Close to Home:
The International Side of New Domestic Threats

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Introduction

In contrast to the pervasiveness of meta-theories regarding Islamist organizations, this discussion focuses on the complexities of Islamist activity overseas with an eye toward their implications for Canadian foreign policy.[1] The timeliness of this discussion requires that all of the different facets — military, political, social, economic, ideological — that relate to the Islamist issue be explored in a fashion that is less parsimonious, but more fruitful, than theory-building. Moreover, in policy terms, coping with Islamists as a security threat, a political reality, a question of development, and possibly even as the future leadership of a Middle Eastern or Central Asian state, the following emphasizes that the issue cannot be approached with black-and-white or "quick fix" perspectives in one domain. A healthcare clinic in the narrow alleys of Islamic Cairo, an explosion in the Gulf of Aden, the history of colonialism, a child dying of a bullet wound in Ramallah, a United Nations resolution, a tower falling, a nondescript apartment in Montreal's Little Tunisia, and decision-making on Parliament Hill are all, for better or worse, inextricably connected.

The International Side

If anything positive emerged from 11 September 2001 it was the immediate and overwhelming response of many North Americans to learn more about the Middle East and Islam. While it's always a question of sources and pre-disposed belief, most scholars, and now laymen, can agree on three assumptions that we will take as our starting point: a) Islam is part of the Judeo-Christian tradition with similar metaphorical (and often graphic) holy texts that can be interpreted in many forms, even violent ones; b) groups utilizing Islam for political and/or violent purposes are not unlike other ideological/religious/national organizations and

movements of different stripes that have emerged over the last century; c) divisions of East/West and "civilizations" are fairly tendentious. That is, we have seen relationships between such unlikely allies as Donald Rumsfeld and the Mujahadeen al-Khalq, the US and the "Afghani" Mujahadeen, as well as Israel and Hamas. Similarly, some Islamic fundamentalist organizations have extensively utilized Western land, resources, finances and templates to enhance their ultimately Western-opposed programs.[2]

Based on this, I argue that delving into holy books or belief systems for the answers to our pressing *political* questions is a futile venture (in fact, our understanding often emerges as unsophisticated as those of the groups we are discussing). The following explores the complex political, economic, historical and social impetuses, contexts and outcomes of this new phase of organized violence. Thus, the three crucial aspects to discuss are a) the differences between and within Islamist groups; b) the prevalent connection of violence and Islam at this time; and c) the factors that catalyzed these movements, perpetuate their existence and hinder a reasonable mitigation of violence and exclusionary platforms. This analysis then addresses some of the contextual factors that may better inform Canadian policies and interventions directed toward the region.

Turning to an exploration of the differences among Islamist groups, there are three types of variation that occurred over time. To qualify this, I do not, or rather cannot, at this point, suggest that there is an inevitable trajectory of evolution of these groups; similarly, forming categories is not an attempt to clean up the complexities and subtle differences of each group in each country. Simply by confronting the idea of differences, we wrest this subject out of the over-generalizations and over-simplifications of prior discussions. The three types of differences that we must understand vis-à-vis Islamist groups are, first, that their ideological and organizational founders and leaders often underwent a particular progression of highly varied ideas; second, that most groups can be divided into four categories based on their strategies, tactics and goals; and finally, that there is a difference between "territorial" groups and "network" groups.[3]

First, a common thread that ideologically links a majority of Islamist movements is the set of writings by thinkers, populists, theologians and community leaders in the mid-20th century. Individuals fitting into one or more of these distinctions include Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb (Egypt), Abu Ala Mawdudi (Pakistan), Rashid al-Ghannoushi (Tunisia), Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah (Lebanon), and Hassanal-Turabi (Sudan). These alternative platforms of dissent were attempts to cope with the aftermath of colonialism, the failures

of nationalism and the economic and social malaise of the new Muslim states. Moreover, they were attempts to offer an authentic solution to disempowerment. More often than not, this solution came in a three-pronged package of instilling public morality, filling in the social service gap left open by the leadership, and voicing aspirations for an Islamic state.[4]

The interesting aspect of this foundational ideology is that the authors, and their ideas, went through comparable patterns of change. In their initial phases, they often attended Western schools in their respective countries or abroad. There was usually an early interest in and intellectual command of Western literature or, for some, an affinity for Western pop culture. The second phase that followed often involved a sort of falling out with the West. This could be framed as dissatisfaction with particularly westernized political ideas and their inability to solve problems facing the Muslim world or, as was often the case, the entrenchment of the perception that these ideas bred more problems in the noted region. Other manifestations of this split with the West included an aversion to the unusual morality of the European or American experience, or a genuine search for an authentic means to catch up with the West. Turning inward to the ills of their nation-state, they were doubly alienated when the post-colonial regime, in attempts to monopolize the reins of power, subversively or violently repressed the popular activity of these leaders and their early followers. The last phase for many of the writers, but I would like to think not for the groups to whom they bequeathed their legacy, was some form of acceptance or advocacy of political violence as "inevitable."[5]

