

RETHINKING APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS IN WEST ASIA AND NORTH AFRICA: METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The study of Islamist movements in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) has long benefited from a formative corpus of research—largely consisting of fieldwork conducted in the 1990s and/or 2000s which often entailed directly engaging with Islamists—that has served both as a rich source of empirical evidence and as a basis for theoretical explication regarding various aspects of the phenomenon. While the ensuing passage of time ought to engender reflection regarding the state of the field and future trajectories, the COVID-19 pandemic renders such an endeavour all the more salient. For aspiring scholars, it is often difficult to imagine undertaking research involving in-person observation of, and interviews with, openly identifying Islamists typical of the aforementioned corpus. How, then, can we both build on our predecessors' insights and extend research horizons in new directions? In accordance with this issue's theme of 'Opportunity in Crisis', I demonstrate how changes in the regional political climate and the academic habitus have reshaped the boundaries—that is, the limitations *and* the possibilities—of research into WANA Islamist movements. Reflecting on methodology and ethics, and the interplay between the two, I argue that two things can—and should—be done to advance the contemporary study of Islamist movements in WANA: it is time to systematically bring quantitative data and Big Data in from the cold, and to increase *meaningful* involvement of local knowledge producers in research processes.

KEYWORDS: Islamist movements, West Asia and North Africa, research boundaries, ethics, methodology, quantitative data, Big Data, participatory action research.

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars of Islamist movements in West Asia and North Africa¹ will no doubt be familiar with the corpus of work produced by authors such as Carrie Wickham,² Janine Clark,³ and Salwa Ismail,⁴ largely based on fieldwork undertaken in the 1990s and/or 2000s that often involved directly engaging with Islamists. Such studies have long served both as a rich source of empirical evidence and as a basis for theoretical explication regarding variegated aspects of WANA Islamist movements, including patterns and processes of Islamist socialisation and mobilisation, the socio-spatial situatedness of urban Islamisms and their articulation with everyday life, Islamist ideological development and genealogical trajectories, as well as the relationship between Islamist movements and the state.

While the ensuing passage of time ought to engender reflection regarding the state of the field and future trajectories, the COVID-19 pandemic renders such a stock-taking endeavour all the more salient. For aspiring scholars in the field of WANA Islamism, the aforementioned corpus can function as both a cognitive springboard and millstone simultaneously; notwithstanding the aforementioned insights, it also serves as a reminder of our own comparative limitations. For example, it is difficult to imagine undertaking research along the lines of Wickham's holistic fieldwork which entailed, inter alia, participant observation and open-ended interviews with openly identifying Egyptian Islamists.⁵ How, then, can today's emerging scholars of WANA Islamism both build on the insights of the aforementioned corpus and extend research horizons in new directions?

THE CONTEMPORARY STUDY OF WANA ISLAMISM: LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

In answering the above question, we must start by unpacking two sets of developments

¹ This article utilises the term 'West Asia and North Africa' (henceforth WANA) in lieu of 'the Middle East', owing to the latter's Eurocentric imperialist etymology.

² Carrie Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

³ Janine Clark, *Islam, Charity, and Activism: Middle-Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Janine Clark, "The Conditions of Islamist Moderation: Unpacking Cross-Ideological Cooperation in Jordan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 4 (2006): 539-60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743806412460>.

⁴ Salwa Ismail, "The Popular Movement Dimensions of Contemporary Militant Islamism: Socio-spatial Determinants in the Cairo Urban Setting," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 2 (2000): 363-93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500002504>; Salwa Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

⁵ Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam*, 18-20.

that dialectically shape the contemporary study of WANA Islamism. First, in the time elapsed since the aforementioned research was undertaken, and particularly since 2011, the political climate of WANA has dramatically altered—with significant implications for the study of Islamism in particular. Most obviously, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Libya have suffered sustained armed conflict. Moreover, since the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi in 2013, a new iteration of authoritarianism in Egypt has developed, characterised by sui generis repression of the Muslim Brotherhood⁶ and the cultivation of a climate hostile to research into ‘politically sensitive’ phenomena.⁷ Furthermore, Israeli securitisation of Islamists in the Palestinian Occupied Territories has intensified, particularly following Hamas’s 2006 electoral victory,⁸ with similar patterns also developing in Persian Gulf states.⁹ Simply put, Islamist milieux in WANA are not as directly accessible for researchers as they used to be.

