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PROTEST IN THE NAME OF GOD: ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS IN THE ARAB WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

Islamist movements continue to hold a significant position in the political and social map of the Arab countries. Coming to the attention of the West for the first time with the Iranian Revolution, these movements have increased their power over time and become a major force in the region. Rather than being monolithic, Islamist movements include a wide range of groups from small militant organisations to larger political parties that enter elections and continue their existence by democratic means. What unites these movements is their desire to form an Islamic state based on the rule of Shari'ah, the revealed law of Islam.

The main aim of this paper is to look at the Islamist movements of the Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa and try to analyse the factors that contribute to the Islamist phenomena in the region.

The Islamists are moderns but they are not modernists. Although the bulk of these movements condemn contemporary societies as corrupt and the conditions they live in as jahiliyya, referring to the period before Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, they are modern movements that seek to engage the Islamic way of life with modernity. They oppose modernism and its proponents. Modernism foresees that with the advent of modernisation, the political significance of religion will decrease, traditional religious institutions will weaken and religious control over society and culture will diminish. It is assumed that religion, rather than being a force of collective action for society, would simply become a private issue for the individual. Islamism must be understood as a "series of parallel socio- religious movements in the modern world that accepts the instrumental belief of modernity but not its value re-orientations. The single and most consistent denominator of Islamism is the opposition to all those individuals or institutions that advocate Enlightenment values and wave the banner of secularism or modernism (...) Its origins are inseparable from the spectre of its declared enemy: the Enlightenment."¹

According to Islamist movements, man was created for a purpose: to embody the will of God by leading a righteous life and following the correct path. While doing this, man must strive to build and maintain a righteous community of the faithful, as he cannot live alone. The Islamist movements seem to alter Aristotle's concept of "man is a political animal" into "man is a religious animal",² seeing religion as encompassing all aspects of life, in a contemporary Middle Eastern context.

REASONS FOR THE ISLAMIST REVIVAL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

While looking at the reasons for the growing support of Islamist movements in the Middle East, I will be dividing the factors affecting Islamist 'revival' into four topics. Political, cultural, socio-economic and external factors will be the main topics analysed. The literature that deals with de-colonisation, 'nativism' and cultural authenticity are all placed under the title of the cultural factors, keeping in mind that it has political as well as socio-economic roots. It is difficult to divide the factors into clear-cut categories as they are all in a continuous interaction. It is also difficult to separate cultural factors from the socio-economic factors, where the latter generally affects the former. Still, for the sake of understanding the topic in categories and showing that there are different explanations by different writers on the topic, such a categorisation is made here. It must still be kept in mind that all the factors make their own contribution to the issue and they should therefore not be thought of in isolation from each other.

Socio-economic Factors

Especially in the 1970s and early 1980s, socio-economic factors were seen as the main reason for the emergence of Islamist movements. Slow progress or lack of economic development was shown as the driving force behind the phenomena, the marginalised poor and rural immigration to cities were regarded as the main source of these movements. Later, it became increasingly clear that the Islamist movements did not mainly recruit from the uneducated poor. This had implications for the understanding of Islamism.

The economic development policies of the 1950s and 1960s did not bring the prosperity that governments in the Middle East promised their populations. Focusing mainly on import substitution industrialisation and a heavy role for the state in the development process, the countries started to suffer from a balance of payments and currency crisis as the 1970s arrived. The remedy for the stuck economy was sought in economic liberalisation (*infitah*), which inevitably resulted in an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, reduced subsidies, decreasing wages for state employees and growing unemployment. Immigration from the countryside reached enormous numbers, creating huge new quarters with little or no infrastructure on the outskirts of the cities. The Arab state came under increasing criticism for its failure to cope with these developments.

Poor economic performance and rapid population growth created a suitable environment for the growth of Islamist movements. Among the urban poor, legions of young men, unable to find regular employment, spent most days on street corners or in coffee houses becoming ever more disillusioned and embittered. In Algeria, they are called 'homeboys', boys from the neighbourhood, or 'wall boys', unemployed youth having nothing to do except 'hang out' leaning against walls.