The second question, the issue of violence and Islam, perhaps can explain the "why" of this progression of ideas. This progression is such that fairly common and, arguably, legitimate forms of protest during the era of post-colonial self-determination emerged from and also produced Islamist groups and intellectual trends. However, as situations and contexts shifted, many of these groups appeared to be associated more with endemic violence. In fact, they seemed to fail to provide their promised solid, viable frameworks of alternative leadership and solutions to the myriad problems in the developing world. One model attempts to explain how and why this progression occurred — and why the results were largely thus far negative. It suggests that in the initial phases of the movements, their efforts to walk a fine line between navigating within the system and creating an alternative form of politics were often dashed by politicization.

More than any other factor, the nature of the state (often synonymous with the regime) and its policies and actions toward these nascent Islamist movements formed the language of protest and determined the intensity and venue of dissent. Working within this tumultuous environment whittled the movement down from an intellectual exercise to a practical, accessible set of platforms. Further interactions with the state, usually negative, catalyzed fragmentation within the Islamist groups as to their ends (*telos*) and their means to get there.[6] The two perspectives that often emerged were, unsurprisingly, a so-called "society-first" camp while the other focused on a "fire-with-fire" approach in hopes of seeing more immediate results. The first approach, by those who could now be considered the old guard, focuses more on the intellectual underpinnings of their (or their group's) role in promoting a model of both political and moral salvation. By changing society first, they argue, through education, ministry and social programs, change will occur in the long run.[7]

The second school of thought often emerged from the society-first ranks. Disillusioned with the state, generally after serving a few terms as political prisoners, and frustrated with the slow, accommodating, grassroots position of the old guard, they attempt to up the ante. They focus on directly, publicly and dramatically clashing with the state (and other groups if necessary) to inject purpose, momentum and tangible gains into their political credentials. These two main paths can be broken down further into the types of groups we see today: the preach-and-teach variety (Hezb ut Tahrir in Central Asia, and Indonesia's L'askar Jihad); or the "morality police," whose aggressions usually amount to smashing liquor stores to pressure the state to adopt the shariah (for instance the early FIS in Algeria forming a political/social alternative to the exclusivist and faltering ruling party). Other formations can be added, such as the established figurehead groups who often struggled for their state's independence and now basically operate relatively peacefully (or through protest) as a *de facto* opposition movement (Hezbollah political wing in Lebanon, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and Egypt), and the "rebels-without-a-cause" groups who have amassed capabilities and resources and seek a variety of pernicious goals.[8]

Having said that, as any scholar of Islam worth his or her salt will attest, violence is not an inherent, immutable part of Islam, or even political Islam of the modern era. Violence is more prevalent as a means (to what end is becoming more questionable) swathed in the symbols and rhetoric of the ideology-of-convenience of the day. Often, this is because the environment surrounding these movements is repressive or violent. The difficulty is that this feeds into and perpetuates violent responses by Islamists. However, at

this stage, it is not a faucet that can be turned off — simply "being nice" will not elicit an equivocal response. Long-term, systemic violence (domestic and international), particularly vis-à-vis Islamic opposition (either crushing it or supporting it), has made violence something of an epidemic or, rather, the language of the day.[9]

The third issue, related to the discussion above on the differences amongst Islamists and the persistence of violence, is the nature of the groups presently operating and their varied goals and strategies. While there have been financial, material and ideological linkages among Islamist organizations for some time now, the degree of interconnectedness was quite ephemeral to the goals and strategies of the organizations. Most of the organizations that we have grown up with are territorial groups: Hamas, Hezbollah, Muslim Brotherhood Egypt, MB Jordan, FIS, Islamic Jihad, and others. They focused on a limited number of goals where they could make their mark. These included ousting Israel from various lands, overthrowing a government, amassing the support of the people, and clamping down on inauthentic ("un-Islamic") morals and practices within their societies. Although in their public discourse they called for "crushing of the infidel" and "destroying the Great Satan," they had neither the reach nor interest to affect much more than their immediate surroundings. Most importantly, they were (and most still are) attached and accountable to, and dependent on, a civilian base of support. As with any political party, these groups monitored their popularity — if their actions alienated or brought harm to their supporters, these groups heard about it and changed tactics.[10]

