

The Paradox of Islamist Politics

Salwa Ismail

Since the international Islamic revolution anticipated by some in the mid-1990s failed to happen, some writers have claimed that political Islam itself has failed. These arguments miss the point, mostly because they limit the political to activities concerning the state and government alone. Islamists are both conscious strategists and beneficiaries of deeper social change. Islamist politics, understood in this way, has proven its adaptability and resiliency.

With the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a group which is argued to represent Islamism is thought to have carried out an action of unprecedented scale against one of its enemies. In light of the September 11 events, those outside the field of Middle East studies might be surprised to find that influential scholars have been arguing for some time that Islamism has failed. In the 1990s, militant Islamists aspired to replace governments across the Middle East with Islamic states. Western analysts issued dire warnings of the “green peril” and the impending “clash of civilizations.” But the anticipated international Islamic revolution never happened. Indeed, the call to *jihad* made in 1998 by Osama bin Laden and his lieutenant Ayman al-Zawahiri was rejected by most Islamists, including the radicals. In this narrow sense, the Islamist project does indeed appear to have failed.

French scholar Olivier Roy, author of a previous study entitled *The Failure of Political Islam*, now argues that we are witnessing the advent of post-Islamism.¹ Underlying Roy’s thesis is the assumption that Islamism, at one time, constituted a revolutionary force that, if successful, would remake the map of the Middle East. This project failed on three counts. First, Islamist movements shifted from internationalism, where the slogan of the *umma* (the community of Muslim believers) referred to a pan-Islamic entity, to a sort of nationalism where the term referred to Muslims within the boundaries of the nation-state. Second, on the domestic front, the movements lost their revo-

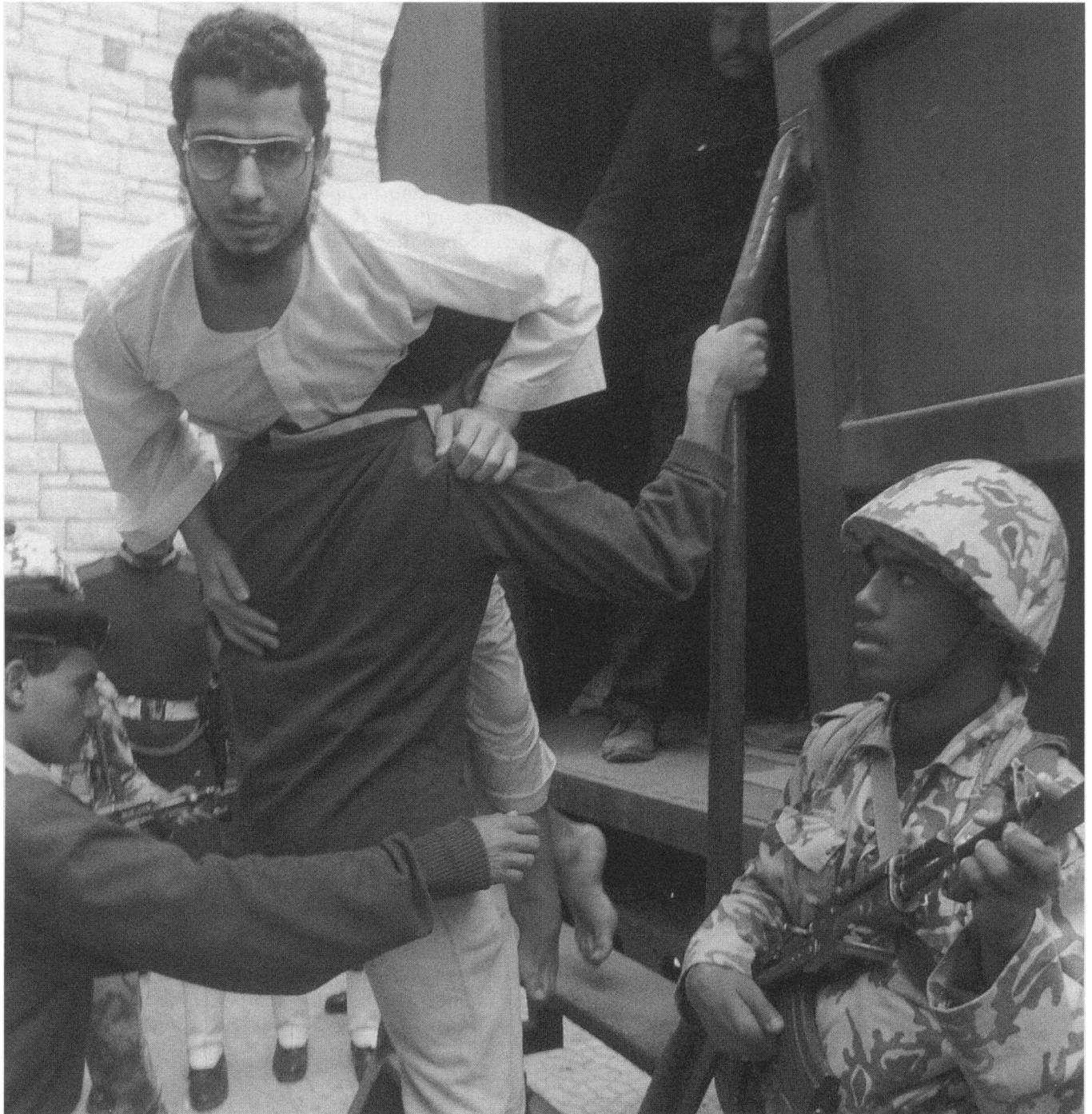
lutionary character, turning into run-of-the-mill “neo-fundamentalists” concerned mainly with issues of morality. Neo-fundamentalism is signaled in the Islamists’ increased focus on the *shar‘ia* (Islamic law) rather than on the state. Third, on the level of the individual, Islamism failed because it had been swallowed up by consumer culture. Roy concludes that Islamization is no longer a project involving the takeover of state power but a process unfolding at a distance from the state.

