

Political Islam Task Force Workshop I

May 2018 ,6 – Istanbul

A preparatory workshop for the task force “Transformation of Political Islam Movements since the Arab Uprisings” was organized in Istanbul on May 6, 2018. It aimed to find a common ground on some conceptual and intellectual challenges for the upcoming studies to be conducted. Several experts on Political Islam movements with different case studies and different perspectives attended the workshop.

The purpose of the workshop was twofold: to reach an agreed-upon definition of the concept of “Political Islam” to be used in defining the organizations included in the research project and to find appropriate approaches to discussing the transformation of the nature of Political Islam movements since the Arab Uprisings.

As for the first goal, scholars discussed how to categorize organizations as part of the Political Islam phenomenon. This entailed defining the characteristics of Political Islam movements and then specifying organizations that fit into the categorization of Political Islam in each case study.

In the beginning, the concern of Islamic movements and parties not using the concept of “Political Islam” was raised. It was argued that this “label” is a western concept and that the Islamic movements felt the term denotes a secular orientation.

The first defining criterion proposed for the Political Islam movements was related to their goal. In other words, Political Islam movements are those that seek to establish an Islamic government. Yet, to differentiate between Political Islamists and the Salafi Jihadists, it was emphasized that the aim of Political Islam movements is to Islamize the political regime, whereas the goal of extremist Salafi movements would be to transform the state system itself and even the international order.

This discussion led to another question: What are the tools used by the Political Islam movements to change the regime? The idea behind this question was to determine whether the use of violence could be another difference between Political Islamists and Salafi jihadists. In general, there was a consensus that Political Islamists accept to be part of the existing systems, they are gradualist, and they are generally non-violent. However, some opposed the argument that abstaining from violence is a distinguishing criterion for Political Islamists and argued that there were times when they adopted violent means. Nevertheless, the general consensus was that Political Islamists might use violence occasionally but not as a routine element in the political struggle.

As a conclusion, it was stated that only non-violent groups who accept the modern state framework and want to Islamize/reform the regime can be categorized as Political Islam movements while those who reject the nation-state, international order, and current regimes in the region and want to change the state system itself through violent means are Salafi jihadists. Furthermore, it was stated that Political Islam movements are founded as social movements, while the Salafi Jihadi movements started as militia and their membership is closed, selective and not open nor public.

These defining standards were challenged by some attendees based on historical background. It was noted that the Muslim Brotherhood – the classical example of a Political Islam movement – was originally founded against the nation-state, aiming to restore the Caliphate and change the state system in the region. On the other hand, a violent Salafi Jihadi movement called al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt, which was active during the 1970s to 1990s, wanted to change the regime rather than the state. However, it was eventually agreed that the research project should only look into the movements current ideologies and agendas.

Another debate occurred on whether the Salafi movements should be categorized as part of the Political Islam movements. Non-violent Salafi parties such as al-Nour Party in Egypt can clearly be considered as part of the Political Islam phenomenon. However, it was noticed that not all Salafi movements establish a political wing or party, and many of them remain exclusively as a religious organization. Therefore, after the discussion, it was concluded that Salafi groups that accept and work within the system and establish or behave like a political party (and not as a pressure group) should be categorized as part of the Political Islam movement. Here, the Muslim Brotherhood was used as an

example. In many countries before the Arab Uprisings, the Muslim Brothers did not have a political party, but instead they used to have a party-like platform and would field candidates into the parliamentary and local elections.

Concludingly, Political Islamists were defined as those who are willing to work within the existing system aiming at Islamizing/reforming the regime but who do not favor violence even if violence may be resorted to occasionally. Moreover, they engage in politics routinely and in a party style rather than behaving as a pressure group or a lobby.

Based on the above-mentioned set of parameters, organizations to be included in the task force research were determined. The Muslim Brotherhood and al-Nour Party were categorized as the main representative of Political Islam in Egypt. In Kuwait, the Political Islam movement includes the Islamic Constitutional Movement – the Muslim Brotherhood's political bloc, the Shi'i National Islamic Alliance, and other groups such as the Salafi Islamic Alliance, the Umma Party, the Salafi Movement, and Revival of Islamic Heritage Society. In Syria, the research will include the Muslim Brotherhood and its political wing al-Waad Party and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement as an example of newly established armed groups involved in social activities. In Yemen, three Salafi parties besides the Muslim Brotherhood have been selected for the research project. There was a discussion regarding whether Houthis should be included as a Political Islam movement or not. It was viewed as an armed militia rather than a political movement; nevertheless, it was argued that the Houthi movement is currently undergoing a transition from a militia to a political party.

