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STÉPHANE LACROIX

Islamism and the question of religious authority

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The focus of this brief will be on Sunni Islamism in general, and will include observations that apply to both its peaceful and violent strands.

Islam is a complex corpus of belief and practice open to multiple interpretations, from which different kinds of political attitudes can be legitimized, depending on which part of the corpus one decides to stress. Islamist ideology is one possible reading of this corpus. How, then, does Islam matter for Islamism?

One way of making sense of this is through Social Movement Theory (SMT). The advantage of an SMT approach is that it deculturalizes Islamism and views it as a social movement like any other. In SMT terms, religion then becomes a symbolic resource which Islamists use, in selective ways, to: define and reinforce an identity, frame their message and provide legitimacy to their actions. At a more practical level, Islam also provides specific mobilizing structures that can be used for gathering or recruitment, (such as the mosques).

A problem with the SMT approach is that religion is treated as a discursive resource available to anyone, regardless of the position from which that person is speaking. In other words, there is

a general sentiment that the traditional producers and guardians of religious discourse, the *ulama* (the Islamic scholars), are irrelevant (or have been made irrelevant by the Islamists). It can be argued that this is the result of a western modernist bias, which makes researchers look at the *ulama* as a mere survival from the past with no real influence. In this paper it is argued that the *ulama* do matter significantly and that their lack of support for the Islamists has represented a major challenge to the Islamist movement.

The *ulama*'s lack of support for Islamists has been mentioned in some academic works, and it has generally been explained by the dominance among *ulama* of a strong tradition of quietism, which goes back to the early centuries of Islam. If it is true that most *ulama* have indeed been quietists, there exist a number of counter-examples in Islamic history, starting with Ahmad Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), who did not hesitate to proclaim jihad against the Mongols, despite the fact that the latter had in appearance converted to Islam. This shows that the *ulama*'s lack of support for Islamists does not only stem from their supposed quietism.

My contention here is that there exists a structural explanation. The idea that there is no clergy in Is-

lam has obscured the fact that, throughout history, a certain division of labor has developed in Muslim societies, as a result of which the ulama have come to constitute a distinct and separate social group. In the terminology of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, they have constituted a 'field': the religious field. This is more easily acknowledged in Shiism because the 'religious field' there has been institutionalized, and what resembles a religious caste, with distinctive clerical features, has taken shape since the period of the Safavid dynasty. In Sunnism similar dynamics are present, though they are not as visible.

THE SAUDI EXAMPLE

In this context, the case of Saudi Arabia is interesting. In Saudi Arabia, there are very clear boundaries between who is an *alim* (the singular of ulama) and who is not. There are certain places of learning and certain networks of transmission that produce the ulama. Those who do not belong to these networks may well call themselves ulama, but people will never take them seriously and may even make fun of them. To mark their status, the Saudi ulama have historically developed a specific dress code: they shorten their *thobes* (traditional men's dress) and remove the *iqal*, the circle that holds the *shmagh* (the piece of cloth that Saudis wear on their heads). Interestingly, this is not an application of any religious principle but is pure 'distinction', as Bourdieu would call it. In many ways, the *azhari* dress in Egypt plays a similar role.

In the last few years, there has been a growing body of literature on how globalization and the rise of a new 'Muslim public sphere' have fragmented the religious sphere, implicitly resulting in the influence of the ulama being weakened. This brief states, however, that on the ground this is not so, and that the opposite may even be the case: in some respects, globalization actually made the ulama stronger by providing them with new vehicles to channel their influence. Through the new media, the Egyptian sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who is based in Qatar and has a weekly very popular religious talk-show on al-Jazeera, has, from being a 'local mufti', become a 'global mufti'.

ISLAMISM

Historically, Islamism emerged as a movement of religious laymen, and still today it consists primarily of teachers, engineers, doctors etc. It emerged partly in reaction to what these religious laymen considered the ulama's failure to defend Islam against Western influence and corrupt regimes. Islamism is thus as much a rebellion against established political authorities as it is a rebellion against the religious authorities.

