

5. Mai. 2015

von gast

in Sicherheitskultur,  
Theorie

Kommentare ( 3 )

## Politics Matter in the Middle East and So Does Religion: Forms of Political Instrumentalisation of Islam

by *Hakim Khatib*

Practicing politics within religious frameworks is more likely to increase states' fragility. While employing religious references in political discourses could foster positive outcomes such as avoiding dangerous eruptions of violence under authoritarian regimes, it could also increase the space for political and religious elites to instrumentalise religion for their own interests. Such patterns of instrumentalisation are more common in the Middle East; especially the dominant religion in the region is Islam, which enjoys a decentralised mode of function.

Political Instrumentalisation of Islam means ‚Islam‘ serves as a means of pursuing a political aim or relating to Islam's function as a means to a political end. Like the Marxist theory views the state and social organisations as tools taken advantage of by the ruling class or by individuals in their own interests, Islam seems to function as a tool exploited by the powerful elites or individuals in their own interests.

Religion rises to play a distinctive prominence in several cases, from which I mention only three in this article. First, the case of state ideology building such as the case of the dissolution of the state of modern Pakistan from the partition of India in 1947 and the case of state ideology building of modern republic of Turkey in 1923. At that time Pakistan was more linguistically, traditionally and socially heterogeneous. Functioning as an integration element, Islam, at least rhetorically, was mixed with nationalism in a series of compromises between modernist elites and religious factions to establish borders between Islamic Pakistan and Hindu India.

In Turkey, the state didn't precisely serve Islam, but rather vice versa. After the collapse of the Sultanate and the secularisation of legal and educational systems, the Turkish government founded the so-called Presidency of Religious Affairs (in Turkish: Diyanet İşleri Bakanlığı) in 1928, by which the religion was officially administered by a state institution. The state monopoly of exercising religion explicitly meant that any Imam education, religious teachings and preaching should be solely legalised through state channels. Until 1941, the central Presidency of Religious Affairs distributed the content of Friday speeches to all preachers across Turkey.

Second, the case of power balance and state crisis in a dictatorial state such as the one we see between the ruling political elite and Islamic institutions in Egypt since 1920s. On variable degrees, King Farouk, Jamal Abdunnasser, Anwar Sadat, Hosni Mubarak, Mohammd Morsi and Abdulfattah Al-Sisi formed an alliance between the state and Al-Azhar, Egypt's leading mosque and university. This alliance resulted in forming the so-called ‚official Islam‘ of the state, which represents the state's position on religion and its various mechanisms.

Third, the case of state in a violent crisis such as the one we have been witnessing in Syria since 2011. Religion, specifically Islam, served mobilisation, contestation and elimination processes. In this case, and

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according to the engagement of religious factions in political opposition, the manipulation of Islam seems to be useful for the state to react and outbid its opponents. The regime directly framed the protests as sectarian and claimed the protection minorities and the correct version of Islam. As the Syrian regime framed all protests and subsequent armed resistance in sectarian terms and associated them with 'extreme Islamist factions', some protestors, in return, framed all Alawites and other minorities to be responsible for the regime's atrocities and carried on to protect what they see the right version of Islam.

Political instrumentalisation of Islam should have forms but they could be blurry. However, we can recognise the following categories:

#### **The ruler–Ulama relationship**

Instrumentalisation of religion can occur in the form of an alliance between the ruler and the Ulama. Such a relationship comes about through coercing or luring the religious elites by the despotic regime or ruler. Religious elites receive protection and privileges, whereas the ruler receives religious and moral support in return, by which rulers can fortify and consolidate their power position, gain more legitimacy and credibility.

Religious elites (using religious terms and references) could also function as a means to eliminate other religious and secular opponents to them and to the ruler. They help the ruling elite, intentionally or unintentionally in creating cognitive structures that define their identity, define the political process and the ruler's role as well in a reality that they all constantly built and rebuilt.

#### **The Ulama–followers relationship**

The relationship between religious elites and their followers works as a take-action-step. Such a form serves the mobilisation of the masses. As it could result in exploiting the very honest beliefs of people, it could also lead to positive effects such as peace building and avoiding dangerous situations or falling into violence.

#### **The independent use of religious references**

All dimensions of power in a state could equally exercise such form. Its main characteristic is using religious terms in communication with others. Rulers, religious figures, political parties and state networks, secular and non-secular factions, the public etc. could fall under this form using religious idioms to relate to the prophet Muhammad and the Quran. This relation to the tradition serves in determining the authenticity, legitimacy, and credibility of one's actions and words.

This form is the most complicated one and can be used in private as well as public spheres. This form of implementing religious references can raise the issue of the genuineness of someone's belief in using religion. It might seem to be political instrumentalisation of religion because the end goal is political or has a political impact, but in reality, it is a genuine belief. This kind of religious use is unlike those who instrumentalise religion with the previous knowledge of doing so. However, the end effects of both actions – intentional and unintentional – are political or relate to political influence and they contribute to the political outbidding game among contesting actors in a state.

Therefore, based on the end effect of such contestation processes, intentional (being aware of the fact they are instrumentalising Islam) and unintentional (being unaware of the fact they are instrumentalising Islam) are forms of political instrumentalisation of Islam. The end effect is identical and both contribute to building cognitive structures of reality in which all political actors live and evolve.

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Pushing religion into political domain puts belief systems at stake. While religion enjoys a dogmatic nature, politics enjoy a compromising one. On the one hand, if religion was heightened in the political domain, it might increase the dogmatic understanding of compromising political constructs. This could consequently lead to a political vicious cycle, which risks reaching a political stalemate. On the other hand, Politics destroy religion by compromising, making concessions and imposing more interpretations of religion on society. Politics and religion make an antithetical paradigm, yet they help political and religious elites in the Middle East to create and preserve structures guarantee their survival.



**Hakim Khatib** is a lecturer at Philipps University Marburg, Darmstadt and Fulda University of Applied Sciences and a PhD Candidate in Political Science on the political instrumentalisation of religion in Egypt at the University Duisburg-Essen.

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### 3 Kommentare zu “Politics Matter in the Middle East and So Does Religion: Forms of Political Instrumentalisation of Islam”

Marco Hartinger | 6. Mai. 2015 um 13:34 |

#1

Ich finde den Beitrag sehr interessant. Viele **Sicherheitsdienst** sidn auch stets bemüht solche Blogs zu erstellen und versuchen hier immer wieder Gerechtigkeit an den tag zu bringen

ANTWORTEN

Janusz | 7. Mai. 2015 um 16:39 |

#2

Thanks for this interesting post. How does „IS“/Daesh fit in your categories?

ANTWORTEN

Hakim Khatib | 11. Mai. 2015 um 16:42 |

#3

My attempt to categorise the forms of political instrumentalisation of Islam do not put any groups under one specific form. Daesh as an organisation makes a combination of some or all forms mentioned-above, exactly like any other actors instrumentalising Islam in the Middle East. In Max Weber and Michael Mann’s terms, collective and distributive power can be exercised by those who monopolise a claim to meaning—the Caliph and his Shura council. In this case, according to my understanding, this group lies under the independent use of religious references, regardless their end goals, triggering a new chain of episodes of action and reaction based on their own religious references and interpretations. While there are many who could follow the call of Daesh commanders in a search for meaning, the commanders (Ulama in this sense) of Daesh gain more legitimacy and more authority. And here we see the second categorical form I mentioned in this article—The Ulama—followers relationship. The time hasn’t come yet for the third form because ISIS is still in the state of war. Should the wartime end, a ruler-Ulama

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relationship should form based on their choice of governance.

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