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Comparing Goals and Aspirations of National vs Transnational Islamist Movements

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JOSEPH J. KAMINSKI, DEC 28 2014

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The previous century saw an Arab world dominated by corrupt monarchies and dictatorships. The nation-state model, as practiced in the Muslim world, failed at many basic functions of what would be considered high quality-governance [1], including the preservation of minority rights. According to Zaid Eyadat,

Plainly and simply, the regimes and monarchies of old in the region have abysmally failed in producing creative ways for incorporating minorities into the state and the social framework at large. With the emergence of the nation-state came the heavy, top-down approach to solving every undesirable issue, including minority rights. (Eyadat 2013, 735)

As a result of these failures, the late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen a re-emergence in the strength and interest in Islamic-based political movements (Roy 2012 and Eyadat 2013). Despite fears of mixing religion and the state in the West, the Arab and Muslim world in general have been more accepting of this taboo idea in the minds of liberals. "While the West is inherently suspicious of the rise of Islam as a political force, Arabs are much more diverse in their political attitudes" (Eyadat 2013, 734). This article looks to show some similarities and differences between national and transnational Islamist movements in regards to tolerance, religious freedom, and the use of violence.

I will look in greater detail at the examples of Tunisia's Ennahda Movement, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Hamas as national-based Islamist movements in the next section. Following a discussion of national Islamist movements, I will look at transnational Islamist movements. I will look at the cases of Al Qaeda and ISIS as examples of contemporary transnational Islamist movements. The last section will look at the hybrid case of Hezbollah.

National-based Islamist Movements

Perhaps one of the most successful current Islamist movements in Africa, in terms of sustained political power and influence, is Tunisia's Ennahda Movement. Ennahda emerged under the name Ḥarakat al-Ittijāh al-Islāmī, or "The Movement of Islamic Tendency," in 1981. It changed its name in 1989 to Ḥarakat an-Nahḍah. Ennahda gained inspiration from the Iranian Revolution in 1979 (despite Tunisia being almost 100% Sunni), the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and the ideas of Hasan al-Banna (Wright 2001 and Lewis 2011).

While the original Ennahda movement in the 1980s was more extremist-oriented, they changed their course in more recent times. According to Aiden Lewis, "Aligned with more extreme Islamist movements elsewhere in the Arab world in the 1980s, Mr[.] Ghannouchi and other Ennahda leaders now like to compare Ennahda to the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey" (Lewis 2011). Ghannouchi sees similarities in the way Islam undergirds both Turkish and Tunisian society. Both nations have almost unanimous Muslim populations and both nations each possess one of the most revered Islamic Holy Sites in the world; the Hagia Sofia in Istanbul, Turkey, and the Great Mosque of Kairouan in Kairouan, Tunisia.

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After Ennahda gained power following the overthrow of the enormously unpopular autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, out of pragmatic interests they incorporated some elements of the previous regime into the new government. In the words of Ennahda's leader and founder, Rachid al Ghannouchi, "Power-Sharing in a Muslim or Non-Muslim environment becomes a necessity in order to lay the foundations of the social order" (Ghannouchi 1998, 273). Ennahda's leadership recognised that this would assist in the transition to power. According to Longo:

In fact, when Nida was formed after the 2011 revolution, al-Nahda has integrated several members of the former regime into its ranks to secure them a role in the aftermath of revolution and strengthen its position vis-à-vis other political forces. This is the case of Habib Essid, long-standing politician during the 1990s, who was appointed Minister of the Interior during the transitional phase led by Mabazaa and Essebsi, and then advisor of the Prime Minister during the first al-Nahda's government led by Hamadi Jebali. (Longo 2014)

Flexibility was a concern of Ennahda from the moment it came to power. Ghannouchi himself states, "Realism and flexibility are amongst the most important features of Islamic methodology" (Ghannouchi 1998, 272). Ghannouchi recognises that different historical geo-political circumstances require different ways of governing a state. One cannot simply graft an 8th century-style caliphate in a 21st century world.

