# Rethinking language: "Islamism" as a dirty word

**Jonathan Brown,** Alwaleed bin Talal Chair of Islamic Civilization, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service

*Editor's Note: As part of Brookings's <u>Rethinking Political Islam</u> project, we've asked a select group of outside scholars to react and respond to the overall project, in order to draw attention to potential blind spots, trends of note, and more.*

Much depends on whether one thinks "Islamism" is a dirty word.  This is true for policymakers in the West and leaders in the Muslim world alike.  As with the moniker "The Muslim Brotherhood," the word "Islamism" is thrown about loosely and clumsily because it is an amorphous and contested term that reflects the worldview (perhaps deepest fears?) of whoever is using it more than any fixed reality.  Those who are suspicious of "Islamism" almost always imagine it, along with "The Muslim Brotherhood," to be some durable transnational network, uniform in its most threatening characteristics wherever it appears.

Yet what was true before the Arab Spring, and what has emerged as even truer since its dismal failure, is that "Islamism" is local in both its shape and appeal.[1] Analysis of Islamist movements continues, very sensibly, to be carried out on a country-by-country basis.  This is because it is the ecosystem of the nation-state that continues to play the dominant role in shaping events.  Elements of that system include the particular response of a government to Islamist opposition (Morocco's accommodation of Islamist parties early on in the Arab Spring vs. Egypt's return to Nasserist liquidation); the particular historical space for political involvement in a country (Kuwait's relatively open political discourse versus Saudi Arabia's closed discussions); the particular history

---

[1] Nathan J. Brown, "The irrelevance of the international Muslim Brotherhood," Foreign Policy, 21 September 2010. http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/09/21/the-irrelevance-of-the-international-muslim-brotherhood/

of Islamist movements in that country (the Jordanian Brotherhood's decades of subdued democratic activity versus Yemen's Islah and its involvement in Yemen's civil wars); or the impact of foreign policy considerations (for example, how the nationalist-cum-sectarian threat of Iran can trump Saudi Islamists' objections).

Since the Arab Spring, Islamists, already nationally bound, have remained so. As Steven Brooke notes in his contribution to Brookings's Rethinking Political Islam initiative: "A defining characteristic of Islamist groups has been their fundamental accommodation to the existence of current states."[2] He goes on to describe how "Islamist groups participated in political systems, adopted national discourses, and largely subjugated their activism to regime laws." It is worth noting that this is essentially what distinguishes Jihadists from Islamists. Jihadists are those Muslim actors whose acts of violence proceed from their no longer considering themselves subject either to the regimes controlling the land in which they live or to the monopoly (and hence, accountability) of states on the use of violence.

A great irony since the Arab Spring has been that the truly transnational factors have not been "Islamism" but rather the clumsy and horribly damaging responses by numerous Arab regimes to its perceived threat. Support by Saudi Arabia and the UAE for the Sissi regime has led to Egypt's stunning reversion to a repressive military dictatorship reminiscent of mid twentieth-century fascism, while stability and economic development still elude the country. As Brooke's paper describes, far from improving the dismal standard of living in Egypt, the Sissi regime's authoritarian pursuit of total state control has involved sucking the civil society organizations that previously filled in for failed state services back into the state's leviathan of incompetence. As Omar Ashour notes, Sissi's 2013 coup against the elected Islamist president sent a message to Islamists in Libya, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere, namely that of "militarising politics: only arms guarantee political rights, not the constitution, not democratic institutions and certainly not votes."[3] Beyond mere messaging, the potential for successful transitions in Yemen and Libya has been obliterated in great part by Saudi and Gulf State incitement of intensified internal armed conflicts. One tragic aspect of the "anti-Islamist" policy advanced by Saudi Arabia (much ameliorated since the exit of King Abdallah's advisors from power) and Gulf States such as the UAE has been that it aims not at any urgent threat but rather at preventing a perceived slippery slope towards types of government in the region that might present alternatives to monarchy.

