

Understanding Political Islam

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1. Introduction

Former Prime Minister of the UK, Tony Blair, wrote recently that “[i]t is here in the centre of Islam that so many of the issues around how religion and politics coexist peacefully will be determined.”¹ The purpose of this paper is to explore the links between Islam and economic and political transitions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in order to see whether the experience of the region is consistent with the concerns expressed by Mr Blair – namely that “[t]he battles of this century are less likely to be the product of extreme political ideology – like those of the 20th century – but they could easily be fought around the questions of cultural or religious difference.”²

¹ Tony Blair, “Religious Difference, Not Ideology, Will Fuel This Century's Epic Battles,” *The Observer*, January 25, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/25/religious-difference-ideology-conflicts-middle-east-tony-blair>.

² *Ibid.*

The rise of political Islam into prominence poses important questions both for people in the MENA region and for policymakers in the West. At least since 9/11, the thrust of Western foreign and security policy towards the MENA region has aimed at containing more radical forms of Islam. In practice, that often meant cozying up with authoritarian regimes, as long as they were secular, since these were seen as superior to their theocratic alternatives. When the Egyptian military brought down President Morsi in early July last year, there was a sense of relief among many in Washington. American neoconservative commentator Bill Kristol, for example, articulated it in the following way:

“I think they prefer the military to rule to the Muslim Brotherhood ruling--I think an awful lot of people in the region prefer that. An awful lot of the Arab governments prefer it. And it’s not clear to me that we shouldn't prefer it.”³

A typical narrative of political development in the MENA region sees religion in politics as a symptom of backwardness, and as something that can be expected to wither away as nations grow more prosperous, modern and democratic. It also associates religiosity with with a set of theocratic beliefs on how the society ought to be governed. Naturally, the emergence of explicitly religious parties in Arab then appears as a cause of concern.

This conventional account of religious politics is not completely wrongheaded. Religious identities matter to people, and religions – including Islam – often have normative implications about how the society ought to function. Given that religious beliefs seem to be at the core of Arab societies’ cultural identity, it is not entirely implausible that the rise of Islamists politicians in the aftermath of the fall of secular authoritarian regimes in the region is a simple answer for the popular demand for more religious content in politics. If

³ Awr Hawkins, “Bill Kristol: Military May Be Preferable to Muslim Brotherhood Rule in Egypt,” Breitbart, August 18, 2013, <http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Journalism/2013/08/18/Bill-Kristol-Perhaps-We-Should-Prefer-Egyptian-Military-Rule-To-Muslim-Brotherhood-Rule>.

that were true, then the prospects for secular liberal democracy in the region would be alarmingly limited.

2. Two puzzles

But is such pessimism justified? There seem to be two important puzzles that the conventional narrative leaves unexplained. First, individual religiosity is a poor predictor of voting behavior and policy preferences. Second, electorally successful parties have a track record of successful provision of social services.

In Muslim-majority countries, individual religiosity tends to be a poor predictor of voting behavior. Whether one is religious or not says little about whom one is going to vote for in the election or what one thinks about specific policy issues, which sheds doubt on the notion of Islamism as an ideological agenda. Studies of individual-level data from the Palestinian territories, Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt show that Islam has only a small impact on political attitudes, especially on attitudes towards democracy, and only very little explanatory power in accounting for support for democracy in Arab countries.⁴ In Lebanon, religiosity is not a significant predictor of political activism.⁵ In the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, Indonesia, religiosity was not significant in explaining voting behavior in the elections of 1999 and 2004,⁶ and neither does an 'Islamic ideology' explain the support for Indonesia's religious parties.⁷ In Central Asia,

⁴ Marc Tessler, "Islam and Democracy in the Middle East: The Impact of Religious Orientations on Attitudes toward Democracy in Four Arab Countries," *Comparative Politics* 34, (2002): 337–354.

⁵ Melani Cammett, Partisan Activism and Access to Welfare in Lebanon, *Studies in Comparative International Development* 46 (2010): 70–97.

⁶ R. William Liddle, and Saiful Mujani . Leadership, Party, and Religion: Explaining Voting Behavior in Indonesia, *Comparative Political Studies* 40 (2007): 832–857

⁷ Thomas B Pepinsky,, R. William Liddle and Saiful Mujani, "Testing Islam's Political Advantage: Evidence from Indonesia," *American Journal of Political Science* 56 (2012): 584–600.

religious affiliation does not affect preferences for democracy and political Islam.⁸ Even in Central Asia, “there is little difference between Muslims, the Orthodox, and non-believers [...]. Even more strikingly, the most observant Muslims are almost as pro-democratic as those who are non-observant.”⁹

Our own work in this area, using data from the Arab Barometer,¹⁰ shows that whether one believes that religion should have a place in politics says little about what one thinks about different policy issues. The key results are presented in Table 1 below, which shows the results of logit regressions in which opinions about public policy were associated by a number of explanatory factors, including socio-economic status. It turns out, however, that self-reported attitudes towards the presence of Islamic religion in politics (measured by the variable *Political Islam*) have very little explanatory power over specific policy questions.