Another type of group has emerged in the form of the notorious al-Qaida (although I am certain that as with any parent organization, there will be competitive offshoots in the near future marketing a better "product") — this can be called the network model.[11] The goals are uncertain and oscillate between actually crushing the infidel, or gaining infamy, power, and control of states and people. The latter goal does not mean just the governance of a state in the traditional sense, but having the international capacity (somewhat like a multinational corporation) to extend its influence across boundaries and across issues — not for the glory of Islam, or to liberate and lead people, but for the aggrandizement of self. The unsettling aspect of these groups is not their goals or coldness (these have been demonstrated by leaders and groups in history before, and not all of them have been "the enemy"), it is their overall lack of accountability to a support base.[12]

Although the territorial groups seem less of an immediate threat to the security of neighbouring states or to Canada, there may be a shift in the role of these groups — a role with spillover potential — that emerges when the "enemy" departs. That is, during the period of resistance against an enemy (for example: USSR-Afghanistan or Israel-Palestinian Authority) a great deal of legitimacy is afforded to Islamic resistance groups from within. Accountability is equivalent to the provision of security: As long as security (in both military and social service terms) is provided and resistance seems successful, these groups appear accountable to the demands of their "constituents." In the absence of an external threat, the society, which in some cases lacks a strong legal, political and educational infrastructure, now must confront/integrate/concede to these previously legitimate, often semi- or fully literate X[**IL**literate (?)]X, and armed groups, who are themselves looking for a more developed role. In order to secure power in this time of transition, these groups tie societal improvement and stability with morality. Therein, fear of immorality debilitates an already weak social base. Violence once again becomes the language of both leadership and resistance. As we have seen, lines on a map do very little to contain the offspring of persistent injustice and violence.[13]

The Domestic Side

The question this poses for academics, decision makers and the public of Canada is what can be and should be done? Leaving the issues of domestic security to the experts, I will continue with the international focus. What this discussion demonstrates is not only that Islamist organizations come in many different political and intellectual shades, but also that they are embedded within a history, a context, and a movement of self-definition, not just self-determination.

The context of this self-definition encompasses the realms of politics, education, economics, security, governance, human rights and the environment, among others. Some solutions that have emerged recently, including a new Marshall Plan, may mitigate some of the short-term woes; recall though, that most of the Islamists are wealthier than their opponents. Moreover, a Marshall Plan for parts of the Arab world would entail the very type of American economic and political influence that is said to be at the heart of strands of Islamic opposition that specifically reject the West and the United States. Despite this apparent tension, it would appear that remaking the Arab world according to the three fundamentals of American idealism, "peace, democracy and free markets," is at the core of the policy currently adopted by the Bush

Administration, whose success at justly implementing any of these three principles in this region has yet to be seen.[14]

Military bombardments may express resolve or temporarily dampen a threatening fire, and "giving" other countries democracy may make us feel good, but none of these alone are enough, and none of these implemented in generic, normative packages will work on an entrenched and multi-faceted problem that runs all the way up to the Security Council of the UN from the dark corner of that alleyway in Cairo. However, international assistance in the realms of economics, education, legal matters or political inclusiveness does not necessarily come with normative overtones, which inevitably alienate their intended recipient. A position of isolationism or feigned ignorance toward the problems of this region will, first, not improve the conditions, second, allow the problems to persist and, third, not provide a guarantee that these problems will not be on our own doorstep the next day (and not just in the morning newspaper).

As it is presumptuous for anyone to claim to have the answers, the best and most that may be offered are two observations of a potential role for Canada. First, in the security realm, the most effective, least invasive way to cope with and gain some predictive capacity with respect to the destructive activities of Islamist organizations is intelligence. This proposal takes into account the diverse human resources available in Canada, coupled with an acknowledgement of its international role as a peacekeeper, the various non-governmental and private Canadian organizations working in development and cross-cultural dialogue abroad, and an awareness of its relatively small, yet capable armed forces. An intelligence and information gathering sector must include researchers and operatives who are specialists and linguists and bring varied skills and a broad spectrum of understanding to their highly sensitive work. Increased incentives, such as opportunities for overseas placements, intra-organizational mobility and higher salaries would attract the type of people to best gather, organize, and *interpret* the data that concerns Canada's domestic security.

This approach could be questioned if, considering our preparedness, in a situation of overt hostilities. Indeed it is often the less invasive, development-focused approach by middle powers such as Canada that comes under metaphorical fire in such periods. The theme of this study has been complexity, which again applies to this issue of overlapping goals and loyalties. Despite a focus on long-term change and stability, I do not suggest war is always avoidable; however, all participants engaged in the conflict (particularly the

weaker parties) must be encouraged to perceive that the restraints of international law and the international community govern what would otherwise be perceived as arbitrary exercises of power (i.e. neo-colonialism) by the stronger parties. A carrot-and-stick policy rarely succeeds in promoting long-term social development but, as noted, this does not mean that carrots are not offered and sticks are not wielded simultaneously.