Second, the academic habitus has also changed, with contemporary ethical concerns, accentuated ethical reflexivity, together with novel methodological opportunities, also delineating the boundaries of possible research regarding Islamist movements in WANA. The global epidemiological climate with COVID-19 engenders not only practical constraints on fieldwork (such as rapidly implemented travel restrictions), but also raises questions regarding the ethics of travelling to, and around, regions with comparatively low vaccination rates, such as WANA, for the purposes of research.¹⁰ Even if one can epidemiologically justify a piece of in-person fieldwork, the ethical responsibility researchers have vis-à-vis our interlocutors also necessitates consideration of, inter alia, how our very subjectivity and physical presence articulate with hierarchies of domination. This is a particularly pertinent issue for fieldwork in WANA, where power relations are often manifestly spatially inscribed. More specifically, by implicitly drawing on various privileges in exercising relatively free movement when conducting research,¹¹ while analogous rights of movement are often not afforded to citizens,

⁶ Khalil al-Anani, “Upended Path: The Rise and Fall of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 4 (2015): 541-542, <https://doi.org/10.3751/69.4.12>.

⁷ Ruth Michaelson, “Giulio Regeni: trial of Egyptian security agents charged over death begins in Rome,” *The Guardian*, October 14, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/oct/14/giulio-regeni-trial-of-egyptian-security-agents-charged-over-death-begins-in-rome>.

⁸ “Israel targeted killings in Gaza and beyond: A timeline,” *al-Jazeera*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/12/israeli-targeted-killings-in-gaza-and-beyond-a-timeline>.

⁹ “Two leading Saudi dissident clerics among 20 arrested,” *Middle East Eye*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/two-leading-saudi-dissident-clerics-among-20-arrested-reports>.

¹⁰ At the time of writing, vaccination data compiled by Our World in Data (2022) shows that the average vaccination rate (at least one dose) for WANA countries is 48.5%, compared with a global average of 63%. Moreover, the WANA average elides significant intra-region variation and is heavily skewed by particularly high levels of vaccination in Gulf states.

¹¹ I write with particular reference to my own subjectivity as a white, British cis male attempting to build a career in Western academia.

scholars benefit from—and, in doing so, potentially legitimise and reinforce—such power dynamics.

Methodologically, much has been made of the Big Data ‘revolution’ in the social sciences. Notwithstanding conceptual fuzziness and hitherto unsubstantiated claims regarding the potential of Big Data,¹² it is unquestionable that contemporary researchers have at their disposal novel sources of data such as that generated through social media and geolocation. They also have increasing access to administrative data such as population censuses and disaggregated electoral data,¹³ with increasingly sophisticated tools of analysis. Additionally, more traditional modes of data collection such as surveys are being administered in a hitherto unprecedented number of WANA countries with progressively comprehensive auxiliary documentation outlining increasingly sophisticated methodologies with regard to sampling, question and questionnaire design, and administration mode.¹⁴ Naturally, each of the aforementioned bring their own challenges—both type- and location-specific—but they nevertheless constitute sources of data that were previously unavailable to researchers.

We emerging researchers of WANA Islamist movements in the Western academy thus live in a world in which our physical access to Islamist milieux is limited compared to that of our predecessors and which, rightly, elicits ethical questions regarding fieldwork in the era of COVID-19 and the spatially inscribed nature of power hierarchies, but which offers new and/or more sophisticated kinds of data and tools of analysis. In reflecting on methodology and ethics, and the interplay between the two, I argue that two things can—and should—be done to advance the contemporary study of Islamist movements in WANA: it is time to (1) systematically bring quantitative data and Big Data in from the cold, and (2) to increase *meaningful* involvement of local knowledge producers in research processes. In the following sections, I outline some preliminary thoughts in relation to each.

