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ISLAMIST IDENTITY POLITICS IN CONFLICT SETTINGS

By Morten Valbjørn and Jeroen Gunning

Do identities matter for explaining the behavior of Islamist actors in war zones? If yes, then what is the relative importance of identities as opposed to the structural context? Is it necessary to pay attention to the “content” of identities or can different identities basically be treated as alike? To address these questions, it can be useful to revisit similar debates in other parts of the social sciences, including International Relations, civil war studies and (critical) terrorism studies. From those well-developed literatures, we highlight four distinct ways of framing discussions on identity politics which are relevant to consider in the present context.

The first of the four frames revolves around the (relative) importance of *ideational* vs. *material* factors. This debate is often framed in “either/or” terms, so the discussion ends up being about whether material or ideational factors mean everything or nothing. This dichotomous framing can be seen in the civil war literature, where greed is juxtaposed to grievance in explaining the onset of unrest, and in some versions of the neorealist vs. poststructuralist traditions in IR.¹⁶⁰ These debates are frustrating; both material and ideational factors must be taken into account but each is alone insufficient. The analytical imperative is to specify the *relative importance* of material and ideational factors and on how they intersect. Illustrating this, in a discussion about the role of Arabism during the Nasser era, Raymond Hinnebusch argues that Egypt’s regional influence at that time cannot be understood without taking into account Nasser’s use of the

Arabist card. But at the same time, he suggests that the long-term outcome of identity-driven foreign policy depends on its congruency with the material balance of power in the region and the nature and degree of global systemic pressures.¹⁶¹ In other words, the role of ideational factors is conditioned by material factors. In a similar way, Constructivists have pointed to the role of ideas in specifying the influence of material factors.

When used to explain the behavior of Islamists in conflict settings, this first framing raises the basic question about whether Islamist combatants are mainly shaped by ideology or by factors more general to wartime conditions. For instance, should Islamic State’s extreme violent practices be attributed to (a specific interpretation of) Islamic doctrines or is it more relevant to pay attention to factors such as state failure, political exclusion and marginalization and how violence shapes religion?¹⁶² Would similarly-placed groups with a different identity behave similarly, or does the unique ISIS identity produce unique behavior? Or alternatively, is it more fruitful to forge a middle way by arguing that any comprehensive account of ISIS must recognize the role of material greed and grievances as well as theology?¹⁶³

The second framing drawn from the broader literature shifts the focus from “whether” ideational factors matter to “*why*” and “*how*” they matter. As IR Constructivists have long since established, acknowledgement of the importance of ideational factors does not necessarily translate into agreement about where they matter in the causal equation. It has also been important among scholars studying Middle East international relations, which traditionally has been perceived as “dripping with identity politics.”¹⁶⁴ There is a considerable tradition of discussing whether identities shape actors’ basic world views and inform their goals, whether their influence mainly concerns the specific ways they are pursuing their interest by enabling or constraining certain forms of behavior, or whether their role is limited to after-the-fact legitimations.¹⁶⁵

In the part of the civil war literature concerned with “*how*” rather than “*whether*” ideology matters for armed groups, it is possible to find a

similar discussion. Sanin and Wood, for instance, have distinguished between a so-called “weak” and “strong” research agenda.¹⁶⁶ The former mainly draws on an instrumental rationality and points to how militant groups adopt ideologies instrumentally to adapt means to ends. Thus, ideology can enable armed groups to socialize combatants with heterogeneous motivations into a coherent group, dampen principal-agent challenges, prioritize competing goals and coordinate with external actors. The latter adopts a more encompassing perspective and focuses on normative and emotional commitments among at least some combatants and examines how these must be taken into account in order to understand the emergence, evolution and behavior of a group.

Some of the analytical tools offered by this second framing invite a discussion about exactly how ideas and identities matter for Islamist combatants in conflict settings. As Cottee puts it, “religion matters in Jihadist violence, but how?”¹⁶⁷ In other words, does an Islamic ideology play a major role in the shaping of militant Islamists’ ultimate motives and notions about who they are and why they fight. Or is the role limited to a shallow *ex post facto* rationalization serving to give a veneer of rectitude to actions informed by other motives. Or is it rather so that while an Islamist ideology may not be the root cause, it constitutes a moral, cultural, and intellectual resource delimiting the scope of what is permissible and hence more or less likely. Hamas in different periods has legitimized both suicide bombings and ceasefires with reference to Islam. This demonstrates how these Islamic resources may allow for multiple interpretations, even if the number of convincing interpretations may not be infinite.¹⁶⁸

The third framing drawn from the literature asks about *whether all identities necessarily matter in the same way*. In other words, can all identities be perceived as basically alike, or is it necessary to distinguish between different kinds of identities? Is there something unique to Islamist identities which matters in war zones? By drawing on some of the classic debates on ethnic politics, Brubaker made a distinction between a “diacritical” and “normative ordering power”

approach to the role of identities.¹⁶⁹ According to the former—ethnic, religious, tribal or national identities can basically be treated as alike. Their relevance is limited to being a distinction marker useful for the drawing of borders between in/out-groups, but they are considered “culturally empty” in the sense that all identities basically will work in identical ways. A second approach emphasizes the normative ordering power dimension of some identities, directing attention to the *content* of specific identities. Identities have substance. They carry a normative dimension associated with certain worldviews and notions of the good society, which in turn has implications for our views about who we are, likely friends/enemies, threats, and appropriate behavior. As a consequence, different identities cannot be treated alike and it is necessary to pay attention to what Barth called “cultural stuff.”