Once in power, Ennahda minimised some of the more controversial Islamist elements of their constitution. This action actually strengthened its position against other secular parties. "Now that the new Constitution has been adopted, and it is less 'Islamic' than any expectation, paradoxically the anti-Islamist front is weaker than ever and has lost its glue" (Longo 2014). Ghannouchi has articulated that the principles of justice articulated in the Qur'an ought to serve as the foundation and basis of what is constitutive of justice. "Ghannushi maintains that re-reading of the authoritative texts of the Qur'an and Hadith is governed by certain principles that have become the basis for determining what is acceptable or otherwise in the modern period, a key one of which is 'justice' ('adl)" (Saeed 1999, 312). Ultimately justice is found within the Qur'an the proper interpretation and implementation of the Shar'ah. However, as a realist, Ghannouchi and Ennahda recognize the necessity of pragmatically reaching their goals, rather than using violence like transnational groups do.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood [Egyptian MB] is another example of a national-based Islamist movement (Rubin 2010a and Rubin 2010b). While the general Muslim Brotherhood movement has spread to other nations, its overall agenda is based with a pre-existing national setting; each individual MB movement sought political power within an existing demarcated territory. According to Rubin, "The Brotherhoods in each country are independent of each other; they usually do not use terrorism; they often follow different policies adapted to their surroundings; and they often try to avoid publicity" (Rubin 2010b, 1). These individual national MB movements did not seek to annex/commandeer land the same way Al Qaeda sought to, and ISIS actually has. This is why this article argues the case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is an example of a national-based Islamist movement.

The Egyptian MB's roots can be traced back to Hasan al-Banna in 1928. His movement grew steadily during the 1930s and into the 1940s (Soage and Franganillo 2010). It is widely believed that the Egyptian monarchy had an interest in his death. In 1948, rumours of a Brotherhood-led coup on Mahmoud Fahmi an-Nukrashi Pasha, the second Egyptian Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Egypt, emerged (Hussain 2010). Al-Banna was eventually killed in 1949. In the 1950s, Nasser continued efforts to limit the influence of the Egyptian MB, but by this point, the movement had established firm roots in Egyptian society.

The Ikhwan [brotherhood] attached itself to, and built strategic relations with mosques, welfare associations and neighbourhood groups, whilst seeking to influence existing activists with its revolutionary ideas. By joining local cells, members could access a well-established and well-resourced community of activists who would help them in all aspects of their lives. (Hussain 2010, 2)

In the 1960s, the Egyptian MB's most popular figure was Sayyid Qutb. Qutb did not call for global jihad; rather, he called for a refocusing of Islamic values in already-existing Muslim societies (Rubin 2010a). In Milestones, Qutb's main concern was the growing Jahiliyyah, or state of barbarous ignorance, that he feared Muslims in Muslim lands were returning to via infatuation with the immoral elements of western culture. According to Qutb:

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We are also surrounded by Jahiliyyah today, which is of the same nature as it was during the first period of Islam, perhaps a little deeper. Our whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws-is Jahiliyyah, even to the extent that what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy and Islamic thought are also constructs of Jahiliyyah! (Qutb 2007, 6)

The theme of returning to a more pure state of Islamic discourse and would continue to be influential into the 21st century, and was central in the 2012 Mohammed Morsi presidential platform. Morsi's agenda sought to reintroduce Islam into the political apparatus. He was deeply concerned with issues of religious rights and freedoms among minorities. In an address as president given in Tahrir Square, as reported by the Guardian, he states:

I call upon you to begin this renaissance project. We Egyptians, Muslims and Christians, are harbingers of development and civilisation and we will remain so. We will meet the trials and schemes which are aimed at undermining our resolve and national unity as we did during the revolution. I am determined with you to astound the world with the Egyptian revival that realises prosperity, dignity and stability. I am determined, with your help, to build a new Egypt, a civil state, which is democratically constituted. All my energies will be devoted to this great project. I will work to preserve Egypt's national interests on all fronts, Arab and African, regional and international. (Mohammed Morsi, Address at Tahrir Square, 2012)

The civil state envisioned by the new leadership, at the least on paper, made clear their desires to encourage diversity and multiculturalism. Despite some statements made by the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 that seemed antithetical to women's rights, Morsi's regime allowed for women to participate in their political movement. According to Pakinam El-Sharkawy, one of Morsi's female political advisors:

The Brotherhood, she emphasised, does not speak for the president; he has resigned from the Brotherhood but remains a member of its political party. "Does any statement issued by any political party or group represent the presidency?" she asked. "It's not the presidency's institution, and it's not an official entity." (Kirkpatrick and Sheikh, 14 March, 2013)

The Morsi-led Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood sought to keep its domestic politics within its own borders; it did not seek to export them to other places. Morsi was much more interested in engaging with traditional Islamist allies in terms of foreign policy than pervious regimes; however, he did not seek to expand his domain of rule or territory, similar to the aims of the Ennahda Movement in Tunisia.