BRINGING QUANTITATIVE AND BIG DATA IN FROM THE COLD

Readers with even a superficial familiarity with research design in the social sciences will be aware that one’s research question(s) ought to drive one’s method. On the basis of the

¹² Tim Harford, “Big Data: A Big Mistake?,” *Significance* 11, no. 5 (2014): 14-19, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-9713.2014.00778.x>.

¹³ Miquel Pellicer and Eva Wegner, “Quantitative Research in MENA Political Science,” in *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges*, ed. Janine Clark and Francesco Cavatorta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 191.

¹⁴ For example, Arab Barometer (2022). As an indication of the rapid development of AB’s methodology, it is revealing to note that the first surveys lacked weights.

aforementioned, they may well be asking themselves, “How can you argue, in the abstract, for the increased integration of quantitative data and Big Data in the study of WANA Islamism?”. To ask such a question, however, is to misunderstand the rationale of this piece. This article should be understood neither as a call for scholars of WANA Islamist movements to abandon en masse the qualitative approaches that have served the field so well thus far, nor as one to uncritically pursue quantitative research. In keeping with my evaluation of the ‘qualitative-quantitative’ debates being the polemical redoubt of a bygone privileged era in political science, my call is far humbler. More specifically, it is to recognise that we exist in a unique contemporary context that both necessitates and opens up possibilities for scholars of WANA Islamism to think carefully about the value added—and, relatedly, the ethical implications engendered—by each aspect of one’s methodology, and to be more reflexive in the potential application of quantitative approaches.

There exist several works on WANA Islamist movements that, in addressing a variety of associated phenomena, successfully utilise quantitative data. For example, Steven Brooke weaves historical, qualitative, spatial, and quantitative data in systematically explicating the socio-political salience of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s social service provision under the Mubarak regime and during Egypt’s 2011-2013 democratic interlude.¹⁵ In outlining the social and institutional contexts in which the nascent Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood organised, Steven Brooke and Neil Ketchley complement quantitative analysis of historical, social, and economic data with qualitative analysis of the Brotherhood’s Arabic-language publications.¹⁶ The ‘socially mediated’ nature of the Syrian Civil War also lends itself to such approaches, facilitating mixed-methods research into, inter alia, Islamist socialisation, group dynamics, and collective action.¹⁷

It is of note that all but one of the above authors were socialised in the US political science academy, in which quantitative methods retain disciplinary and discursive predominance.¹⁸ The variegated limitations thereof need not be recapitulated here; this article does not claim that such predominance is a normatively ‘good’ thing, but rather that *at least*

¹⁵ Steven Brooke, *Winning Hearts and Votes: Social Services and the Islamist Political Advantage* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

¹⁶ Steven Brooke and Neil Ketchley, “Social and Institutional Origins of Political Islam,” *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 2 (2018): 376-94, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055417000636>.

¹⁷ Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, *Syria’s Socially Mediated Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: USIP, 2014), accessed April 6, 2020. <https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/142-pw91-syrias-socially-mediated-civil-war.pdf>.

¹⁸ David Kingsley, “Quantification and Scientism in Political Science: Domination of Discourse by Experts Presenting Mathematical Models of Reality,” *Poverty & Public Policy* 10, no. 2 (2018): 198-221, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pop4.211>.

some knowledge of quantitative methods can open up otherwise inaccessible avenues of research.

In order to systematically facilitate the integration of quantitative data and Big Data into the study of WANA Islamist movements, what is required is nothing short of a holistic approach across multiple levels of academia. It is necessary for UK higher education institutions to expand compulsory quantitative methods training for undergraduate social scientists and offer greater choice in advanced quantitative research courses on postgraduate programmes. Moreover, institutions should offer more experienced researchers, whose academic careers were forged in the crucible of the aforementioned ‘qualitative-quantitative’ debates, more opportunities to explore the potential benefits of quantitative and/or mixed-methods approaches in their research, and provide support in developing their abilities in this regard.