The failure of Islamism as a politically transformative movement has become a common theme in writing on the current state of Islamist politics.² But Roy’s conclusions, because they limit the political to activities concerning the state and government alone, miss the point. Some Islamists have rendered the defense of morality a continual test of the state’s legitimacy. Others have rivaled the state in providing social services, mobilizing local communities’ resources and responding to vital needs. In all this, Islamists are both conscious strategists and beneficiaries of deeper social change. Islamist politics, understood in this way, has proven its adaptability and resiliency.

Failure of the Islamist International

As Roy contends, most Islamists have abandoned the goal of reconstituting the *umma*—the transnational community of Muslims unbounded by the nation-state—to concentrate on building the *umma* within the nation-state. In the 1970s and 1980s, Islamists championed causes that transcended their own nation-states. Militant Sunni Muslims took up arms in support of the Afghan resistance, and the Islamic Republic of Iran aimed to export the 1979

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Member of Egypt's Islamic Jihad is hauled off to serve 15-year sentence. His leg was broken during his capture.

AP PHOTO

revolution. Today, the “Islamist International” is not in the offing, as shown by the rejection of bin Laden and al-Zawahiri’s call for the creation of an international Islamist front against “Crusaders” and Jews. On this and other issues, divisions intensified among the various factions of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Jama’ al-Islamiyya. Egyptian militant groups with bases in Afghanistan and Albania proved ineffective at carrying on activism abroad, as Egyptian security services cooperated with international police to contain them.

The call for an international Islamist front played on some militant groups’ confrontational stand toward the West. The front was conceived as an agent of war against the US and other Western countries. But this strategy met with a tepid response among militants in key countries such as Egypt. The call to establish the front coincided with the peace initiative launched by Egyptian militants, supported by Sheikh Omar ‘Abd al-Rahman from his prison cell in the US. This initiative directed all militants to cease violent activities.

Egyptian militants adopted the practice of self-critique. The peace initiative was launched by imprisoned leaders who had earlier authored tracts on “the inevitability of confrontation.” In the late 1990s, this same leadership embarked on a doctrinal review, producing new documents that were subject to discussion in prison. Reportedly, the idea of rebelling against the ruler was reinterpreted to mean opposing government through no-confidence votes and other parliamentary tactics. A spokesperson of al-Jama‘a explained that violence did not achieve positive results; because violence was not an end in itself, it had to be abandoned. Meanwhile, militants had found success working on university campuses and in neighborhoods in their project of Islamization. Following the peace initiative, individuals associated with al-Jama‘a al-Islamiyya and its prison wing discussed openly the possibility of seeking recognition for a political party.³