The criticism of the youth was, and still is, centred on the 'unwise' policies of the government, leading to their suffering. Governments are criticised for not giving priority to the needs of the masses, but instead building up a political and economic system that is dedicated to preservation of 'élite privilege' and opportunities based on family and personal relationships. Poorly educated men and women are no longer impressed by tales of their leaders' accomplishments in securing independence. "Young people no longer ask their elders what they did during the war; to them war is a two hours history course. They want to know why more than half of them are jobless while 'we earn billions per year from natural gas and the former head of the ruling party lives like a king'."3

Economically, the populations were told during the decades after independence that the key to status in society was education and that a university degree is the guarantor of being a part of the state establishment. However, after the honeymoon period with state-led growth strategies ended, the countries started to suffer from an over expanding state sector. Guaranteed employment ceased to exist and educated youth were given the message that their skills were no longer required by the state. So, economically these people are rejected. This rejection has a cultural dimension as well. These rejected people started to search for an ideology that would reaffirm their self-worth.⁴ Alienated by state ideologies as well as policies, they had no other chance but Islamism. Thus, "religion is the refuge of the man in despair".⁵

As one Algerian explaining his support for the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) said, "In this country, if you are a young man (...) you have four choices: you can remain unemployed and celibate because there are no jobs and no houses to live in, you can work in the black market and risk being arrested, you can emigrate to France to sweep the streets of Paris or Marseilles or you can join the FIS and vote for Islam".⁶

The Islamists seem to be trapped in the society. They are the by-products of economic development and modernisation. However, they "live precariously from menial jobs or remain unemployed in immigrant ghettos, with frustration inherent in an unattainable consumerist world".⁷ This frustration and rejection make Islamist discourse more appealing for these masses. As Nazih Ayubi writes, Islamist movements are:

"All manifestations of and a reaction to a development crisis in the Muslim part of the Third World...and they are almost all composed of the upwardly mobile, formally educated and recent urbanised youth...whose sense of 'relative deprivation' may explain much about their general anxiety and about the adoption of religion as a goal replacement mechanism."⁸

Against the criticisms and the inability of the government to provide society with the basic needs, 'social Islam' comes into the picture, consisting of a web of welfare services and developmental activities that fill the void caused by the government's shortcomings. The Islamist groups provide health services, jobs and schools, especially in the new districts formed on the outskirts of cities. The failure of the governments to live up to people's expectations feeds Islamist activism. As the Egyptian case shows, the Islamic alternative is not popular because it is spiritually gratifying but because it offers concrete solutions to concrete problems. The beneficiaries of the services of the Islamic organisations perceive these services superior to not only the public ones but the private ones as well.⁹

The continuous immigration to the cities maintains the demographic potential of the Islamic movements. Migration to the cities "produces [a] large number of people who are 'urban' but not 'urbane'"¹⁰ and it is from this group that the bulk of the cadres of these movements are recruited. According to Islamists, fast urbanisation is accompanied by a decline in morals because of unemployment, restlessness and overcrowded housing, creating a situation to be controlled and checked. Thus, they are central to many aspects of the immigrant life, sometimes creating a community of its own in these suburbs.¹¹

The idea that Islamism is a reaction to poverty was increasingly challenged towards the end of 1980s. As more detailed studies were conducted on different groups, it was seen that they were composed of urban youth, what Olivier Roy calls the 'micro intellectuals' - educated, sophisticated,

and using a modern discourse.¹² More and more middle class people turned to religion and became Islamists, if not militants. How can this phenomenon be explained? At this point, study of Islamism turn towards political and cultural factors.

Johannes Jansen puts this point clearly when he writes:

"(...) fundamentalism is not a protest against being poor. To think so is simply unsophisticated. Poverty cannot cause fundamentalism. Prosperity does not cure it. Moreover, fundamentalism is not about taking scripts literally. It is a set of beliefs that draws modern power into the realm of religion; it offers a religious approach to political power."¹³

Political Factors

Many scholars put forward the very nature of the Arab state as an explanation for the formation of the Islamist movements. Characterising the Arab state as either 'hybrid' or 'premature', the state is seen as providing the ammunition that the Islamists need to challenge its authority. Within this context, it is good to look briefly at these arguments.

