

# Political Islam: A Threat to the Political Stability of Current Regimes in the Middle East?

Written by Laura Schmah

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LAURA SCHMAH, FEB 4 2013

### Introduction

The revival of political Islam is today a defining feature of many societies in the Middle East; where it, at times, poses a threat to existing regimes, while at other times undergirds them (Krämer 2011). This essay focuses on the destabilising influence of political Islam, exploring how it threatens existing regimes both militarily and ideologically. It concludes that while the military threat has decreased over recent decades, the ideological threat remains very real.

The concept of 'political Islamism' is used here to mean a political ideology that favours a return to Islam as a source of political guidance and to Allah as the highest political authority. This includes groups that directly seek control of the state as well as those whose activism indirectly affects it, through preaching and community action, for example. It should be noted, however, that the term 'political Islam' is not necessarily a neutral starting point (see Hirschkind 2011). 'Political stability' refers to the likelihood that a political system will be exposed to threats, but also to its capacity to deal with threats should they arise (Dowding & Kimber 1983). While the full range of causes of political instability are widely debated, the perceived illegitimacy of a state is often seen as a critical factor (Useem & Useem 1979).

To structure this analysis of the threat political Islam poses to the political stability of current regimes, this essay draws from Anthony Gramsci's (1971) concepts of 'wars of manoeuvre' and 'wars of position'. A war of manoeuvre is a military struggle to capture control of the state. The state is particularly vulnerable to this when it is poorly integrated with civil society (Moore 1995: 377). A war of position represents a more long-term ideological struggle to undermine the regime's legitimacy. This is necessary where there are closer ties between the state and civil society. In reality the divide is not always clear, given that militant organisations are often embedded in civil society and rely on ideological support (Moore 1995: 377). Following this conceptualisation the essay will first review the military challenge of political Islam – the war of manoeuvre – using the example of the Iranian Revolution. Secondly, it will assess the ideological threat – the war of position – that political Islam represents for current regimes, illustrated by the example of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

### The Military Challenge Posed by Political Islam: A 'War of Manoeuvre'

Most states in the Middle East are artificial creations of the colonial era, imposed with little consideration of ethnic or religious divisions. After the Second World War many secured independence during struggles against colonial elites. The nationalist regimes that succeeded were often authoritarian, but gained popular support by delivering modernisation and creating nation state structures. The regimes later replacing them, however, lacked popular support and often ruled in favour of their clans or ethnic groups (Ghalioun 2004). These regimes were often corrupt, ineffective in bringing about economic and structural improvements and delivering public services, and relatively unaccustomed to internal opposition, to which they usually reacted violently and oppressively (Gerges 2003). While this might suggest that they were vulnerable to public discontent and would thus inspire successful wars of manoeuvre, these regimes have also typically proven to be exceptionally effective in deploying secret police and intelligence agencies as mechanisms of repression in order to prolong their authoritarian rule (Diamond 2010).

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The political Islam of the 1970s was often considered a revolutionary movement (Milton-Edwards 2011: 156). This perception intensified during the 1980s when the rise of radical elements across the Middle East began to directly threaten many regimes (Milton-Edwards 2004: 28).[1] Arguably the biggest military success of political Islamism was the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

The revolution was driven by a number of groups with diverse political outlooks, not only religiously orientated groups – including Western-educated professionals. Among these different outlooks, however, Shia Islam seemed most effective at articulating national concerns and thus emerged as a new popular framework of identity, which saw Islam as a religion of protest and revolution (Esposito 1991: 176-178). Following the success of the revolution the *marja* (a high-ranking Islamic cleric) Ruhollah Khomeini and his supporters managed to establish an Islamic theocracy.