In Morocco, the group known as al-Islah wa al-Tajdid (Reform and Renewal) also renounced violence as a strategy. Al-Islah originated in the 1970s as a small nucleus of militants. Known then as al-Jama‘a al-Islamiyya, the group claimed to represent the only true Muslim society—a claim which justified the use of violence against non-members and, in particular, against its opponents. In later transmutations, the group entered into an alliance with a legal party and pursued integration into the political sphere, following an auto-critique and doctrinal change. Taking a conciliatory position toward the regime and opting out of clandestine action, al-Islah redirected its efforts towards greater visibility and public presence. The group participated in the 1997 elections and won a number of seats, becoming the legal Islamist opposition party.⁴

At the same time, more moderate groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in Algeria continued to pursue policies of accommodation with the state. In Egypt, a group of dissidents in the Muslim Brotherhood, seeking to establish a political party, clearly renounced the idea that Islamists have a hold on absolute truth. The dissidents came to see divergent interpretations of tradition as efforts at human understanding. Questioning or opposing an Islamist claim does not constitute rejection of Islam, it simply amounts to disagreement over interpretation. This critique rejected rulings that the existing government is un-Islamic and that the present-day ruler is an infidel (*kafir*). Accordingly, the critics argued that Islamists could not practice *takfir* (declaring someone a *kafir*) and should abandon the imperative to “enjoin good and forbid evil” (*al-amr bi al ma‘ruf wa al-nahy ‘an al-munkar*)—two of the doctrinal justifications for past violence.⁵ In terms of strategy, the group of Muslim Brotherhood dissidents favored participation within the constitutional and legal framework of political action. They set out to establish Hizb al-Wasat, a centrist party that does not insist on qualifying the existing state as

un-Islamic.⁶ But these tactical, ideological and doctrinal shifts do not mean that, as Roy would have it, Islamist movements have disintegrated.

“Small Entrepreneurs of Morality”

While Islamists have not changed the map of the Middle East, their impact upon society and in local politics remains significant. Contrary to Roy’s claim, the Islamists’ preoccupation with morality does not equate to a relapse into puritanism. Rather, the focus on morality reveals the extent of permissible activism in politics. Morality is an area where the militants and the conservative sheikhs, and the various Islamist actors and the state, can find common ground. But *raison d’état* is the ultimate stake in the battle over the definition of religious orthodoxy and the enforcement of public morality. For the state, Islamists’ defense of Islam and claims to orthodoxy are admissible insofar as they do not put state legitimacy in question. There is always a risk of repression for Islamists who make use of Islamic rhetoric in the public sphere to question state legitimacy.⁷ The rhetoric of morality allows for a debate of sorts that pointedly eschews questions of government such as representation.

However, the pursuit of morality in the public sphere can give Islamists power vis-à-vis the state and society, in particular, the power to dictate the norm. At the forefront of Islamist activism are what some scholars call “small entrepreneurs of morality”—individuals and small groups seeking to enforce moral norms in the public domain.⁸ Islamist lawyers and conservative sheikhs in Egypt have propagated a mode of classifying objects, behavior and cultural products like novels and plays as *halal* and *haram* (licit and illicit) and Islamic and un-Islamic.⁹ From this milieu arises a perpetual demand for the “Islamic position” on everything from artificial insemination and sex change operations to traffic lights. There are rules concerning the boundaries of activism. Among these rules is the requirement of framing public rhetoric in terms of “true Islam.” Islamists and their opponents invoke Islamic history and traditions and, in the process, rewrite and reconstruct these traditions. The state, the Islamists and the secularists engage in producing the “true Islamic” position.

Are Islamist activities in the moral sphere apolitical? Roy’s limited conception of the political, in which politics is equated with government and the state, leads him to answer in the affirmative. Yet activism in the social sphere allows Islamists to consolidate power and to contest state power. Asef Bayat argues that moderate Islamists in Egypt, namely the Muslim Brotherhood, have succeeded in developing a social movement. The Muslim Brotherhood established Islamic charitable organizations, schools and clinics, all of which rival or better the state’s social services. Islamists have risen to positions of power in the major professional syndicates. These syndicates were able to garner support among members by offering a social welfare sys-

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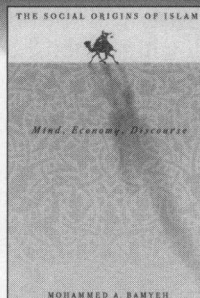
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tem and setting up cooperatives. At the same time, they engaged in political mobilization.¹⁰ According to Bayat, the Brotherhood's success in building institutional networks gives the movement durability and creates channels through which social change may be achieved. In Egypt, moderate Islamism may be succeeding in its aim to capture society, not just the state.

