

IS THERE AN ISLAMIST ADVANTAGE AT WAR?

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A rich academic literature on Islamist political participation has evolved over the last two decades, with sophisticated theoretical and empirical studies across a wide range of political dimensions. This literature has explored the significance of Islamist institutional forms and ideology for outcomes such as organizational survival, service delivery, electoral performance, and political mobilization.¹ The dramatic political turbulence caused by the Arab uprisings of 2011 allowed for fascinating tests of hypotheses such as inclusion promoting ideological moderation, organizational advantages conveying electoral prowess, and moderate organizations serving as a firewall against violent extremists.² Most of this research has been carried out in nonviolent contexts, however, and has been largely disconnected from the literature on insurgencies and violent jihadist movements such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Does the literature on the political performance of nonviolent Islamist movements offer any insights into the behavior or performance of Islamist movements in war zones? Does the “Islamist advantage” observed in studies of elections and social services extend to insurgencies? Are Islamists, for instance, better at attracting external support because of universal ideology, but worse at forming tactical coalitions because of ideological distance? Do Islamists fight or govern captured territory differently than non-Islamists, and, if so, is this different style more effective? Which of those practices are driven by

aspects unique to Islamists (i.e. ideology or organizational structure) or by factors more general to wartime conditions?

To begin to answer these questions, in January 2019 I convened a Project on Middle East Political Science workshop with more than a dozen political scientists from a wide range of specializations and approaches.³ In this essay, I draw on their short papers, my own framing paper, and a day of intense discussions to propose several lines of inquiry about the significance of Islamism in wartime environments. First, I explore the implications of the difficulty in identifying Islamists and conceptualizing wartime environments. Second, I identify a set of potential mechanisms associated with Islamist political advantages which might—or might not—translate into wartime outcomes.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ISLAMIST?

Determining who counts as Islamist in war zones is more difficult than it might first appear. In contrast to electoral politics or social movements where identity and ideology is clearly expressed, in armed conflicts, the identity and real aspirations of combatants can be far murkier. Islamist landscapes, as Stacey Philbrick Yadav has noted in the Yemeni context, can be highly fragmented and behavior deeply rooted in local context. Identifying the conditions under which Islamist identity might be activated or sublimated, and the reasons why certain groups choose to

manifest Islamist identity at particular times, is a critical research question which should be studied comparatively.

Consider the complex tapestry of the highly fragmented Syrian insurgency, which did not begin as Islamist in any meaningful sense but became increasingly so over time. Can we draw a sharp line at some point along the continuum of more than three hundred armed factions and confidently assess which are "Islamist," particularly since many factions changed their branding and avowed ideology over time? Should analysis of Islamists at war include a local warlord who adopts an Islamist persona, or a local militia aligned with the Free Syrian Army that changes its name to signal Islamic identity in order to attract external support from the Gulf? How should we code an organization such as Ahrar al-Sham which cultivated an avowedly salafist religious image, but emphasized its national commitments and eschewed a formal relationship with al-Qaeda or ISIS? Even the Islamic State, which seems an obviously Islamist actor given its extreme ideology and overt performance of religiosity, raises questions, as some observers emphasize the prevalence of Iraqi Baathists in its upper ranks and others deny that it was ever part of the opposition.

One of the lessons of the research on nonviolent Islamists proves useful in this regard. The literature on Islamism has pushed back against overgeneralizations about Islamist movements by emphasizing finely grained distinctions between different types of Islamist movements which allow for more precise specification of causal mechanisms measurement of outcomes.⁴ That research identified specific dimensions along which groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, salafists and al-Qaeda might vary: ideology and ideas, embeddedness in broader society, mass vs. vanguard movements, acceptance of violence, degree of hierarchical decision-making and control. How do different types of Islamist organizations adapt to state failure and conflict? Do

Muslim Brotherhood-style organizations respond differently than do less institutionalized Salafi movements or jihadist groups? Has their ability to control and discipline their members been affected by wartime conditions and state repression? That same approach can fruitfully be applied to Islamist movements in wartime conditions. How important is their avowed ideology to their behavior, whether military tactics or alliance formation or willingness to make tactical concessions? Where is Islamist ideology instrumental and where does it seem more deeply constitutive? Do some types adapt more effectively to war than others? What explains those variations?

It is not only the internal characteristics of movements which matters here, but also the broader context. Muslim Brotherhood political parties will adopt different electoral strategies depending on whether they are the only Islamist contender, monopolizing religious discourse, or competing with other Islamists such as Salafis. So too will Islamist insurgency factions. As Dipali Mukhopadhyay points out based on her research in Afghanistan, "Islamist" is hardly a useful concept in an environment where virtually everyone shares the same Islamic orientation and Islamism is taken as a given.⁵ In Afghanistan, she notes, all the insurgent groups would call themselves Islamist but their differences in political strategy, use of violence, and attitudes towards the state are extremely significant. What's interesting is the axes of debate and distinction among them. In another direction, Islamism takes on a very different valence in the context of a religiously divided country such as Iraq (along Sunni-Shi'ite lines) or Nigeria (along Muslim-Christian lines).

