REVISITING THE ORIGINS OF POLITICAL ISLAM

By Steven Brooke, University of Louisville and Neil Ketchley, King's College London*

The study of comparative politics is increasingly concerned with historical questions.[1] From examining the impact of long-run socio-economic developments to understanding the dynamics of revolution and collective violence, we think that this trend holds particular promise for political scientists of the Middle East. In this essay, we describe our current historically-oriented book project on the origins of political Islam in interwar Egypt. In doing so, we illustrate how scholars can reexamine key moments and episodes from the region's history by combining underutilized historical data with newer analytical techniques from quantitative political science.

USING HISTORICAL DATA AND MIXED METHODS TO TEST ESTABLISHED THEORIES

Our approach to studying the origins of political Islam is motivated by the belief that the historical emergence and success of movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood are outcomes that must be systematically explained, rather than taken for granted. Last year we published the first chapter of this project as an article in the *American Political Science Review*.[2] We used a mixed-methods research design to answer the question "under what conditions did the first Islamist groups establish an organizational presence?" We began with a detailed inventory of hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood branches published by the group in 1937 and 1940. Then, with the support of a grant from the Project on

Middle East Political Science, we digitized fine-grained socioeconomic data from the 1937 Egyptian census held at the American University in Cairo and the Egyptian National Library. We strengthened the analysis by collecting additional data on other factors that may have led to the rise of the Brotherhood including the sites of missionary activity, the locations of British military bases, and the extent of Egypt's rail infrastructure during the period. By matching the branch locations with this array of historical data, we were able to identify the social contexts associated with Muslim Brotherhood branch formation.

In some aspects, our findings corroborated the existing case literature on Islamist movements.[3] For example, looking across more than 4,000 subdistricts, we found that the Brotherhood was much more likely to establish a presence in areas with higher literacy rates. In others, however, the findings suggested revising how we understand the spread of Islamist movements. In contrast to the prevailing orthodoxy that asserts Islamists initially established a foothold in areas where Muslims were more likely to come into contact with the West, our analysis revealed that the probability of a Muslim Brotherhood branch emerging actually dropped as the local European population increased. Similarly, we find no evidence to suggest that the first Islamist movements established a presence in areas where Christian missionaries were more active.[4] Our analysis also identified new factors

*Authors listed alphabetically.

patterning the organizational growth of Islamist activism during this period. Drawing in part on a theoretical literature highlighting the importance of economic infrastructure and transport availability to social movement formation and perpetuation, we found that subdistricts hosting a railway station were much more likely to host a Muslim Brotherhood branch compared to subdistricts without a station. We gained additional confidence in this finding through a focused case study of the Brotherhood's use of Egypt's train network to grow the movement, drawing on railway travel itineraries of key Brotherhood personnel published in the movement's newspaper.

GETTING CREATIVE WITH ARCHIVAL AND GEOSPATIAL DATA

Future chapters of the book continue to mine this rich vein of historical material. In one chapter, we use listings of thousands of advertisements for mosque-based lectures delivered by Islamic associations in the 1920s and 30s, including the Muslim Brotherhood, to identify which Cairene mosques were more likely to host early Islamist activism. However, it is not sufficient to simply identify the characteristics of mosques where early Islamist were present: inference requires also identifying those mosques which *did not* host this activism. To capture the universe of mosques during this period, we collaborated with Tarek Masoud to digitize and geo-reference a series of very highly detailed (1: 5,000 scale) maps of Cairo produced by the Egyptian Survey Authority in the 1930s. As these maps identify the location and size of every mosque in Greater Cairo during this critical early period of the Muslim Brotherhood's growth, we can explain why Islamists were more likely to mobilize in some mosques and not others.

In a preliminary analysis, we find that larger mosques located closer to transport networks (in this case, tram lines) were more likely to host Islamic activists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Mosques serving areas that lacked government health services were also more likely to see Islamist activism, and this activism predicts where the Brotherhood went on to

establish their health services in the 1940s. Extending our investigation of the relationship between Christian missionary movements and the Muslim Brotherhood, we find that mosques serving areas where missionaries were active were also much less likely to see Islamist activism, controlling for a range of plausible confounders. Taken together, this finding confirms that the emergence and development of political Islam in Egypt cannot be reduced to a cultural reaction to the West but was instead profoundly intertwined with the development of the modern Egyptian state and economy.

A cursory examination of interwar Egypt also reveals an array of rival organizations and political movements of every ideological persuasion and repertoire, yet only the Muslim Brotherhood endured. To explain these varied trajectories, we analyze a comprehensive list of members of the Young Egypt movement. Because this list includes the precise addresses of these activists, we can use our map series, as well as census data, to compare the contexts that produced activism by Young Egypt with those that produced the Muslim Brotherhood. Another chapter will be based on a completely geo-referenced 500-sheet map series from the period that details a range of political, social, and economic features across the entire country, including the precise location of thousands of mosques and shrines. We will couple these maps with a list of over 700 branches of the Muslim Brotherhood that existed in 1944, which we recently discovered in the archival record.