---

[2] Steven Brooke, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Social Outreach after the Egyptian Coup," Brookings Institution, August 2015. http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Research/Files/Reports/2015/07/rethinking-political-islam/Egypt_Brooke-FINALE.pdf?la=en .

[3] Omar Ashour, "Between ISIS and a failed state: The saga of Libyan Islamists," Brookings Institution, August 2015. http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Research/Files/Reports/2015/07/rethinking-political-islam/Libya_Ashour-FINALE.pdf?la=en

In light of the destruction wrought by such intervention, and given that Islamism is a more appealing phenomenon than Jihadism, accommodating Islamism would seem a prudent course. It might be instructive to reconsider what people or movements generally mean when they describe themselves as '*Islami*'. In general, Islamists seek a more overtly 'Islamic' idiom for public life, law and the foreign and domestic policy priorities of the states they live in. These aims often overlap substantially with concerns for social justice, challenging elite structures and resisting foreign encroachment, all tensions than have been packaged neatly in calls for implementing Islam's egalitarian vision and for transnational Muslim solidarity, and that match the more cultural conservative views of those outside more Westernized elites. So the Muslim Brotherhood (almost everywhere) has drawn substantially on young, highly educated professionals to whom corrupt or inefficient political economies have not granted opportunities commensurate with expectations; the issue of Palestine continues to roil; and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey represents the economic and then, finally, political rise of the "other" Turkey, not the previously dominant Kemalist elite. This is particularly threatening if one is rigidly attached to regimes that refuse to reform governance or allow for renegotiations of how resources are distributed. Calls for the rule of law, accountability, and socio-economic justice are laudable. Citizens of a state have an acknowledged right to lobby on behalf of those with whom they identify elsewhere. Transnational solidarity blocs already exist, including an Islamic one. And the desire for a public space and politics seen as more "authentic" may unnerve or disgust, but there is scant hope of eliminating it from the political life of any community.

Of course, a major concern over Islamism for some citizens of Arab states is the worry that Islamist empowerment would result in conservative regimes that dramatically (whether immediately or gradually) alter their lifestyles. But here it is worth looking back at the Arab Spring and its aftermath to see if one can really establish any reliable causal link between increased Islamist participation and state-sanctioned challenges to liberal living. To take Egypt as an example, far from proving a linear causal track leading towards conservative repression, Islamist discourse during and after the Arab Spring has proven so flexible that it bears limited fruit as a category of analysis. Far from calling for the imposition of conservative rules of dress, Salafi parties such as the Nour Party in parliament and independent Salafi preachers stressed that such laws would be detrimental and were not Islamically required.[4] Vilified in the Egyptian press for pushing for more detail on the role of the Shariah in Egyptian law during the negotiations over the country's 2012 constitution, the Salafi leadership associated with

---

[4] Interview with Dr. Imad Abd al-Ghaffur, head of the Nur Party on Bila Hudud [in Arabic] on Al-Jazeera on 1 January 2012 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLxlIn2woz8

the Nour Party would later be the only Islamists who supported the highly circumscribed language on Islam in the post-coup 2014 constitution.

After the 2013 coup, the positions taken by different Islamist groups in Egypt were determined more by calculations of political interest or commitments to or against the *ancien régime* than by the necessary conclusions of "Islamic" arguments. Supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and opponents of the coup took to the streets chanting not "Shariah" but '*shar'iyya* (legitimacy by law),' a slogan of democratic process. An open letter by fifty-six Saudi religious scholars condemning the coup and the repression by the Sissi regime relied not on classical Islamist arguments but on how the coup was an affront to the democratic choice of the Egyptian people.[5] Meanwhile, it was the Egyptian state's religious establishment that reiterated standard, conservative Islamic arguments that citizens must not resist the de facto ruler (based on a saying of the Prophet, even an oppressive ruler who usurped power should be obeyed). The public spokesman of the Nour Party, whose leaders had stood in support of the 2013 coup, announced that the party would support Sisi's campaign for president not because he was an Islamically legitimate ruler but because he enjoyed senior administrative authority.[6]