Not All National-based Islamist Movements Renounce Violence

One cannot simply argue that all national-based Islamist movements are opposed to the use of violence; this article argues that there is a tendency within most national Islamist movements to, at the least, renounce violence as a means to achieving political goals. The most obvious counter-example is that of Hamas in Gaza.

The way violence is utilised in the case of Hamas is different than the cases of ISIS and Al Qaeda. While ISIS and Al Qaeda both are not representatives of any single territory such as Hamas, ISIS and Al Qaeda tend to use violence against whomever they feel is a threat to their interests; Hamas' violence is targeted at solely a specific entity: Israel. "By the early 1990's, it no longer sought to antagonise others as readily as in the past" (Hroub 2000, 51). Hamas differentiated that its principal enemy was Israel and not Western states that supported it. While Hamas still opposed western support of Israel, they did not seek to wage Jihad on the West as did/does Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Considering levels of violence seen during Israel's 2014 Operation Protective Edge, the situation between Gaza and Israel is by all reasonable standards an ongoing civil war. Israel's naval blockade of the waters off the coast of Gaza, by UN standards, would be an open declaration of war if Gaza was formally recognised as an autonomous nation-state[2]. "The act of initiating a blockade is tantamount to an act of war, and is one of the enumerated specific acts of aggression that appears in the [UN] General Assembly's consensus definition of Aggression adopted on 14 December 1974" (Kraska 2010, 379-380). As Gaza continues to lack the autonomy of a legally recognised state, it is likely to continue to use violence. When states feel in a corner with 'nothing to lose,' they are more likely to engage in

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violence, as opposed to when they do feel they have some tangible benefit to lose (Mecham 2006). Like any state or movement, national or transnational, when one feels threatened, they are more likely to respond with violence.

Transnational Islamist Movements

Transnational Islamist movements are those movements that do not limit themselves to any specific national boundary or government, and seek to impose their worldview on an area not confined to any one particular nation-state's legally demarcated territorial borders. The transition from a national to transitional movement is often a tactical choice on part of the movement. This is to say a movement can start of as a national movement and evolve into a transnational movement. "For many Islamist organisations, the evolution from a national to a transnational organisation is primarily the result of tactical rather than strategic choices designed to ensure the survival and legitimacy of the movement" (Mecham 2006, 3). Such movements consist primarily of an ethnically homogenous population who perceive themselves as oppressed by a foreign power or foreign powers with respect to territory (Burroughs-Johnson 2013). According to Quinn Mecham, there are three specific conditions that cause Islamist movements tend to become 'transnational.' Understanding these conditions can shed light on why some of these transnational movements become what they do. Mecham states:

In particular, Islamist movements are likely to become increasingly transnational under three principal conditions: a) when members of the domestic Islamist movement become linked to participation in external conflicts through training activities; b) when the movement's funding is transnational and the funding party creates organisational incentives for transnational ties; and c) when geographic resources necessary for sustained mobilisation in repressive contexts become external to state boundaries. (Mecham 2006, 2)

Unlike national-based Islamist movements such as Ennahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood-led Egyptian state in 2012, transnational Islamist movements by nature tend to exist more at the fringes of political society. Such groups generally lack direct access to national political processes; as a result of this exclusion, often such movements have little to no interest in cooperating and making concessions to any formal state-led entity.

[I]f Islamist groups are not incorporated into domestic political processes but instead are forcibly repressed by the state, they may become transnational organisations, which are extremely difficult to control. Because transnational groups do not respond well to domestic policies, they are less likely to change in response to political incentives. (Mecham 2006, 5)

Transnational Islamist movements, by nature, tend to vacillate between violence and non-violence, depending on external circumstances. At times such movements are focused more on domestic issues, while at other times these same movements are much more concerned with global issues.