WHAT IS A WARTIME ENVIRONMENT?

If identifying Islamists is more difficult than it first appears, so is rigorously defining war zones. The key cases motivating our study seem fairly clear, at first: Syria and Libya after 2011, Yemen and Iraq after 2014. But there is considerable variation in the intensity and nature of even those paradigmatic conflicts. Libya

passed through a period of political contestation after the fall of Qaddafi, until state failure and militia violence brought back war. Yemen's war looks very different in the south and the north, and many Yemenis suffer more from the nonpayment of wages and collapse of the agricultural infrastructure than from direct violence. Even in Syria, citizens in Damascus experienced war very differently from citizens on the frontlines in Aleppo—and Aleppo looked very different in 2015 than in 2012.

The institutional effects of war also vary considerably. While we often think of war as producing state failure, Quinn Meacham points out that war could also produce stronger mobilizational states. War produces personal insecurity and suffering, which may drive individual behavior, whether towards greater religiosity, towards sectarian or other hostile attitudes, towards retreat from politics, or towards hunger for revenge. But it may also have highly ordered, structured patterns within the violence, pushing people towards the informal economy or rent-seeking. The growing literature on rebel governance is particularly relevant in this regard, as Steven Brooke argues, posing questions about whether Islamists enjoy advantages in insurgent service provision comparable to those they enjoy in nonviolent contexts. Participants in the workshop broadly agreed on the importance of studying the lived experience of war and the variation in that experience in order to effectively assess its impact on Islamist movements. War might involve long stretches of normality punctuated by sudden explosions of violence, or it might be frontline conditions of constant conflict and displacement.

Still, wartime environments do seem to differ in some critical way from other institutional contexts. Plausible hypotheses are that under wartime conditions social power shifts to armed groups, more extreme ideological forms drive out more moderate ones, the stakes of competition move towards the existential, and violence reshapes social and political life. The question then becomes whether those environmental drivers systematically advantage

Islamists over non-Islamists, or if this happens only under particular conditions. To the extent that wartime environments pose stark choices with existential consequences, they should pose an especially good test of the relative weight of various causal factors.

ARE THERE ISLAMIST ADVANTAGES?

Syrian opposition supporters often complain of how their revolution was hijacked by Islamists. But how and why Islamists were able to capture the revolution, and how the Syrian insurgency became "Islamist" is a critical question rather than a starting point for analysis. Do Islamists wage more effective insurgencies than do non-Islamists? Why? Many of the seemingly exceptional qualities of groups such as the Islamic State—such as its bureaucratic proto-state governance and presentation of local battles in global and transnational terms—are actually quite typical of insurgencies.⁶ Are Islamists better at these typical activities, or do they do qualitatively different things?

A robust literature explores the question of whether and how Islamist movements enjoy advantages in electoral politics, in service provision, or in survival under repressive conditions.⁷ How do those advantages, if any, translate into wartime environments? Do the same mechanisms apply across such a different context? If Islamist movements do have advantages over non-religious competitors in civil war environments, is it primarily due to their ideology, organizational structure, degree of commitment and socialization of members, or ability to draw on external sources of material support?

Drawing on his important study of Islamist social service provision in Egypt, Steven Brooke offers a number of reasons that Islamist groups might be better at governing territories and populations than non-Islamist groups. They might be—or might be perceived to be—more efficient or less corrupt. A tighter organizational structure may facilitate

coordination and rapid adaptation to unpredictable and violent conditions. Their access to external funds and experience may give them an advantage at relief work among refugee populations. It is quite telling, as Aaron Zelin has argued, that salafi-jihadist groups which traditionally avoided Muslim Brotherhood-style service provision began to move into that realm forcefully in the post-2011 war zones such as Libya and Syria. While they did not enjoy the Brotherhood's long experience, they often proved quite capable of allowing professional service delivery without overt Islamist indoctrination. Extending the study of Islamist social service provision to relief work among refugee populations is a natural move.

Islamist identity might convey other advantages. In fluid, contested environments, Islamist identity could help make connections across space and class.⁸ Rigorous organizational structure and indoctrination may allow for some insulation against infiltration and defection. Mosques and religious networks provide focal points and an organizational infrastructure for building movements of broader reach than the village or neighborhood-specific militias created by non-Islamists. Islamist commitment might produce higher levels of commitment and self-sacrifice among fighters, conveying military advantages at the tactical level which add up to strategic advantages. Sharia courts might provide for an alternative justice system to establish legitimate order within state breakdown.