PROSPECTS FOR REVISITING A RICH—AND UNUSED—HISTORICAL RECORD

This deeply historical project has taken us into archives across Egypt, the U.S., and the UK. Our work is not the first to cover this period of Egyptian history or the Muslim Brotherhood; this is a terrain that has been fairly well trod by both historians and social scientists.[5] Yet during our research we have been struck by the fact that large swathes of source

material are completely unexploited. Because the majority of prior research on this period has been qualitative, a variety of quantitative information remains nearly completely unused.

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This is no small thing—the intense association between the colonial project and systematic data collection (including mapping) means that multiple aspects of political, social, and economic life during the period were catalogued by colonial agents, often in minute detail.[6] While we should be critical of the motives that lay behind producing these sources, they can nevertheless enable us to tell the story of this period in a way that has not been done before.

Quite obviously, we are not the first to discover that history provides a deep reservoir of evidence that can help us vital questions in comparative politics. Nor do we claim that that quantitative research is superior to other types of frameworks. But two factors suggest that revisiting the rich historical record with an eye towards quantitative and mixed-method research designs is likely to yield significant advances. First, the sheer volume of the available material—including census data, maps, movement publications, government records, and newspaper reports—allows us to arbitrate key claims that underpin our understanding of Middle East politics. Often, we have found this valuable "new" data for our project literally side-by-side in the archives with primary source material that served as the backbone for a number of classic histories of the period. We expect that researchers interested in such topics as state formation, the legacies of contemporary underdevelopment, and historical episodes of political contention will find similar imbalances in the exploitation of source material. As with our project on political Islam, this will likely allow researchers to revise and deepen our understanding of more contemporary phenomena.

Finally, and more practically, we note with concern the increasing difficulty of fieldwork in the region. Researchers, even those studying subjects that have traditionally seemed innocuous, put themselves at significant risk of targeted harassment, arrest and detention, and even physical injury. The danger is often far greater for local informants and interlocutors, who lack the backing of university apparatuses, professional organizations, and foreign passports. As students of Egyptian politics, we have felt this constriction acutely. There are, of course, a variety of ways to accommodate these unfortunate realities, including turning to the internet, gathering freely-available data from Twitter feeds, Facebook polls, or other digital sources such as Google Maps.[7] We would also suggest scholars to return to the historical record with a particular eye towards exploiting quantitative data, which we believe can helpfully speak to significant questions in comparative politics.

[1] See for example: Blaydes, Lisa, and Eric Chaney. "The Feudal Revolution and Europe's Rise: Political Divergence of the Christian West and the Muslim World before 1500 C.E." American Political Science Review Vol. 107, No. 1 (2013): 16–34; Braun, Robert. "Religious Minorities and Resistance to Genocide: The Collective Rescue of Jews in the Netherlands during the Holocaust." American Political Science Review Vol. 110, No.1 (2016): 127–47; Jha, Saumitra, and Steven Wilkinson. "Does Combat Experience Foster Organizational Skill? Evidence from Ethnic Cleansing During the Partition of South Asia." American Political Science Review Vol. 106, No. 4 (2012): 883–907.

[2] Brooke, Steven and Ketchley, Neil. "Social and Institutional Origins of Political Islam." *American Political Science Review* Vol. 112 No. 2 (2019): 376-394.

[3] Masoud, Tarek. *Counting Islam.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

[4] Baron, Beth. *The Orphan Scandal: Christian Missionaries and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood.* Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014.

[5] Mitchell, Richard P. *The Society of the Muslim Brothers.* Oxford: Oxford University Press; Lia, Brynjar. *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement, 1928- 1942.* (Ithaca: Ithaca Press). Munson, Ziad. "Islamic Mobilization: A Social Movement Theory Approach." *The Sociological Quarterly* Vol. 42 No. 4 (2001): 487- 510.

[6] Mitchell, Timothy. *Colonising Egypt.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 1991; Mitchell, Timothy. *Rule of Experts.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 2002; Edney, Matthew H. *Mapping an Empire.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997. Tellingly, one area where this approach is particularly advanced is colonial India. See Banerjee, Abhijit and Lakshmi Iyer. "History, Institutions, and Economic Performance: The Legacy of Colonial Land Tenure Systems in India." *American Economic Review* Vol. 95, No. 4 (September 2005): 1190-1213; Donaldson, Dave. "Railroads of the Raj: Estimating the Impact of Transportation Infrastructure." *American Economic Review* Vol. 108, No. 4-5 (April 2018): 899-934.

[7] Brooke, Steven. "Evolving Methods in the Study of Islamism." *POMEPS Studies* No. 17 (2016): 27-29. Available online at https://pomeps.org/2016/03/05/evolving-methodologies-in-the-study-of-islamism/