⁸ Kathleen Collins, and Erica Owen, “Islamic Religiosity and Regime Preferences: Explaining Support for Democracy and Political Islam in Central Asia and the Caucasus,” *Political Research Quarterly* 65 (2012): 499–515.

⁹ Richard Rose, How Muslims View Democracy: Evidence from Central Asia, *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2002): 102–11.

¹⁰ Dalibor Rohac, “Religion as a Commitment Device: The Economics of Political Islam.” *Kyklos* 66, no. 2 (2013): 256-274.

Table 1 Political religiosity and policy preferences. Logit/ordered logit regressions, with country fixed effects

	Dependent variable	Coefficient	Robust
		on <i>Political Islam</i>	standard error
What would you choose as the most important characteristic of democracy	<i>Elections</i>	0.137***	(0.047)
	<i>Freedom to criticise</i>	-0.04	(0.051)
	<i>Small income gap</i>	-0.04	(0.052)
	<i>Necessities for everyone</i>	-0.059	(0.049)
How well or badly is the government managing the following matters? (1- very well, 2- well, 3-badly, 4-very badly)	<i>Managing Economy</i>	0.006	(0.036)
	<i>Creating Jobs</i>	-0.03	(0.036)
	<i>Narrowing Gap</i>	-0.009	(0.036)
	<i>Improving Health</i>	-0.055	(0.035)
	<i>Improving Education</i>	-0.008	(0.036)
To what degree would you agree that the violation of human rights in [country] is justifiable in the name of promoting security and stability?	<i>Human rights violations not OK</i>	0.073**	(0.035)
In your opinion which of the following is the most important problem facing [respondent's country] today?	<i>Economy</i>	-0.039	(0.041)
	<i>Corruption</i>	0.143***	(0.045)
	<i>Authoritarianism</i>	-0.107	(0.097)
	<i>U.S. occupation of Iraq</i>	-0.233	(0.162)
	<i>Arab-Israeli conflict</i>	-0.152	(0.109)

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01. Description of variables used can be found in Tables 8 and 9 in the Appendix. Full results are reported in Dalibor Rohac, 2013, "Religion as a Commitment Device: The Economics of Political Islam." *Kyklos*, Vol. 66 (2): 256-274.

There is a second puzzle. Why does the success of Islamists seem to be linked with the provision of social services and local public goods? After all, if the conventional account were correct and the people in Arab countries were simply yearning for the presence of Islamist policy platforms in politics, there would be no reason to expect Islamists to be any more active in the provision of social services, local public goods and so on than other political groups.

Yet, throughout the MENA region, Islamists have been involved conspicuously in the provision of such services, including healthcare, education, welfare assistance and humanitarian aid. In Algeria, Islamic groups were among the first and most effective organizations to help the victims of the Algiers earthquake in 1989.¹¹ In Morocco, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) itself is not active in the provision of social services, but its umbrella organization, the Unity and Reform Movement (MUR), is most notably active at the local and municipal level. In Tunisia, *Ennahda's* precursor, the *Movement of the Islamic Tendency*, has developed a network of social service provision and built a presence at the local level of government. Furthermore, it has traditionally operated numerous civic associations¹² including sporting clubs, and organized collective weddings, free of charge. In Egypt, “[t]he Muslim Brotherhood runs 22 hospitals and has schools in every governorate in the country. The organization also runs numerous care centers for poor widows and orphans as well as training programs for the unemployed. [. . .] Of the roughly 5,000 legally registered NGOs and associations in Egypt, an

¹¹ , John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* Oxford: Oxford University Press (1999): 176.

¹² Mohammed Fadhel Troudi, “La révolution tunisienne entre attente et déception, fragilité et maturité,” *Géostratégiques* 32 (2011): 172.

estimated 20 percent are brotherhood-run.”¹³ In Jordan, the Brotherhood operates the Islamic Hospital in Amman¹⁴ and the al-Afaf Charitable Society, providing collective weddings and matchmaking services.¹⁵ In Yemen, the *Islah* party has created welfare, religious and educational organizations that deliver social services. Most notably, the Islah Social Welfare Society engages in health awareness campaigns, religious education, illiteracy eradication, and relief donations. Finally, in Lebanon the “Social Unit” is one of the eight key elements of Hezbollah’s structure¹⁶. It provides social welfare services as well as technical help and has set up institutions from agricultural cooperatives to cultural centers.¹⁷ The same goes for Hamas in the Palestinian territories, where Islamists run relief programs, funding schools, orphanages, mosques, healthcare clinics, soup kitchens, and sports leagues.

3. Islam and policy credibility

These two facts strongly suggest that the appeal of the substantive content of religion on voters in Arab countries is not the only relevant factor. What else may be at play? Besides their theological content, religion serves as a node of social organization. It may be that their organizational characteristics of religion help address some of the pressing political problems in the region.