Marx defined the state as the expression of the interests of the ruling class - that of the bourgeoisie. Going beyond this limited notion of the state, Gramsci filled in the gaps in Marxian understanding of the state, defining it as the "entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules".¹⁴ And it is through this hegemony that the state, expressed in the notion of civil society, that the ruled could be persuaded to accept the system of beliefs of the ruling class and to share its social, cultural and moral values.

Like most of the countries of the developing world, the Arab state is regarded as unable to create the hegemonic ideology. Established before the conditions of the statehood were present, Arab states were founded either by the colonial powers or by the elite of those countries, under the impact of colonialism. Thus the state remains legal and cannot become sociological. Furthermore, in the early decades of the Arab states, pan-Arabism was the dominating ideology. This transcended the legitimacy and the ideal beyond the nation-state, undermining national legitimacy. As the ideal of pan-Arabism lost its power after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Islamism emerged. Within this context, political Islam can be seen as a part of the failure to form a hegemony by the ruling group and Islamism forming a counter-hegemonic ideology.¹⁵

Ironically, when the Middle East state is examined, it is seen that the state itself initiates Islam and uses Islamic symbols to legitimise its power. Charles Tripp calls the Middle Eastern states "hybrid creatures", which, on the one hand, comply with the formal definitions of the state in the international order - largely modelled on the Western state tradition - and, on the other hand, are authoritarian structures that revolve around the personalisation of power. According to this line of argument, rulers do not want to implement the Western model of the nation-state in its full form because this opens up their political systems to the participation of 'powerful' citizens and might endanger their absolute power. At the same time, they cannot claim that they are only pursuing the interest of their own particular clan or community. As a solution to this, they are deploying emotive themes to 'authenticate' and 'indigenise' their power. By using Islam for this purpose, they provide the opportunities for the "conscious, Islamic groups to oppose its power and legitimacy and rise their voice in criticising its basics".¹⁶

The overall cause of political alienation can be summarised as the problem of the "three 'P's": The core of the problem is the system of Power, Patronage and Privilege that entrenched interests in the party, government and the economy are unwilling to sacrifice in the name of some larger good."¹⁷

The divided nature of society in the Arab world summarises the picture. Munir Shafiq notes that there are two societies in the Arab world. While on the one side, there is the modernised, secular élite, on the other side, there is the traditional or what he calls 'original' societies.¹⁸ The modernised segments of society are installed by the West with the aim of "dividing the Arab unity and increasing the dependence of the region on the West as a whole".¹⁹ Politically, systems of government are formed to imitate the Western powers. Culturally, these modernised segments, by their way of lives, imitate the West and are seen as being under Western domination. Thus, the Arab élite are seen as standing in a relationship of subservience. In contrast to the modernised segments, in the 'original societies' that constitute the majority of the population, people remain rural and still "solidly planted in the traditional Muslim worldview and way of life".²⁰ The quest of the periphery - the ruled - for Islamic values and an Islamic way of life against the centre - the secular Westernised élite - seems to summarise the picture in the countries of the Middle East. The words of Salah Eddine Jourchi, one of the founders of the Islamist movements in Tunisia, is a good example of this quest: "There is nothing strange about one nation trying to take the other one, what is strange is the nation that is invaded accepts and blesses this occupation and puts all its energy into deepening it and helping it to take root."²¹

All of these discussions bring us back to the legacy of the colonial experience in the Arab countries. The impact of colonial rule in the Middle East is important in preparing the fertile ground for the Islamist movements in the region. The colonial powers left the Middle East under pressure from the masses but they did not hand over their power to the masses but to the military élite. After the decolonisation period, the populations were almost completely prevented from playing the game of politics: no political parties were allowed to exist and no elections that mattered were held.²²

An important point to note here is the mosques. The mosques have served as the main platform where people met and discussed daily life for decades. Being the main socialising place of the communities, mosques served as a recruiting place for the Islamists as well. The well organised mosque network enable the Islamists to meet in the mosques, without the state's interference, giving them great freedom. This factor contributed to the growth and strengthening of the movements in the region.