The Islamic Idiom

In a number of countries, the Islamist movement originated among university students, and gradually spread into the urban neighborhoods. Islamists moved into spaces of cooperation and solidarity, like the mosque, the sports association and the neighborhood welfare society. Islamist activism in popular neighborhoods developed in relation to existing practices—for example, they stepped in to occupy the role of arbiters in disputes. Further, they appropriated the role of protecting women and safeguarding their chastity through the monitoring of gender relations and the enforcement of mores governing sexuality. In certain Cairo popular neighborhoods, the offices of al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya reconciled disputing spouses, reinstated a son's financial obligations to his mother, settled outstanding debts and so on. Al-Jama'a's involvement in social relations affirms the symmetry between their modes

of operation and popular avenues of social regulation in particular spheres. Both al-Jama'a and the people eschew government intervention.¹¹ In this type of social outreach, Islamists deployed their own idiom to describe activities that are not necessarily Islamic. Translated into the Islamic idiom, practices of arbitration were called *tahakum* (arbitration by God's rules). Similarly, the Islamists' involvement in social services, built on local practices of self-help and mutual aid, was described as *zakat* (alms-giving)—a key religious duty in Islam. While Roy sees the Islamists' resort to established practices as part of their failure, it is more plausible that the deployment of Islamist idiom to articulate any given practice and strategy represents a struggle over symbols and meanings, and hence an effort at Islamization. Perhaps, the alternative polity is not to be achieved through a takeover of the state but through social activism and engagement, drawing on existing resources and reworking established practices.

In countries such as Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia, Islamist social activism rooted itself in the new urban quarters inhabited by the less well-off segments of society. Lacking social services, these neighborhoods quickly developed informal networks of mutual aid. Islamists have adopted the same strategies that are pursued by people in the communities where they have been active. A non-Islamist activist from Imbaba, a Cairo neighborhood, said

that his activism paralleled that of Sheikh Jabir, an Islamist leader arrested by the police at the height of security sweeps in 1992. The activist viewed his interventions in local problems—mobilizing to extend aid to needy families, resolving conflicts and so on—as similar to Sheikh Jabir’s. Jabir used force in some instances. But on the whole, Jabir played the mediator, following established social practices and conventions, simply adding an Islamic frame of reference.¹² Further, the roles occupied by actors within the Islamist movement are embedded in the networks of kinship and patronage that prevail in the new urban quarters. In Algeria, the construction of a religious identity was functional to the emerging notables whose socio-economic position expressed relations of power that developed in the conjuncture of economic liberalisation and the accompanying societal disengagement from the state.¹³ For example, notable-entrepreneurs who emerged with the growth of informal economic activities, in particular, those who were active in the trabendo networks, affirmed their position as social and economic patrons by funding the construction of mosques. The mosques provided services that extended beyond the religious needs of the community, permitting the development of solidarity relations and social relations based on allegiance and clientelism.

Islamism in All Shapes and Sizes

Any observer of Middle Eastern societies will say that they became more conservative and visibly “Islamic” over the last three decades. Widespread adoption (or in some cases, readoption) of the veil by women is the symbol of this transformation. But studies of veiling have long shown that women do not simply adopt Islamic dress because they subscribe to an Islamist ideology. Veiling can be a response to social or political conditions, quite independent of an individual woman’s beliefs. In recent years, veiled women and teenage girls have begun to substitute less restrictive or more colorful types of dress, or to wear the veil with jeans or tights. Experimentation with various kinds of Islamic dress has become, in a sense, a fashion statement, as the range of socially acceptable Islamic dress has widened. Roy and others call this re-Islamization: Islamic symbols are deployed in other spheres of social life without necessarily having an Islamic meaning. Islamic symbols, in other words, are becoming banal, simply another way to consume. At best, these mixed modes of dress or the phenomenon of controversial belly dancers setting up charity meal tents for the poor during the month of Ramadan is a hybrid of Islamism and something else. Roy interprets re-Islamization as a sign of both the crisis and failure of Islamism. Hybrid dress and other

cooptations of Islamic symbols signal the victory of the global market with its weapons of mass communication.