¹³ IRIN, *Social programmes bolster appeal of Muslim Brotherhood*. UN Office for the Coordination Humanitarian Affairs, 2006, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/26150/EGYPTSocial-programmes-bolster-appeal-of-Muslim-Brotherhood>

¹⁴ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Islamist Activism in Jordan,” in Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early (eds). *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*. Second Edition. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (2002): 234.

¹⁵ Quintan Wiktorowicz and Suha Taji Farouki, “Islamic NGOs and Muslim Politics: A Case from Jordan,” *Third World Quarterly* 21 (2000): 685–699.

¹⁶ Ahmad N. Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press (2004).

¹⁷ Ibid. See also Rana Jawad, “Religion and Social Welfare in the Lebanon: Treating the Causes or Symptoms of Poverty?,” *Journal of Social Policy* 38 (2008): 141–156.

Specifically, religious politics can be seen as a solution to the problem of credible electoral commitment that plagues new and emerging democracies. Voters prefer political groups that can make credible promises to supply public goods after the elections, but such political groups are rare. Politicians in new and emerging democracies have seldom had the opportunity to invest in the technology of making credible commitments, which requires establishing reliable channels of communication with voters and methods of tracking their promises and their deliverables.

Politicians who are not trusted by the population face two options. Firstly, they can invest in building a reputation by informing voters about their promises, tracking those promises and letting the voters assess the deliverables. That process is costly and takes time to work. Alternatively, they can use intermediaries – patrons – who are already able to make credible promises about transfers to their clients. Patrons can make credible promises because of their role in society and because of their past reputation. If the candidate can make credible promises about transfers to a small number of patrons, then the problem of credible pre-electoral commitment can be mitigated even though politicians themselves are unable to make credible promises directly to voters. Promises made through patrons pertain to targeted transfers, not to the provision of public goods. This is because patrons can extract surplus from transfers, but not from public goods.

New democracies thus often rely on patronage. As a result, they suffer from an underprovision of public goods and from an overprovision of transfers to specific constituencies. Patronage-based politics can be expected to dissipate over time as politicians build a reputation that enables them to make credible commitments to the provision of public goods. However, patronage is also a hindrance in this process as it

creates disincentives for politicians' investment in their ability to make credible promises to the electorate, resulting in prolonged periods of bad governance and redistributive politics.

Unlike their competitors, religious groups in MENA countries are able to make credible promises about policy platforms and public goods provision. They are well-known for being involved in the provision of collective commodities for their members and wider communities for a long time, which adds to their credibility in making promises for the supply of public goods in the future. The Muslim Brotherhood has operated in Arab countries for decades, often in spite of official repression. Furthermore, their religious nature enables them to handle collective action problems in ways secular organizations cannot.

These mechanisms most prominently include sacrifice and stigma,¹⁸ which both reduce the return to market activities by being either costly in their own right or by make interaction with non-members of more difficult. Most common examples include restrictions on dress or diet. These help members signal commitment to the group and create a barrier against potential lukewarm members who would free ride on goods produced by the religious organization. Finally, if religious beliefs of Islamic politicians are common knowledge, then their promises can be made credible by the existence of post-mortal rewards and punishments.

4. Conclusions and policy implications

¹⁸ Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Sacrifice and Stigma: Reducing Free-Riding in Cults, Communes, and Other Collectives," *Journal of Political Economy* 100 (1992): 271–291.

If this explanation is valid, then the presence of Islamic parties is welfare-enhancing relative to a situation in which politicians rely on patronage as the sole method of making promises to voters. Unlike patronage-based politics, credible religious parties provide a bundle of public goods and transfers, maximizing the utility of the median voter.

However, that should not be read as an endorsement of political Islam. After all, as the examples of Hamas and Hezbollah only serve to illustrate, religious organizations that are distinctly successful at providing club goods and local public goods may also have an advantage in the sphere of organized violence. The argument of this paper is merely that, in transitional environments, electoral success of Islamists is a natural result of the political environment, which can be mitigated only by the growth of credibility of alternative political groups. The electoral advantage enjoyed by Islamic parties can be expected to dissipate over time as competing political groups establish channels of communication and promise verification for their voters, and build reputation over time. This is in line with the pattern seen in other Muslim majority countries, which have liberalized their political process earlier on. Most notably, in Indonesia, the share of votes by Islamic parties has been falling since the elections in 1999 – from 39.2% in 1999, 38.4% in 2004, to 29.2% in 2009. We have yet to see whether that pattern repeats itself in Arab Spring countries.

There is no denying that religion and politics do not always mix well. However, the appropriate answer to the ugly side of religious politics is not political repression of the kind we are seeing in Egypt but rather open, competitive democratic politics. If anything, repression of Islamists and the erection of barriers to political participation serve as an impetus for these organizations to have recourse to violence. When thinking about

political Islam and the temptation to exclude unsavory political elements from the political scene, we should always remember the words of economist Alan Krueger, who wrote about political violence:

“Terrorists and their organizations seek to make a political statement; terrorists arise when there are severe political grievances with no alternatives for pursuing those grievances.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Alan B. Krueger, “What Makes a Terrorist?,” *VoxEU*, September 11, 2007, <http://www.voxeu.org/article/what-makes-terrorist>.