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## Political Islam and Arab Civil Society

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TIMOTHY POIRSON, DEC 12 2014

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As the year 2014 is slowly drawing to a close, we begin to look back with an attempt to understand why and how certain events happened. Islamist political groups enjoyed a strong surge of advancement in certain Middle Eastern/North African countries. They now represent an important type of non-state actors in contemporary international relations. Groups like *Islamic State* or *Ansar al-Sharia* are declaring caliphates in the territories they seize, which challenges the sovereignty of established states like Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Lebanon. Who are these groups? What prompted their creation, and on what grounds do they operate? What real threat do they pose to regional stability and to the international community?

Political Islam is a term that is often used amongst circles of academics and policymakers, but its complexity is seldom acknowledged or understood. 'Political Islamic movements' believe that Islam has a built-in political system that every believer should adhere to and uphold (Khan, 2014). Islamist groups are motivated by the idea that there is "not enough Islam" in society (Woltering, 2002:1133). There can be no 'Islamisation' of society until an Islamic political system replaces the existing one. The path to reach said 'Islamisation' varies according to which group is operating and their specific circumstances, however, the implementation of *shari'a* is a tool that is commonly held and for which is popularly advocated (Woltering, 2002:1133). In the wake of the heightening of Islamist activity in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), particularly with the rise to pre-eminence of the *Islamic State* – also known as *Islamic State in Iraq and Syria* (ISIS), *Islamic State in Iraq and the Levantine* (ISIL), or by the Arabic acronym *Daesh* – questions about this misunderstood legal tradition have been posed by Western media and policymakers, oftentimes demonstrating little understanding of the historical wealth and implications of this tradition.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the threat of communism has seemingly been replaced by the fear of Islam in the Western World. It is seen as both a 'major threat' to Western democracies and its civil society, but also to Arab civil societies (Turam, 2004:259). Academic literature on the perception of contemporary Political Islamic movements, however, is polarised. On one side are scholars who see Islam as the staunch enemy of liberal democracy and *civil society* (Gellner, 1996; Huntington, 1996). On the other, political Islam is portrayed as a 'propellant' of *civil society* by embodying the only strong opposition voice in the sea of repressive authoritarian regimes in the Arab World (Hefner, 2000; Norton, 1995). The latter voices construct their argument on the idea that, despite being a notion plagued by definitional issues, *civil society* is pitted as a platform for criticism of the State (Turam, 2004:260), which is the same assumption as Islamist groups, who, beyond a simple criticism of the State, possess a 'secularisation-resistant' essence (Gellner, 1996:15) that struggles with the State. Having said that, many Middle East observers contest the idea of an Arab *civil society*. Indeed, these observers argue that it has been absent, or at the very least stunted, in development for centuries.

The Arab pre-modern society was initially centred around a political authority whose legitimacy rested upon a combination of conquest and religious doctrine. It included a public space shared by merchants, guilds, and Sufi orders (Gellner, 1988). Outwith this political authority, other collectivities operated in an autonomous and defiant manner, mainly tribal and ethnic groups who ran their own internal affairs through 'elected or appointed leaders' (Ibrahim, 1998:375). Overall, traditional forms of authority embodied by leaders, elders, and elites were performing

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the functions that provided the governance of these societies. Social solidarities existed along multiple lines, such as religious and ethnic ones (Ibrahim, 1998:376-377). Its socio-political structure changed considerably following the colonial era in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. New Arab states were born, carved into existence by externally dictated artificial borders. In addition to this, these new states initially ignored pre-modern era traditional wisdom (Ibrahim, 1998:377) when building their institutions, resulting in society being kept passive through paternalistic authoritarian regimes that kept society in the dark, away from decision-making circles.

Despite the repressive nature of the governmental authorities in the post-World War One MENA states, Islamist groups started to appear as early as the late 1920s with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Such groups developed as strong movements in opposition to repressive government, sometimes even posing serious security threats to the regime. Often, the governmental response was to increase draconian measures to silence Islamist groups, which were ineffective at eliminating these groups as a challenge, and intensified public support. During the 1980s and the 1990s, MENA *civil society* found itself caught in a struggle between authoritarian regimes and Islamist groups, going so far as having some members of this *civil society* drawn into these Islamist groups, or else silenced (Ibrahim, 1998:378).

The events of the 2011 Arab Spring saw renewed hope for Arab *civil society*, at least in the eyes of Middle East observers. This optimism was tempered, however, when the protest-driven democratic movements encountered resistance (Oprisko, 2013). Libya and Syria descended into civil war, and the Egyptian military overthrew Mohammed Morsi, the democratically elected president and member of the Muslim Brotherhood. The success of *civil society* at creating a space for itself remains questionable. While the fall of seemingly immovable authoritarian regimes did not seem to profit much to *civil society*, it has been Political Islamist movements, rather than *civil society*, which have taken advantage of the power vacuum following the Arab Spring movements. These successes are evident in both Libya and Syria, where ISIS and ISIL have carved out territory in which to establish bases to launch operations and in which to implement their ideology and consolidate power. Groups like *Islamic State* or *Ansar al-Sharia* are declaring Caliphates in the territories they seize, in an attempt to fulfil the Political Islam ideal of a 'global Islamic Caliphate'. Political Islam is thus perceived as representing a clear and present danger to the liberal international order and its current status quo because it is a competitive vision for how the world ought to be ordered.

The broad scope of this direct challenge is what prompted the creation of this edited collection. The goal therein is to provide greater understanding of contemporary 'radical' political Islamic activism, illuminating the new trends set by ISIS or *Ansar al-Sharia*, in how Islamist movements operate. It aims to make the reader think beyond the media headlines and consider the realities of such caliphates proclaimed by these groups. This collection also aims to offer a perspective on what the implications for world politics are.

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