In wartime contexts, discussions about the “content” of identities often have revolved around the religious/non-religious distinction. In terrorism studies, there is, for instance, a considerable tradition of discussing whether, why and how it makes sense speaking of a distinct kind of “religious terrorism.” Based on a critique of influential figures such as Rapoport, Juergensmeyer and Hoffmann; Gunning and Jackson highlight some of the conceptual and empirical challenges in distinguishing between so-called “religious” and “secular” violence.¹⁷⁰ Others have accepted the concept of “religious violence”, but disagree over how it differs from the non-religious. Some have suggested that the two are profoundly different from each other and argued that religious terrorism is utopian, anti-modern, anti-democratic, inflexible, irrational, and unconstrained.¹⁷¹ Others, such as Brubaker, argue that attention to religious beliefs, practices, structures, and processes provides important insights, with a set of modalities and mechanisms specific to religiously informed violent political conflict. These might include the social production of hyper-committed selves, the construction of extreme otherhood and urgent threat, mobilization of rewards, sanctions, justifications and obligations, the experience of profanation and translocal expandability. However, he emphasizes that none of these

modalities and mechanisms are uniquely religious, although others have argued that they make religion particularly salient during conflict.

It thus remains useful to question whether – and if so why – it makes sense in conflict settings to distinguish between non-religious and religious armed groups or will other kinds of analytical distinctions be more useful? Lynch has discussed a number of specific mechanisms through which Islamists in conflict settings may hold *specific* (dis)advantages compared to other actors, for instance, whether they are better at attracting external support due to universal ideology but worse at forming tactical coalitions due to ideological distance.¹⁷² As an alternative to the religious/non-religious distinction, others have suggested a distinction between nationalist/strategic and ideologically/utopian based violence.¹⁷³

Finally, in the fourth framing, the question about the role of the “content” of identities more narrowly focuses on (different currents in) Islam(ism). In a discussion in IR about securitization and religion, Sheikh, for instance, has criticized Bagge Laustsen and Wæver¹⁷⁴ for leaning too heavily on a Western-centric – or more specifically Protestant Christian – understanding of religion. She calls against this background for greater attention to how religion has been conceptualized in quite different ways, including in the Islamic world.¹⁷⁵ Based on this framing, the question about the “content” of identities becomes less about a religious/non-religious distinction and moves to a *more narrow focus on Islam and its place in Islamism*. Over the past decades, this framing has given rise to a huge and multifaceted literature on differences – and similarities – between Islam and Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism¹⁷⁶ and on whether, how and why Islam matters for *Islamists*. Part of this debate has been concerned with the very contested questions about whether Islam as such is more or less violent than other religions¹⁷⁷ and whether it at all makes sense claiming that the final aim for all Islamists is “the conquest of the world by all means.”¹⁷⁸ Another part has moved beyond whether Islam as such is a “religion of war” or “religion of peace” to look at how Islam is interpreted in multiple ways and therefore focus

should be directed at “Muslim politics.”¹⁷⁹

It is important in this context, then, to distinguish between different types of Islamisms rather than lumping all together.¹⁸⁰ This has given rise to a large debate on how to typologize Islamism and how different militant Islamisms use and justify violence in different ways. Some distinguish between groups fighting within a delimited territory as part of what is considered national resistance vs. groups involved in some larger battle between “Islam and the West” or for the establishment of a caliphate (i.e. “resistance/irredentist/nationalist” vs. “revolutionary/doctrinal”);¹⁸¹ others differentiate between groups associated with national liberation, transnational Islamists fighting the “Far Enemy” and domestic insurgency against an incumbent regime representing the “Near Enemy”.¹⁸² Hegghammer offers an even more finely grained typology. Half of the ten forms of Islamism in his preference-based typology are violent, but associated with very different “rationales” as they are respectively state-, nation-, umma-, morality- and sect-oriented.¹⁸³

One notable blind spot in the discussion of the varieties of militant Islamism has been its predominantly Sunni-centric nature.¹⁸⁴ Most attention has traditionally been devoted to Sunni Islamist groups, e.g., AQ, Islamic State or various forms of militant Salafism, or the Muslim Brotherhood. When Shia Islamists have gained attention, it has often been assumed that they are either completely subservient to Iran, or that they are no different from their Sunni counterparts, with Hamas and Hezbollah equivalent examples of “Islamist National Resistance”.¹⁸⁵ However, there is a growing acknowledgement of the need to bring in (the study of) “the Other Islamists”, the Shias, into the broader Islamism debate and to examine whether, and if so why and how Sunni and Shia Islamists differ from each other.¹⁸⁶ In view of the prominence of both Shia and Sunni Islamists in conflict settings during the recent decade, e.g. Syria, Yemen, Iraq, it is time to revisit not only claims about how Shia Islamists appeared to be less violent than their Sunni counterparts, but also questions about whether violence in sectarianized conflict settings is more brutal and whether there is anything distinctly

“Shia” or “Sunni” in Shia and Sunni Islamists when situated in violent contexts.¹⁸⁷ While the latter question can be addressed by focusing on doctrinal differences per se, e.g. Shia/Sunni conceptions of jihad, martyrdom etc.,¹⁸⁸ it can also be approached by comparing various Shia and Sunni Islamist combatants on the varying role of sectarianism, how their members are mobilized and groups organized, how violence is legitimized, the importance of religious networks and clerics, how they attract foreign resources and links to

external patrons (e.g. Saudi-Arabia, Qatar, Iran) or how intra-sect rivalries are played out (e.g., in Iraq or Syria).¹⁸⁹

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