Simultaneously, action is required in order to break down the widely held fallacy that equates quantitative methods and positivism on the one hand, and qualitative approaches and interpretivism on the other. The ensuing recalcitrant aversion to quantitative methods common among scholars of WANA Islamism and prevalent in WANA studies more generally¹⁹ does not stand up to meaningful scrutiny; the notion that quantitative and qualitative approaches respectively belong to opposite sides of a dichotomous positivist-interpretivist divide reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of ontology, epistemology, and methodology, and the relationships between them.²⁰

INCREASING MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE PRODUCERS IN RESEARCH PROCESSES

The aforementioned ethical considerations need not function as a hindrance to the study of WANA Islamist movements; instead, we ought to reconceptualise them as an opportunity to rectify historical hierarchies of domination in research processes by increasing *meaningful* involvement therein of local knowledge producers, an issue with which the broader field of WANA studies is currently grappling. As Professor Dina Khoury alluded to in her 2021 MESA Presidential Address,²¹ it is incumbent upon those in the Western academy to cultivate an

¹⁹ Pellicer and Wegner, “Quantitative Research,” 187.

²⁰ Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl, “What is Theory?,” *Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 1-19.

²¹ Dina Khoury, “Pessoptimism and the Discontents of the Field,” *Vimeo*, December 2, 2021, 44:28, <https://vimeo.com/652415971>.

equitable division of labour and ‘intellectual’ work; that is, local colleagues cannot be relegated to a role in which they simply produce and collect data that serves the sole purpose of advancing the careers of those in the West. The relative inability of WANA Islamism researchers in the Western academy to conduct in-person research constitutes a novel opportunity to challenge established disciplinary power hierarchies by centring on-the-ground colleagues at all stages of the research process, from design to data analysis and reporting. Moreover, ‘local knowledge producers’ need not be understood simply as formal institutions and academics in the region; our research interlocutors can be included in this term. As a departure point, I suggest that the tenets of Participatory Action Research²² can offer insights into ensuring that such participation is indeed meaningful and does not simply pay lip service to the term, or function as a cynical outsourcing of risk.

The above demands a significant degree of ego-transcending and system-challenging effort on the part of researchers in the Western academy. Structural features of the neoliberalised higher education system play a large role in shaping academics’ agencies and priorities. For example, career progression is largely dependent on (often sole or first author) publication metrics.²³ Such pressures of the neoliberal academy are difficult, perhaps impossible, to reconcile with the increasingly recognised salience of local institutions, researchers, and interlocutors to one’s research. Change of the kind outlined above will require honest introspection by the Western academy—it (read *we*) must recognise that there exist situations in which a ‘sole authored’ thesis or ‘first authored’ paper is insufficient in evaluating one’s capacity as a researcher. Indeed, the very notion of the ‘independent researcher’ entails the exercise of historically mediated power hierarchies in drawing boundaries regarding who ‘counts’ in social research and the production of knowledge. Only then will we be able to systematically advocate for corresponding changes to the kinds of research formally recognised and valued in the academy.

I recognise that the above calls may not necessarily be well received, for they require challenging levels of individual, disciplinary, and systemic introspection; consequently, I both anticipate and welcome constructive engagement. This piece should be read as but one step in an iterative and honest reflection about the state of the field and potential future trajectories. I invite like-minded researchers who are interested in forming a regular

²² Alice McIntyre, *Participatory Action Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008).

²³ Sharon McCulloch, “The Importance of Being REF-able: Academic Writing Under Pressure from a Culture of Counting,” *Impact of Social Sciences* (blog), February 9, 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/02/09/the-importance-of-being-ref-able-academic-writing-under-pressure-from-a-culture-of-counting/>.

discussion group regarding the application of quantitative data and/or Big Data to the study of Islamist movements, and/or facilitating meaningful collaboration with local knowledge producers, to get in touch. It is incumbent upon us to use the contemporary climate as an opportunity to reflect on our field methodologically and ethically, oriented by a responsibility to redress historical hierarchies of domination and avoid generating new ones, in mapping out potential future trajectories.

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