These religious laymen's attempts to sideline the ulama was made legitimate by the Salafi intellectual posture that many of them advocated: if what was needed was a return to the fundamentals of Islam, resulting in sidelining centuries of Islamic tradition, the upholders of this tradition were not as central anymore. This hostility to the ulama was not always as explicit as in the words of Sayyid Qutb and a few others who were particularly harsh with established religious authorities, but it was generally present.

The ulama were distressed by the rise of this new Islamist movement. It had emerged outside their control and was independent of them, yet it claimed to be acting in the name of Islam, a resource they had always considered their monopoly. In the Saudi case, it could even be argued that the rise of Islamism from the 1960s onwards prompted the development of a new genre of literature, in which the ulama reaffirmed their leading role in society as 'heirs of the prophets' (*warathat al-anbiya*). This can be seen as a clear sign that they felt their position was called into question. This point is confirmed by numerous interviews conducted by the author in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in which ulama express their disgust with doctors or engineers who claim the right to talk with authority in the name of Islam.

An important point is that the ulama and Islamists belong to two distinct social fields, which are fundamentally in competition. The struggle between them is not necessarily one of diverging interpretations of Islam. On the contrary, one will find as much writing about sharia and the necessity of an Islamic state in the ulama's literature as in Islamist writings. The dividing line is a structural – one could say corporatist – one.

THE ISLAMIST PREDICAMENT

The Islamists have quickly come to understand that they could not succeed without minimal support from the ulama. Bringing the two groups together has not been easy. The following quote from a leading Saudi Islamist opposition figure (and a surgeon by training) illustrates the tension between these two groups and the difficulties in them working together. When asked about his views on the ulama, he responded: ‘The ulama? They are a necessary evil. As an Islamist movement, one can do nothing without their support. But they are conservative! And so out of this world! And they always believe they should take the lead, even when they have no idea of what’s going on’.

The Islamists’ inability to obtain ulama support explains, in many ways, the failure of the joint Islamic Jihad-al-Gama’a Islamiyya attempt to overthrow the Egyptian regime in 1981. The revolutionary Islamists could only enlist the support of one relatively minor sheikh, namely Sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman (who was to become known as the blind sheikh, imprisoned in the US since 1993). The rest of the religious establishment, with al-Azhar at the forefront, vehemently opposed them. Though they had relatively good operational capacities and managed to kill Sadat, the popular uprising which followed failed miserably. The reason is that it is unlikely that a movement opposed by virtually all religious authorities would enjoy general widespread popular support.

In the few cases in which a significant part of the ulama establishment supported an Islamist mobilization, it was essentially for the ‘wrong’ reasons. An interesting case is Saudi Arabia in the wake of the 1990 Gulf War, where a mobilization spearheaded by Islamist intellectuals acting with dissident ulama took place. Yet, the study of the origins of this movement shows that a struggle had been going on for about a decade within the religious field between the established ulama and a new generation of peripheral ulama. In order to prevail in this conflict, the peripheral ulama chose to support the Islamists. This was a strategic decision, and it did not last long. By 1992-1993, dissident ulama and Islamist intellectuals were beginning to quarrel over fundamentally different objectives and world views. The Islamists criticized the dissident ulama for their ‘corporatism’ and for only being willing to defend and expand the privileges of their own

‘caste’, with no real interest in a broader reform project. After the collapse of the movement in the mid-1990s, the dissident ulama dissociated themselves completely from the Islamist opposition and returned to the religious field, a position they have maintained until this day.

The failure of this first major Islamist mobilization in Saudi Arabia provided the context in which al-Qaeda started to grow as a visible entity. Like other Islamist movements, al-Qaeda was founded by laymen, including Osama bin Laden, a graduate in economics, and Ayman al-Zawahiri, a surgeon. They soon encountered the familiar problem: very few ulama were ready to support them. This situation has remained until this day.