Cultural Factors

There is a perception of a divided society in the Arab countries in which the Westernised élite, consciously or unconsciously, is acting as a part of Western ideology or culture.

The quest for national authenticity and the search for what is original and 'native' as against Western culture is an important element in support of the Islamic movements. After the 1967 defeat, the discourse of 'leaving God' and so being 'let down by God' was widespread in the Arab world. Islamic movements can be seen within the context of 'nativism' - which describes the feelings experienced by someone who senses that his world, his culture, his way of life are being threatened by another culture. In addition, related with that, Islamic movements are 'nativistic movements', that is any "conscious organised attempt on the part of a society's members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture".²³

Francois Bugat and William Dowell see the revival of Islamic movements as a part of the independence movements of the Middle Eastern states. They argue that:

"(...) the South after having undertaken to disconnect its political future from the West (through independences) and then to win more autonomy in the management of its material sources (by nationalisations), it now turned towards the terrains of culture and ideology, domains previously conquered by the North and which now it seeks to reappropriate. Even if it is far from representing the outcome, Islamism, 'the rocket of decolonisation's third stage' manifests the acceleration of the process by repositioning the South in relations to the North. And it is an essential step."²⁴

Rached Ghannouchi, the Tunisian Islamist leader, says, "To tell the truth, the only way to accede to modernity is by our own path which has been traced for us by our religion, our history and our civilisation."²⁵ Salah Eddine Jouchi says that the only way to get rid of underdevelopment is to refuse all foreign representation. The first step is to destroy in ourselves the idol of the West.²⁶

The Algerian case is a good example as the impact of colonisation is emphasised in the rhetoric of the FIS. It has been declaring openly its anti-French stand and giving all the evils of the present Algerian state to the French colonial legacy. "The Algerian state of 1962 no longer corresponds to the aspirations of 1 November 1954, for which we took arms: an independent state founded on Islamic principles," says Abbasi Madani, leader of the FIS. "The state which emerged before our eyes was based on secular socialist foundations. This was a serious deviation (...) we were entering an era of despair, failure and disaster."²⁷ Ali Benhadj, the FIS's star preacher, put the point more forcefully: "My father and my brothers may have physically expelled the oppressor France from Algeria, but my struggle together with my brothers, using the weapons of faith is to banish France intellectually and ideologically and to have done with her supporters who drank her poisonous milk."²⁸

Gilles Kepel writes of Algeria:

"France was denounced both for its pernicious influence which lasted beyond colonisation, the French occupation was seen above all as a policy of cultural Westernisation, marked by the spirit of the crusades, with the aim of destroying Islam and for the plots it was supposed to be continually hatching to combat the FIS as the incarnation of Islam. The legislative elections of 1991 were therefore presented as a battle between the party of the Arabic, Islamic civilisation which represents the majority of the people and the French Language party which had been in power since 1962."²⁹

The FIS has now embarked on a process of 'recolonialisation' - a domestically colonising logic, against everything that is Western, mainly French. Its discourse centres on the colonial past, intends to erase it and promises a future that is not deemed colonial. The FIS is trying to create the feelings of 'us' and 'them' for the government, and create a sense of identity against its followers. However, it must be kept in mind that Islamism is less about identity and more about power politics, just as the colonialism was less about 'civilising mission' than of power.³⁰

The Islamists are sticking to a view close to Huntington's 'clash of civilisations'. The transformation of the world from bi-polarity to a uni-polar system led to different arguments that a new era is now under way where conflicts will take place between the cultures and the civilisations of the countries. This approach is almost abandoned in Western political analysis. However, Islamic movements seem to stand as staunch defenders of this approach by advocating cultural authenticity and cultural

adversaries of our time.

Within this context of arguments, it is the quest for the cultural authenticity of Middle Eastern societies that leads to the revival of Islamist discourse in society. The desire to be independent and to get rid of all the symbols of the West and Western colonisation seems to be the explanation given for the growth of Islamist movements.