Ironically, it has been the regimes most determined in their opposition to Islamist groups that have introduced some of the most glaring limitations on liberal lifestyles. In Egypt, despite rampant and totally unsubstantiated rumors that the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government was in the process of Islamizing the country, it was the Sissi regime that introduced new measures to regulate alcohol, engaged in public raids on perceived bastions of immorality, and tasked the religious establishment with combatting atheism.[7] Similarly, in Saudi Arabia it was the rabidly anti-Muslim Brotherhood cadre of leading advisors under the late king Abdullah that declared that anyone advocating atheism in the kingdom was a terrorist.[8] Suspicions of Islamists seem born out by Turkey's AKP limiting press freedom and detaining outspoken opponents. But, as Berna Turam has observed, this is not necessarily because Islamists are more hostile to liberties than secularists in Turkey but because no party in the

---

[5] "*Bayan al-Ulama al-Su'udiyon hawl ahdath Masr* [Saudi scholars' statement about the events in Egypt]," Al-Jazeera, 5 August 2013. http://goo.gl/C3ppYX

[6] "*Nader Bakkar: Ekhtarna El-Sissi bi'tibareh "ra'ees majlis idarah" wa laysa khalifa lel-Muslimeen* [Nader Bakkar: We chose El-Sissi as 'Chairman' and not 'Caliph']," el-Watan News, 15 July 2014. http://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/520837

[7] Jannis Grimm, "Sisi's Moralism," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 December 2014. http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=57574

[8] "Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights," Human Rights Watch, 20 March 2014. https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/20/saudi-arabia-new-terrorism-regulations-assault-rights

country has broken free of a political infrastructure and culture that has long had limited concern for personal liberties.[9]

Often, discussions about Islamism end with liberals voicing concern over a Muslim-majority country becoming "the next Iran." Beyond mere changes to lifestyle in the social sphere, there is the fear that Islamist rule will lead to a total transmutation of the state and national identity. But insisting on preventing even the possibility of such a change ignores the reality that it is precisely the deep questions of identity and of what "good" the state is supposed to advance that lie at the heart of political and social polarization in many Muslim countries. By analogy, urban Americans can fear what might happen if a president were elected on promises to fulfill an evangelical Christian or nativist White agenda. But closing doors to the involvement of such constituencies in national politics would not make them disappear. It would only intensify polarization and resentment towards the gatekeepers of the status quo. The vast majority of women in Egypt wear the hijab[10], and more than half of Turkish women do as well.[11] If, indeed, the legal and social questions around women covering their heads portend a larger debate over identity and the nature of the state, would it be democratic – or wise – to prevent that debate from happening?

## About this Series:

The *Rethinking Political Islam* series is an innovative effort to understand how the developments following the Arab uprisings have shaped—and in some cases altered—the strategies, agendas, and self-conceptions of Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world. The project engages scholars of political Islam through in-depth research and dialogue to provide a systematic, cross-country comparison of the trajectory of political Islam in 12 key countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, as well as Malaysia and Indonesia.

This is accomplished through four stages:

- **Working papers** for each country, produced by an author who has conducted on-the-ground research and engaged with the relevant Islamist actors.

- **Reaction essays** in which authors reflect on and respond to the other country cases.

- **Responses** from Islamist leaders and activists themselves as they engage in debate with project authors and offer their own perspectives on the future of their movements.

- **Final drafts** incorporating the insights gleaned from the months of dialogue and discussion.

[11] "On their heads be it," The Economist, 28 October 2010. http://www.economist.com/node/17363686

BROOKINGS

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.

Brookings recognizes that the value it provides to any supporter is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment and the analysis and recommendations are not determined by any donation.

BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
1775 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20036 U.S.A.
www.brookings.edu