This lack of religious support has been a key handicap for ‘jihadists’ because, since the cost of their actions is higher, they tend to need more thorough justification. To escape this predicament, jihadis have used different strategies, arguably with limited success:

1. They have tended to rely on medieval ulama rather than contemporary ones. Ibn Taymiyya is widely quoted and seen as the ideal figure of an *alim-mujahid*.
2. In many cases, the Islamists pretended to have support that in fact they did not have. For instance, in the mid-1990s, bin Laden claimed the support of the two Saudi dissident ulama Salman al-Awda and Sarfar al-Hawli, who were then in jail. The two were quick to dissociate themselves from al-Qaeda when they were released in 1999. Another interesting example is how Abdallah Azzam seems to have thought he needed to claim the support of religious heavyweights for the conclusions in his 1984 book *The Defence of Muslim Territories is the First Individual Duty*. In the introduction to his book, he thus claimed to have received support from Saudi Arabia’s two most prominent religious authorities, Sheikhs Ibn Baz and Ibn Uthaymin, something which never happened.
3. Al-Qaeda groups also started to bestow the names *sheikh* and *mufti* upon anyone with even the smallest measure of religious capital, in some cases drop-outs from religious universities. This was, for example, what al-Qaeda in

the Arabian Peninsula did rather pathetically after 2004 in the case of Abd al-Majid al-Munay and Sultan al-Utaybi.

4. In parallel with these attempts to claim the support of ulama, al-Qaeda's Saudi militants began striving to redefine their *raison d'être* and the purpose of their actions. In their writings, *jihad* became a crystalline principle whose implications, notably the obligation for everyone to engage in armed combat against the infidels, were presented as being so clear that no interpretations were needed. According to their rhetoric, any exegesis seemed dangerous because it risked sullyng the purity of jihad by introducing elements of political pragmatism. As a result, involvement of the ulama was unnecessary and could even turn out to be harmful. Jihad was thus presented as a holistic category which encompassed and went beyond *'ilm* (religious science). According to the Saudi *jihadi* web-ideologue Luwis 'Atiyyat Allah: 'True religion consists (of conducting jihad,) not religious repeating text like parrots or transmitting them like donkeys ... That is why the best evidence of *tawhid* is the gift of one's soul to God on the fields of jihad or in the struggle against the tyrant.'
5. The same tendency to make *'ilm* derive from jihad – not the contrary – is illustrated by the fact that the leaders of jihadi movements increasingly call themselves sheikhs, even when they do not possess any religious qualifications. For instance, the leaders of al-Qaeda are referred to as 'Sheikh Usama bin Laden' and 'Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri'. To justify this, some may play on the ambiguity of the term sheikh because it can also serve as a simple mark of respect, although it generally has clear religious undertones.

CONCLUSION

Despite their claim to speak and act in the name of religion, the paradox of Islamists is that they have constantly encountered great problems in winning the support of the ulama, which has limited their ability to mobilize. This is even more the case for violent Islamist movements, because the cost of mobilization is higher for them and so it needs more thorough justification. What this article argues is that the predicament is a structural, not a contextual one, which therefore remains a key problem for Islamist movements.

The popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt may seem a counter-example, but this is actually not the case. Indeed, the Brotherhood counts very few ulama within its ranks (only one religious scholar sits in the Guidance Bureau, Abd al-Rahman al-Barr), and interviews conducted with Egyptian ulama suggest that a lot of ulama are weary of the Brotherhood. Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi represents an important exception, but the extent of his influence is due to the magic of the new media, which is able to make one man as influential as a thousand.

The popularity of the Brotherhood thus largely results from two other factors: political circumstances (the fact that they were the only credible opposition for decades) and their social work. The religious discourse (on which they do not have a monopoly, as everyone uses religious discourse in Egypt anyway) does not seem to be the reason for their popularity. This slightly counter-intuitive fact should lead us to reconsider the relationship between Islamism as a vehicle for social mobilization and the influence of authoritative religious discourse.

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RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

DIIS Religion and Violence papers are based on the presentations given at the international conference "Ten years after 9/11: What did we Learn about Religion?" held in Copenhagen 22-23 September 2011. The conference, that was organized by Centre for Advanced Security Theory at the University of Copenhagen (CAST) and the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) gathered leading experts on terrorism and religion. The aim was to facilitate a dialogue between practitioners and scholars and to provide a platform to discuss policy suggestions and initiatives to deal with religious aspects of violence.

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