External Factors

Added to these factors, which are domestic in nature, the impact of some important external events cannot be disregarded. The foundation of most Islamist groups are traced back to the period right after the 1967 defeat. During the Six Day War of 1967, the Arab states, led by the Nasserite Egypt, faced a humiliating defeat. Instead of capturing Palestine as they aimed to, they lost further territories to Israel. Defeated in the war, Arabs started to look for a new ideology, a soul-searching that would take them out of this humiliation. Islam was seen as the solution. The main reason for the 1967 defeat was generally seen as the lack of piety in society. Thus, 'we left God so we are let down by God' became a common reaction.

The rise of OPEC and the accumulation of huge revenues in conservative Arab states ready to help the Islamist movements was decisive as the Islamists got access to funding for their organisational ambitions. The Iranian revolution of 1979, having both practical importance in assisting Islamists in the region and as the symbolic importance in establishing an 'Islamic state', is also a milestone for the Islamist movements. The Iranian revolution played the model role of a successful Islamist challenge to secularism.

The break-up of the Soviet Union left Islamism as the only alternative to Western dominance. Further, the popular overthrow of the authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe was seen as an example of success of the populations in overthrowing imported regimes.

Finally, the Gulf War of 1991 was seen by many in the Arab world as a proof of Western dominance over the Arab states. What made an impact was not the intentions of the Western powers but what was popularly seen as the subservient support from the Arab states. This further increased the mobilisational potential of the Islamists as their position mirrored that of the popular sentiment.

WHY ISLAMISM?

It is argued that both the communist and the Islamic ideologies provide a persuasive intellectual response to the issues of national crisis, economic hardship and individual alienation. So, why does Islamist ideology dominate in the Arab world rather than the Marxist or leftist one in general?

We can talk about four factors that contribute to our discussion. The first factor is the ability of the rulers to dismiss leftist origins as either atheist or as agents of a foreign power that is determined to destroy Islamic and authentic national heritage.³¹

Furthermore, we can talk about the recent historical setbacks of the quasi-socialist experiments in the Arab world. Socialism, Marxism and the Soviet Union are said to have been tried and to have failed. Marxism could not become an alternative, firstly because it was already being used by the nationalist regimes themselves. The regimes in power were trying to appropriate Marxist or socialist ideology in their rhetoric and leaving Marxism out as a viable alternative. In addition to that, the Marxist Left in

general was suffering from structural disintegration due to oppression from nationalist regimes.³² Any other ideology was rejected for being Western. Islam offered the only ideological and the symbolic autonomy.³³

Moreover, the deep-rootedness of Islamic belief in these societies contributes to the phenomena. Finally, the strong sense of communion that the Muslim groups provide for their members is important. Most of the members of Islamic organisations, as the Egyptian case proves, come from a rural background and the strong feelings of brotherhood, mutual sharing and spiritual support advocated by the Islamist organisations welcomes the newcomers. It is argued that the Islamic groups fulfil a de-alienating function for its members in ways that are not matched by groups with different ideologies.

CONCLUSION

It is not possible to talk about a sole factor for the prominence of Islamist movements in individual countries. They are all in interaction and the contemporary situation is a mixture of these different reasons. However, depending on history, colonisation, economic development policy, proportion of migration to the cities and the existing channels of participation, some of the reasons are more dominant than others. It should be kept in mind that whichever of the above mentioned factors play the dominant role in the countries of the Arab Middle East; they all suffer from a legitimacy crisis. Efforts by governments for development via Western models do not contribute to the "legitimacy and accountability knot" in these societies. Popular will and demands cannot be channelled thoroughly as civil society is weak and power is highly personalised. The policies implemented by the regimes are seen as either representing the interests of the modernising élite or the centre as against the interests of the masses or the periphery.

All of these factors should be kept in mind when talking about the Islamists in the Arab World. As a solution to the growth of Islamist movements, the immediate need for political reform in terms of democratisation and human rights is proposed. However, taking into consideration the political establishments in these countries, this still looks like a distant possibility. It seems that the Islamists will continue their important positions on the political and social map of these countries. Which one of the factors will play the major role in their development in the future is still to be seen.

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5 Ibid.

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 - 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.
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 - 26 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
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