With respect to long-term change, the region itself holds the intellectual and moral capacity within a number of its institutions and individuals to peacefully change society for the better. Often these small caches of authentic, respected intelligentsia are the first victims of physical and verbal attacks from both the authorities and the opposition. Propping up favourable regimes that are artificial and brutal will only create instability. Rather, we should focus on channeling our financial and intellectual capacities into the authentic, accepted, viable and inclusive programs and people in the region. This will be one step to ensuring stability and cooperation in the long run at international and domestic levels.[15]

Coupled with this support for visionary, moderate leaders, careful investment into developing the infrastructure of universal education within these societies will, in the long-term, empower females, children, the disabled and the elderly; provide not only the skills for economic productivity, but also the literacy skills needed to work within (or even against) the system; and minimize the primacy of violence as the language of opposition, change and interaction. Similar to the two camps of the early Islamists, the bottom-up, incremental path is the most frustrating but most stable, while the impetuousness of the violent path delivers immediate tangibles and embeds violence. The most important notion to take away from this discussion is that the differences, nuances and complexities of Islamist groups as wel as the complexities of the environments that trigger, perpetuate and change them must be understood.

Added to this, we as Canadians, as partners in bilateral and multilateral relationships on the continent and internationally, must conceive of our role as not simply focused on coping with the Islamic threat — it is just one symptom of broader complexities and disjuncture within the region. Soon, the language of power, security and self-determination will once again shift and we will have to adapt our focus away from battles about ideology and legitimacy to battles about water and resources. How we intervene in the region with respect to the issues and actors at present will lay the groundwork for how future conflicts are dealt with.

Politics is a realm that rarely encourages predictions, however, it can be safely suggested that, if mishandled or ignored now, the complex issues explored above may in the future hit even closer to home.

Notes

[1] The development of theories is a crucial aspect of the study of the Middle East and Islamists. See the following for strong theoretical discussions on Islamists from a variety of perspectives: Laura Guazzone, ed., *The Islamist Dilemma: The Political Role of Islamists in the Contemporary Arab World* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1995); Gilles Kepel, "Toward a Social Analysis of Islamic Movements," in Leonard Binder, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics in the Middle East* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1999); and Gudrun Kramer, "Islam and Pluralism," in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble, eds., *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, vol. 1* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995).

[2] See Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Conal Urquhart, "Hamas Uses Charity to Lure Support," *The Guardian Weekly* (Sept. 1, 2002).

[3] Ahmad Moussalli, "Modern Islamic Fundamentalist Discourses on Civil Society, Pluralism, and Democracy," in Augustus Richard Norton, ed., *Civil Society in the Middle East* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1995); Crystal Procyshen, "Islam, Insurgents, and Institutions," *Journal of Conflict, Security, and Development*, 1:3, 2001.

[4] Ibrahim Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins of the Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996); Iftikhar H. Malik, "Islamic Discourse on Jihad, War, and Violence," *Journal of South Asian and Middle East Studies,* 21:4, 1998.

[5] Issa J. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (Albany: SUNY, 1990); Yvonne Haddad, "Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of the Islamist Revival," in John Esposito, ed., *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). See also: Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Damascus: Holy Koran Publishing House, 1978).

[6] Lisa Anderson, "Fulfilling Prophecies: State Policy and Islamist Radicalism," in John Esposito, ed., *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1997).

[7] See Jamal al-Banna, *al-Farida al-Ghaiba: Jihad al-nafs am Jihad al-saif?* (Cairo: Dar al-Thabit, 1984).

[8] For an excellent, practical synopsis of these positions see "Guide to Indonesia's Militants," *BBC Online: Asia-Pacific,* www.bbc.co.uk (October 16, 2002).

[9] Olivier Roy, "Changing Patterns Among Radical Islamist Movements," *Brown Journal of International Affairs,* 6:1 (1999).

[10] See Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

[11] Only recently did official information emerge to confirm this point: "UN Report Sees 800 al-Qaeda Members at Large," 23 June, 2003 (Paris: Reuters). Rolan Jacquard with the International Observation on Terrorism notes that these members are "third-generation al-Qaeda" who are fully trained and operate independently.

[12] See Roy, Procyshen, op. cit.

[13] These ideas are based on a memorial lecture given by Sally Armstrong on Afghanistan (McGill University, Montreal, Canada: October 30, 2002).

[14] Julie Kosterlitz, "The Neoconservative Moment," *National Journal* (May 17, 2003): 1540.

[15] Thomas Friedman, "Under the Arab Street," *The New York Times* (October 23, 2002); Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: An Overview," in Brynen et al., eds., op cit. See also, Sally Armstrong, *Veiled Threats* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2002), for a discussion on societal transformation and the role of women.