With regards to Al Qaeda, which literally means, 'the base' in Arabic, the group from its beginnings was a transnational Islamist organisation. Created in the late 1980s and largely funded by a wealthy Saudi national, Osama Bin Laden, Al Qaeda from its very beginning were dedicated to the creation of a global caliphate and the use of violence of unprecedented scales to achieve their ends (Moghadam 2010). They also sought to encourage participation in their movement from Muslims (Sunni, of course) from all over the world. In their own words, "We wish especially to reach out to our brothers and sisters in Muslim societies. We say to you forthrightly: We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies" (Ibrahim 2007, 18).

While Al Qaeda were most certainly a transnational Islamist movement, their movement actually lacks much of what would be traditionally considered a 'political apparatus.' Al Qaeda does not have legislators, politicians, courts, or even clearly demarcated constitutional codes. Rather, Al Qaeda's 'doctrine' is largely a hodgepodge of Qur'anic interpretations and fatwas from individuals often not qualified to issue them, and the formal execution of 'commands and rulings' are not clearly defined or understood. If one breaks an Al Qaeda decree within the organisation, there is no recognisable, formal 'legal or governing body' that can be immediately pointed to as the entity that will carry out the punishment. A similar reality is emerging with the most recent transnational Islamist movement to come into public view: ISIS.

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As mentioned in the previous paragraph, at the core of Al Qaeda's mission is to engage in violence. With regards to violence against the West, one Al Qaeda essay states:

The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual obligation incumbent upon every Muslim who can do it and in any country—this until the Aqsa Mosque [Jerusalem] and the Holy Mosque [Mecca] are liberated from their grip, and until their armies withdraw from all lands of Islam, defeated, shattered, and unable to threaten any Muslim. (Ibrahim 2000, 13)

One can see that these demands are quite broad. While they speak of the 'liberation' of al-Aqsa and the Holy Mosque of Mecca, they do not actually define what this means. In order for these Mosques to be 'properly liberated,' who must be in control and how must they operate? None of these specific questions are directly addressed. The same can be said of the vague demand that Americans must be killed until they are 'shattered, and unable to threaten any Muslims.' This is another non-quantifiable demand. Such broad ideological demands lacking actual concreteness seem to be a common theme with many transnational Islamist movements.

Despite the lack of concreteness in many terms used, one thing that is clear in the case of Al Qaeda is a desire to see the fall of the West. According to the well-known, high-ranking Al Qaeda operative Saif al-Adel's document, "al-Qaeda's Strategy to the Year 2020," the American economic system will eventually collapse by 2020 due to the numerous military engagements across the globe which will eventually lead to a Jihad led by Al Qaeda, and ultimately a Wahhābi Caliphate that will rule over the world (Atwan 2006). The explicit desire for the destruction of other nation-states and their ways of life are a major difference between national and transnational Islamist movements.

Beginning in 2014, Al Qaeda had taken a backseat to a new transnational Islamist movement that has already changed its name three times. Originally the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the movement now simply goes by the name IS, or the Islamic State [3]. On the seriousness of the global threat posed by the Islamic State, British Prime Minister David Cameron states, "We face in Isil [ISIS] a new threat that is single-minded, determined and unflinching in pursuit of its objectives" (Khomami 8/16/2014). ISIS has been able to amalgamate a bizarre coalition against it, including the US, Great Britain, the current Iraqi government, the Assad Regime, the moderate Syrian rebels, Kurds, and even Iran. The Islamic State represents an amalgamation of various Al Qaeda-linked groups into one 'coherent' entity that has already declared itself a Caliphate, something Al Qaeda never even tried to do, with its leader being Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, a shadowy figure whose past is almost entirely unknown.

As this article is being prepared, much mystery still surrounds ISIS. One thing is clear thus far: they have taken violence to a new level of theatrical production that even trumps Al Qaeda. Within a period of weeks during the summer of 2014, two American reporters, Steven Sotloff and James Foley, and British aid worker David Haines, were barbarically beheaded in gruesome public videos which were clearly pre-meditated and meticulously choreographed. ISIS currently is active in its efforts to conquer new territories. They have large areas of territory under their control in northern Iraq, and have even made it across the border into Syria. At this point, it is impossible to evaluate the bureaucratic organisation within ISIS due to the secrecy of the organisation itself and the limited scholarly research on the topic at the time this article is being written. However, considering the appointment of an all-powerful Caliph, it is reasonable to assume that ISIS internally is organised around charismatic and traditional models of authority, as opposed to rational-legal models as outlined by Max Weber in his studies of bureaucracy in Politics as a Vocation (Weber 1946).

