question of the legitimacy of violence to further an Islamic system 2) the question of solidarity and cooperation with non-Muslims, and the place of non-Muslims in the society the Islamists are fighting for, and 3) the relationship between the genders.

Individual Projects

Islamism and Gender (Morocco and Egypt)
Bjørn Olav Utvik

This project will analyse how the question of gender relations is addressed in the discourse and practice of moderate Islamist movements operating in contexts where they can express their point of view relatively freely. Both Morocco and Egypt have strong Islamist movements enjoying broad popular support. In Morocco, the focus of the investigation will be on the legal political party PJD (The Party for Justice and Development) and the social movement Al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Beneficence) and in Egypt on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Centre Party (Hizb al-Wasat).

Primary research-questions are: At the level of discourse, how is the contradiction between the Islamists' stated recognition of women as equal political actors and the acceptance of a traditional view that the man is the head of the family, negotiated? To what degree is there a difference in the discourse of men and women in the particular movements and how has this developed over time? To what extent are men and women equal, in practice, in the inner life and work of the organization?

The main sources for the study will be the Islamists' views as they appear in publications and interviews with leaders of the movement. In the process of critically analyzing the discourse the study will be supplemented with interviews with local scholars who study Islamism, and with members of secular feminist organizations.

Islamism in Israel
Tilde Rosmer

This study of the rapidly growing organization the Islamic Movement in Israel provides an opportunity to analyse Islamists in a context where Muslims constitute a clear minority. As of today, Muslims constitute approximately 18 percent of the population within Israel's pre-1967 borders. The particularities of this situation, wherein the Palestinian minority population in Israel is closely connected to the Palestinian majority population of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and wherein Israel's right to exist is not unconditionally accepted, put the question of how these Islamists develop Islamic policy towards non-Muslims in the forefront.

Rosmer's investigation will therefore focus especially on understanding the Islamist movement in Israel as a movement within the Israeli political and social landscape. In order to clarify the Islamists' attitude to the Israeli majority population and their place in the future that the Islamists are working for, the study will focus on the following questions: How are the goals of the group in relation to the Israeli Jewish population presented in their programmatic expressions in Arabic? How does the group present its goals, actions and ideology in Hebrew to the Jewish audience in Israel?

Rosmer will base her work on an analysis of texts from the movement supplemented by interviews with its leaders, as well as a review of Israeli literature on the movement.

Islamism between Violence and Politics (Iraq and Egypt)
Truls Hallberg Tønnessen

Tønnessen will focus on what conditions the choice between a peaceful and an armed strategy from the perspective of Islamists. To a certain extent, one can identify clearly defined alternative trends within Islamism where one of the dividing points is the view on the use of violence. At the same time, it is not difficult to find examples of movements that proclaim adherence to peaceful means for change while retaining the use of weapons as a possible tool in certain circumstances, or movements that have, over time, shifted between the use of weapons and peaceful legal work. A survey of the history of Islamism in Egypt since the 1980s and in Iraq, primarily after 2003, could shed light on the relationship between ideology and other factors in the choice of strategy adopted.

Major questions will be: What was the reason the Islamist groups Jihad and Gama'a Islamiyya in Egypt in the 1980s and early 1990s insisted on the use of armed struggle as the only effective vehicle for political change, and why did a majority in the same groups from the end of the 1990s reach the opposite conclusion? What conditions the fact that different political groups in Iraq have made different choices following the American invasion on whether to take part in parliament and government, or to boycott the political system or to fight it through armed rebellion?

The sources utilised in this study will be extensive written documentation in the form of newspapers, books and, not least, the Internet. In addition, interviews will be conducted in Egypt and with representatives of the legal groups in Iraq.

The project departs from the conviction that in order to conduct research on the Middle East of a quality consistent with international standards, it is necessary to have a thorough understanding of the cultural and political conditions of the region. Here knowledge of language plays an important role, and all the researchers command at least one of the primary languages of the region. All the researchers also have extensive research experience from the study of political and religious movements in the Middle East.

Reference Group

The project will benefit from the insights of a reference group consisting of François Burgat, Director of the Institut Français du Proche-Orient, Damascus, Emad Shahin, Associate Professor at the American University in Cairo, and Mohammad Javad Nateghpour, Associate Professor at the University of Teheran.