Another Islamist advantage might be differential access to external sponsors and resources. Syrian armed factions attracted an enormous amount of financial support from the Gulf by emphasizing that they were fighting a jihad in defense of an embattled Sunni population. Iran, Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia each sought to work with local religious proxies in arenas such as Syria and Libya. Sometimes these religious connections were consistent and aligned with clear sectarian or ideological complementarities, such as Iran's support for Shi'ite militias in Iraq. But in other cases, such as Yemen and

Libya, those patron-client connections seemed more opportunistic and at times (such as the UAE's collaboration with al-Qaeda aligned groups in Yemen or Salafi groups in Libya) even wildly contradictory. External support created feedback loops across multiple levels. Groups with access to those external resources became more powerful, crowding out competitors who did not have such access. At the same time, those rising groups also took on the ideological characteristics of their sponsors, shifting the overall environment of the insurgency in the direction of Islamism. This sometimes led non-Islamist groups to "grow beards" in order to compete for external funding. Even more directly, Iran helped to create and deploy militias in Syria made up of Shi'ites from Iraq and Afghanistan, while the Islamic State was able to recruit tens of thousands of foreign fighters through its ideological appeals.

WHAT ABOUT ISLAMIST DISADVANTAGES?

Potential disadvantages should not be ignored, however. Openly Islamist identity might reduce access to Western military support available to others, or—as in the case of ISIS—attract direct Western intervention. Generalized antipathy toward Islamism might rule out potential alliance partners, or multiply potential enemies. The more effective fighting style might produce a backlash as others come to fear Islamist dominance over the insurgency or be horrified by their perceived excesses. Attracting foreign fighters could be a disadvantage with regard to local populations if they are viewed as alien occupiers or illegitimate. Research presented at the workshop by Nicholas Lolito suggests that groups that are less reliant on local population tend to use indiscriminate forms of violence and more lethal attacks which can be alienating.

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The transnational and universalist appeal of Islam has been posed as an advantage for its ideological appeal. But the emphasis on ideas and scriptural arguments might also be a source of division within these movements and distancing from potential allies and recruits. To the extent that Islamist actors take ideas and religion more seriously than other actors, theological or doctrinal disagreements could undermine military strategy or effective governance. The degree of effort put into ideological production by the Islamic State cannot simply be reduced to recruitment propaganda; it represented a very substantial portion of the organization's activities and public face. Intricate doctrinal argument may appeal to the membership, but will appear esoteric and inscrutable to those outside the jihadist milieu.

Within these domains, it remains unclear how much weight should be put on ideas as opposed to

organization. Is ISIS a relatively typical insurgency or something radically different? Do their ideas lead them to behave differently from similarly placed insurgencies in comparable situations? Such questions should guide future research and provoke useful discussion across cases, regions, and theoretical approaches.

as a regime tool of social engineering and an opposition platform of subversion reveals under-theorized subjects of study and provides a framework for cross-case comparison of various regime and opposition strategies and outcomes. Adding a third, scholar-level tier to this framework enables us to treat pop culture as a nontraditional data source that offers new perspectives on debates to which we may not otherwise have access, particularly for MENA researchers working on politically and culturally sensitive issues in constricted fieldwork spaces.

¹ For a sample of this vast literature, see Nathan Brown, *When Victory is Not an Option: Islamist Movements in Arab Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Steven Brooke, *Winning Hearts and Votes: Social Services and the Islamist Political Advantage*, (Cornell University Press, 2019); Tarek Masoud, *Counting Islam: Religion, Class, and Elections in Egypt* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). Khalil al-Anani, *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood* (Oxford 2017); Carrie Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Quinn Mecham, *Institutional Origins of Islamist Political Mobilization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

² For recent surveys of this evolving literature on post-2011 Islamist movements, see Marc Lynch, *In Uncharted Waters: Islamist Movements Beyond Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood* (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2016) "Adaptation Strategies of Islamist Movements," *POMEPS Studies* 26 (2017) and "Evolving Methodologies in the Study of Islamist Movements," *POMEPS Studies* 17 (2016)

³ The participants were Khalil al-Anani, Lindsey Benstead, Stephen Brooke, Nathan Brown, Melani Cammett, Thomas Hegghammer, Nicholas Lolito, Quinn Mecham, Ziya Meral, Dipali Mukhopadhyay, Elizabeth Nugent, Sarah Parkinson,

Jillian Schwedler, Morten Valbjorn, Stacey Philbrick Yadav, and Aaron Zelin. The workshop was convened at the Elliott School of International Affairs by the Project on Middle East Political Science, with support from the Henry Luce Foundation.

⁴ Jillian Schwedler, "Can Islamists Become Moderates? Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis." *World Politics* 63, no.2 (2011): 347-76.

⁵ Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors and the State in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁶ Ahmed Hashim, *The Caliphate at War: Operational Realities and Innovations of the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017);

⁷ Melani Cammett and Pauline Jones Luong, "Is There an Islamist Political Advantage?" *Annual Review of Political Science*, 17 (2014), pgs. 187-206; Thomas Pepinsky, R. William Liddle, and Saiful Mujani, "Testing Islam's Political Advantage: Evidence from Indonesia," *American Journal of Political Science*, 56:3 (2014), pgs. 584-600.

⁸ Aisha Ahmad, *Jihad & Co: Black Markets and Islamist Power* (New York: Oxford University Press 2017).