Hezbollah: The Hybrid Case

This final section will briefly look at Hezbollah. Hezbollah is perhaps the best example of what one might consider a hybrid movement that can be placed somewhere on the continuum between a national and transnational movement. While they are technically a political party based in Lebanon, they have been active in other, external, regional affairs for over 30 years. They were the main combatants in recent wars with Israel and most recently have offered military support to Bashar al-Assad's regime in the current Syrian civil war. Unlike national-based movements, they are not

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wholly autonomous; they are closely connected to, and financed by, the Iranian government and other private entities (Levitt 2013).

Interestingly, they incorporate elements of both types of movements discussed. Like national-based Islamist movements, Hezbollah does not exist on the fringes of society; they have a wide following in Shi'a dominated parts of Lebanon. They also have a more recognisable formal internal organisational structure that has been studied extensively (Norton 2014). Within Hezbollah, there are numerous councils and organisations. Hezbollah also has an extensive propaganda apparatus, including its own television station, al Manar, which can be viewed on regular cable throughout Lebanon.

However, like a transnational Islamist movement, Hezbollah operates in a much wider global context than just within the Lebanese borders. They do utilise violence, and they often engage in violent rhetoric denouncing Zionism, the West, and other Sunni groups, specifically those believe to be connected to the Saudi regime (Levitt 2013 and Norton 2014). When politically expedient, they renounce violence and call for reconciliation between the different religious sects within Lebanon, however, when it is politically expedient, they call for violence against self-described 'Zionist-Wahhābi collaborators.'

Their current leader, Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah, took over the position of Secretary General of the group in 1992 following the assassination of Abbas al-Musawi by Israeli Defense Forces. Nasrallah's power derives from all three sources of authority under the Weberian model. It derives from rational-legal authority, based on the powers given to him within the official charter and rather developed legalistic framework of the party; it derives from charismatic authority, based on his popularity gained via fighting in multiple wars and skirmishes against Israel; and it derives from traditional authority, based on the fact that he is a Sayyid, or believed to be a direct descendent of the Prophet Mohammed, through his grandson, Ali, thus automatically granting him a higher status within Shi'a society than other people.

Conclusion

Political Movements within the Islamic discourse have each made efforts to address issues such as 'rights and freedoms' in their own ways. In recent years, there has been a great deal of writing on the topic of individual rights. According to Tariq Ramadan:

There can be no ambiguity about the ethical orientation that Islam provides: 'We have conferred dignity on human being' – a principle that applies to all humans, women and men, rich and poor, black and white, Muslim or not. It is the primary, fundamental principle of social justice that, in practice, rests on two prerequisites: equal rights and equal opportunities. (Ramadan 2012, 125)

This article sought to show some clear differences and themes between national and transnational Islamist movements. One thing that differentiates national-based Islamist movements from transnational-based Islamist movements is each movement's approach to diverse political attitudes and differing religious value systems.

Islamist movements that operate within existing national borders tend to be accommodating to diverse populations, sometimes garnering support from secularists. According to Eyadat, "Secularists cling to their principles, fearing the rise of an extreme theocracy like Iran, but an increasing amount of support is espoused for moderate Islamic movements, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or Ennahda in Tunisia, as their framework allows for a reconciliation of religious beliefs and political inclusion" (Eyadat 2013, 734). National Islamist movements are more formally organised internally and have bureaucratic structures based primarily on rational-legal authority. They do not seek to annex/expand territorially, and they exist within the mainstream of local politics.

Transnational Islamist movements often do not have a clear organisational/bureaucratic structure; the policy making process is vague and opaque. Oftentimes they completely lack commonly found institutions within any normally functioning modern bureaucratic entity. These movements generally call for violence and conquest, often seeking to constantly extend their territorial boundaries. Usually the violence is coupled with brutally, well-choreographed,

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videotaped executions of non-combatants. They generally exist at the fringes of political society. People ought to be aware of these important differences before they immediately connect the word 'Islamism' immediately to 9/11 and suicide bombings.

Notes

[1] For a more detailed discussion of the idea of good governance, see Rothstein, Bo. (2011). The Quality of Government: Corruption, Social Trust, and Inequality in International Perspective. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

[2] Article 3(c), UNGA Res. 3314, 14 December 1974.

[3] For the sake of clarity, this article will address the Islamic State, or IS, as 'ISIS.'

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