While the fact that the Iranian revolution was not exclusively a revolution of political Islam qualifies the achievement of the Islamists, the new regime was surprisingly long-lived and successful with regards to the islamification of the state, with internal challenges only arising recently (Milton-Edwards 2004: 36, 58). The Iranian revolution created great fear among other regimes in the Middle East as political Islam posed a major threat to the global Westphalian state-system (Milton-Edwards 2004: 35). Khomeini made clear his intention to export the revolution, with Iran offering logistic support and safe havens to other Islamist movements (Milton-Edwards 2005: 83).

Nonetheless, with the exception of the Islamic Charter Front's successful coup d'état on the Sudanese state in 1989, these fears remained unrealised and the war of manoeuvre proved largely ineffective at bringing about regime change (Milton-Edwards 2005: 89). This was partly due to the fact that radical revolutionary movements remained a minority within a broader variety of Islamist movements (Milton-Edwards 2004: 28). A major advantage for the existing regimes of the region proved to be the material support of Western countries in reaction to the often explicitly anti-Western agenda of political Islamism (Gerges 2003). By the mid-1990s it seemed that political Islam as a military revolutionary force had lost its momentum and was in decline, with failures for example in Afghanistan and Algeria (Milton-Edwards 2005: 110, Al-Sayyid 2003).

It is possible to argue that Islamist terrorism constitutes a revival of the war of manoeuvre. While modern suicide attacks have occurred since 1981, they have recently increased and the attacks have shifted towards targeting Muslims and regimes perceived as un-Islamic (Moghadam 2009). Terrorist campaigns with the aim of establishing an Islamist state, such as that of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad group, have nevertheless been entirely unsuccessful (Abrahms 2006).[2] Thus while Islamist terrorism has a destabilising effect, it is in itself not a major regime threat.

## The Ideological Challenge of Political Islam: A 'War of Position'

Since the symbolic defeat of Arab nationalism in the war with Israel in 1967, there has been an overall cultural revival of Islam (Milton-Edwards 2004: 27). In this sense political Islam has been engaged in a more long-term campaign for influence – a war of position – in which it has challenged the political stability of current regimes by undermining their ideological legitimacy.

While modern political Islam has been largely shaped by the contemporary context (see El-Affendi 2003), it is part of a long tradition that began with the prophet Mohammed taking political leadership of the city state of Medina, establishing a connection between religious and political authority in Islamic culture. This relationship was institutionalised as the Caliphate (Burgat 2003: 44). Islam has thus been understood as a 'way of life' in which politics and religion are inseparable (Esposito 1991: 157).

There is therefore a fundamental ideological clash between the concept of political Islam and the western-style secular governments that have dominated post-colonial politics in the region (Milton-Edwards 2004: 10). Political Islamists reject secularism because it is based on Western liberalism and, as they argue has supported the erosion of the influence of Islam while its advantages have mainly served the interests of colonial settlers and their descendants (Burgat 2003: 44). Moreover, though Islamists have been forced to accommodate the national regimes within which they operate and are deeply shaped by them (Gerges 2003), political Islam has a difficult relationship with the notion of a nation state and nationalism, concepts with which its objectives are not compatible (Sayyid

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2011). This is because Islamists believe that loyalty should rest in the umma, the community of believers, and additionally because notions of territory are alien to Muslim traditions (Vatikiotis 1987: 35-38). As a result political Islam represents a fundamental challenge to the values on which many existing regimes are based.

Yet political Islam is by no means a unified movement, and individual movements often suffer from internal contradictions (El-Affendi 2003).[3] There are, for example, religious divisions between shia and sunni variants, ethnic divisions and political disagreements, such as those between modernists and traditionalists. The existing regimes representing particular interpretations of Islam, e.g. Iran (Shia Islam) and Saudi Arabia (Wahhabism), are another point of division among movements of political Islam (Milton-Edwards 2005: 81). Additionally, even though political Islam is becoming increasingly rooted in society (Milton-Edwards 2005: 111), in many Muslim countries it also has to face a large section of the population that remains committed to Westernisation (Sayyid 2011).