Concerning the second goal, which was how to understand the ongoing transformation of Political Islam movements, many questions



were raised: Are the conventional approaches such as radicalization vs. moderation, defections vs. coalitions, and nationally-confined vs. panIslamism helpful? Should new approaches be employed? How can one differentiate between transient tactical changes and permanent metamorphosis in the ideologies and strategies of the Political Islam movements? Consequently, the discussions focused on specifying the parameters of moderation and radicalization, how to differentiate between permanent and tactical changes in the narrative and the behavior of the Political Islam movements, and how to recognize the changes in the nature of the relationship between the transnational and national Political Islam movements.

Defining moderation and radicalization: After exploring different examples of transformation in the Political Islam movements in the region, three main parameters were identified: whether they accept the use of violence or not, whether they are willing to cooperate with other ideological groups or not, and whether they adopt a reform agenda or demand a massive regime change. In other words, if the Political Islam movements in a given country abstain from using violent means, demonstrate a real intention to work with other ideological groups, or give up their demands for massive and radical political changes, these should be perceived as signs for moderation. On the contrary, resorting to violence, being closed to dialogue across ideological lines, and being more idealistic demanding radical political changes are indicators for radicalization.

However, it is also noted that it is possible to find mixed signs of radicalization and moderation together and it is sometimes hard to decide which one is the dominant attitude within the movement. Additionally, it was proposed that the significance of indicators may change from country to country. That is

to say, in Tunisia, for instance, the indicators for moderation may be related to trans-ideological cooperation while, in the case of Kuwait, it is related more to the political agenda, whether it demands limited reforms or a substantial change.

Permanent or Tactical transformation: It was argued that transformation within the Political Islam Movements could be a transient response to a threat or an opportunity, or a well-studied deliberate change in their ideology and strategy. For instance, in the case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, it was argued that radicalization was an expected, instant reaction to the military coup when some of the movement members used violent means. However, such radicalization seems to be not a permanent shift in its strategy. It was stated that those who insisted to permanently resort to violence became Salafi-Jihadis, despite the fact that some still consider themselves as part of the movement.

Changes in narrative vs. changes in behavior: Another challenge addressed during the discussions was related to how to differentiate between the real changes in Political Islam Movements behavior and mere changes in their discourse. As an example, when a Political Islam Movement declares abandonment of the Pan-Islamic agenda, their program is not always modified accordingly, as was the case of the Bahraini Muslim Brotherhood. It was argued that Saudi Arabia's hostile foreign policy against the Muslim Brotherhood and its declaration as a terrorist group by many countries was the main reason why the Bahraini Muslim Brotherhood announced cutting its ties with the international Muslim Brotherhood entity. However, this kind of declaration was not reflected in its agenda and ideology. Such declaration or renaming does not necessarily indicate a real change. Therefore, one needs to focus on the real change in behavior and agenda instead of a groups' mere announcements.

The relationship between the international Muslim Brotherhood organization and its local affiliates: In order to recognize what the secession of a local Muslim Brotherhood organization from its international entity means, one must first realize what the nature of the relationship is before the secession declaration and how it changed afterwards. It was highlighted that there is no hierarchical relationship between Muslim Brotherhood organizations in different countries and the international Muslim Brotherhood entity. They resemble more of a network. The communication style among them was informative rather than acquiring permission or giving orders. Yet, the communication style is said to be determined on the basis of the nature of the issue. On domestic issues, it can be argued that the style of communication is merely informative. But regarding regional affairs that require a common stance, the decision of the international organization becomes more obliging to local affiliates.

Islamists in power: It was suggested to add an important dimension to the research agenda, that is, how Political Islam Movements experience in power has affected their ideology and behavior. In other words, what changed when Political Islam Movements faced real policy issues? Did they maintained their original ideological position, or did they behave in line with the necessity of politics?

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