But this understanding of re-Islamization assumes that some signs are more authentically Islamic than others, and that some allow for the dominance of religion better than others. In a caricatured manner, Islamists come in a limited range of shapes and forms: bearded men in *jalabiyyas*, veiled women in unattractive dress. This assumption entails the idea of static and timeless beliefs and practices. If religion is conceived as social and historical, then it must also be subject to change and transformation. In its interaction with social institutions, it undergoes redefinition. This same premise applies to Islamism.

Veiling is a sign with multiple and constantly changing meanings. By virtue of its association with the discourse and practices of Islamist activists, veiling connotes adherence to religion, piety and moral rectitude on the part of the veiled woman. But, as fashion, it acquires new, aesthetic meanings. The new aesthetic sensibilities shaped by the design houses of the international fashion industry are represented in the fashion magazines that claim a puritanical identity. Coordinated with other items of clothing, whether jeans or form-fitting dresses, the new veiling is integrated into international fashion. This insertion of a religious symbol into the profane and commercial world of fashion helps to recast the meaning of the veil. Perhaps the aesthetic ensemble associated with the new veiling even promotes individual identity and dignity, rather than a specific brand of feminine modesty.¹⁴ At the same time, by virtue of its association with modesty, the veil activates other, perhaps unintended, meanings. As Gregory Starrett points out, “the act of veiling, whatever its individual motivation and spiritual consequences, is a ritual act that contributes to de facto Islamization of public space.”¹⁵

The multiplicity of meaning extends to religious commodities. Shelved next to other consumer items, religious objects containing Qur’anic verses or transcriptions of the Prophet’s sayings are market commodities first and foremost. The religious meaning is retrieved once the object leaves the shop.¹⁶ However, the same objects acquire new meanings once they are incorporated into the domain of decoration.¹⁷ These multiple, ambiguous and hybrid meanings should not be simply regarded as genuine and not so genuine. We may, and should, note innovations in practice.

Roy is wrong to reduce Islamism and re-Islamization to contradictory impulses. To say that Islamism is political and re-Islamization is apolitical may only serve to cloud the fundamental issues at stake: those of domination and resistance. Comprehending contemporary Islamist thought

In hands-on social outreach, Islamists deploy their own idiom to describe activities that are not necessarily Islamic.

and activity does not consist merely in opposing quietism to militancy or distinguishing the political from the apolitical in social phenomena with an Islamic cast. Rather than relying on these oppositions, we should identify the multiple levels of action and identity formation coexisting within the same movement.¹⁸

Withering Islamism?

Before declaring the advent of post-Islamism, we should question the assumption that Islamism was ever coherent and homogeneous. As a political project aiming at establishing the Islamic state, Islamism involved a variety of actors pursuing different modes of action. In the course of their activism, many have repositioned themselves to take advantage of changing political opportunities. In the process, Islamist goals and objectives have been redefined. Further, the Islamist fact is cumulative: it does not vanish without a trace.

Recent developments in Iran illustrate the cumulative nature of Islamism. Both the Islamist feminist movement and the new theology have developed in dialogue with conservative forces claiming divine authority who are often hostile to the concept of feminism in theory. Against this background, the rights of women in such matters as divorce and child custody were won. Iranian women, having negotiated concrete gains from an Islamic government, saw little reason to regard that system as innately opposed to their interests. As Ziba Mir-Hosseini points out, “[o]ne neglected and paradoxical outcome of the rise of political Islam in the 1970s has been to help create a space within which Muslim women can reconcile their faith with their feminism.”¹⁹ So the course of re-Islamization itself is linked with the fate of Islamist movements. Again quoting Mir-Hosseini: “feminist readings of the *shari‘a* became possible and even inevitable when Islam is no longer an oppositional discourse in national politics.”²⁰

The fortunes of Islamism as a political movement are conditioned by political opportunities, changing social and political configurations and contingent identities. In their interaction with the state, and other political and social actors, Islamists have adopted a multitude of strategies, ranging from outright confrontation and violent action to agitation in the public sphere to infiltration of societal spaces. Following doctrinal rethinking, some militant groups sought accommodation with the state. Their experience shows that by engaging in hands-on activist work in popular neighborhoods, they have learned the informal language of politics spoken by the people. To some extent, they have become integrated into society in ways the state cannot attempt. Islamism as a process—and not just a project—remains a dynamic force. ■

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