However, many western-influenced regimes across the region appear to have no long-term strategy to combat the ideological threat or to absorb Islamists (Gerges 2003). Some regimes have attempted to undercut efforts by political Islamists by launching an Islamic revival of their own (Milton-Edwards 2004: 21), but the legacy of their affiliation with western regimes has undermined their credibility (Burgat 2003: 52, Al-Syyid 2003). In a sense, therefore, political Islamists have been successful even without gaining power. Thus the connections with the West that gave the non-Islamist regimes an advantage in the war of manoeuvre, seem to have come at the cost of their legitimacy and success in the war of position (Burgat 2003: 52).

Fawaz Gerges (2003) argues that Islamist movements have politically matured through past violent confrontation by reformulating their programmes and becoming political parties. Islamist movements have directly or indirectly participated in elections in every country where it has been possible (Al-Sayyid 2003). Political Islam has also gained much support and credibility through community work (Gerges 2003). In Jordan and Kuwait, for instance, Islamist movements have not sought to confront the state, but to build a strong civil support base (Sayyid 2011). A good example is the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, who focused on gradual reform in favour of Islamic revival. The organisation split after his death, but many continued his example of seeking popular support through preaching and education in order to ultimately undermine the regime's legitimacy (Milton-Edwards 2011: 152-155). Thus Islam became a more prominent part of mainstream life and society during the 1980s (Esposito 1991: 171).

These developments also influence the shifting ways in which Islamists view democracy. Traditionally, Islamists have been suspicious of democracy because of its association with the West (Milton-Edwards 2004: 88). However, the success of political Islam in gaining widespread appeal as part of its war of position makes democracy an increasingly viable means for Islamist movements to gain power. Democratic islamifications in Turkey and Pakistan (see Pupcenoks 2012), and the election of the Muslim Brotherhood supported Mohammed Morsi in post-Arab Spring Egypt are indicative of this (Kneel 2012).

Finally, it is worth remembering that democracy is a process, one with no defined goal, which even has the potential to destroy itself and dismantle its fundamental values (Chou 2011). Therefore democracy has the potential to serve political Islam no matter how fundamentalist its values, as long as it can gain public support. As a consequence the new threat to the secular states of the region is no longer an Iranian style revolution, but perhaps a Muslim Brotherhood style democratic take-over (The Economist 2011).

## Conclusions

This essay has argued that during the 1970s and 1980s political Islamism seemed to challenge the political stability of the regimes in the Middle East, through coups and revolutions, and military campaigns that, according to Gramsci, can be conceptualised as wars of manoeuvre. With the exception of Iran and Sudan, however, the threat has not proven to be as dangerous as feared, and the ability of terrorism, as a development of the war of manoeuvre, to bring about regime change is questionable. During that same period, however, there has been a much slower revival of cultural Islam within mainstream society. Many movements of political Islam like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have focused on transforming society rather than immediately capturing control of the state, or, according to

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Gramsci's theory, engaging in a war of position. Seen in this way the threat of political Islam for current regimes remains stronger than ever, as the success of the cultural revival has suggested that Islamist movements will be able to gain influence and power through democratic means.

As a final observation, we cannot understand political Islam without considering the nature of existing regimes. It is difficult to generalise either these regimes or indeed the responses of groups labelled as 'Islamist' across the diverse region of the Middle East. Despite this limitation, this essay has demonstrated that the success of political Islam's war of position means that political Islamism has become mainstreamed to such an extent that no regime in the region, democratic or not, can avoid engaging with it.

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[1] This was led by Jihadi movements based in broader Salafism, who justify waging jihad against other Muslims on the basis of the charge of apostasy, being a non-believer (Wiktorowicz 2011).

[2] It is even debateable whether terrorism is an effective tool to coerce targeted states to adopt certain policies. For two contrasting perspectives see Robert Pape (2003) and Max Abrahms (2012).

[3] For example, many Islamist movements are driven by the fear of losing their culture and Islam, while claiming at the same time that Islam is superior to other religions and ways of life (El-Affendi 2003).

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