

Rethinking How We Rethink Political Islam

by [Jacob Olidort \(/experts/jacob-olidort\)](/experts/jacob-olidort)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jacob Olidort \(/experts/jacob-olidort\)](/experts/jacob-olidort)

Jacob Olidort, a 2016-2017 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, focuses on the history and ideology of Salafi movements and Islamist groups in the Middle East.



Articles & Testimony

Policymakers and scholars need to tread carefully when describing how Islamist groups relate to and influence one another in their ambitions and priorities.

Recently, the Brookings Institution asked a select group of outside scholars for their reactions to its "Rethinking Political Islam" paper series, in order to draw attention to potential blind spots, trends of note, and more. The following is an excerpt from Washington Institute fellow Jacob Olidort's contribution to the discussion; [read his full reaction on the Brookings website \(http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2016/03/rethinking-political-islam-olidort\)](http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2016/03/rethinking-political-islam-olidort).

Given the changes in identities, doctrines, and actions of Islamist groups vying in the political sphere of the tumultuous preceding five years, the Brookings initiative is a critical opening for a new conversation on how we -- in the academic, policy, and public debates -- think about those Islamist groups we consider to be politically-relevant. The eleven working papers all underscore the common tension between the ideological principles of these groups and the alliances they have made over the preceding five years, some of which go against these very priorities. To those who consider the long view of modern Middle East history, these tensions come as no surprise, given that these are all movements whose founding doctrines and early shape during the 20th century were just as much determined by political pressures and personal interests.

While personality and generational differences have historically been factors in how and whether groups survive within shifting political environments, the pressures and stakes changed dramatically after the uprisings of 2011, when many Islamists were able to test their principles in positions of political power and when the significance of their actions was amplified across the region through social media channels. As the papers of Monica Marks and Raphael Lefevre show, the missteps of the region's oldest Islamist group, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, had the effect of alienating it from other Islamist groups across the region. The impact of its actions on the self-perceptions

and maneuvers of Islamists elsewhere are one example of the ways in which local actions could have new kinds of transregional impact. However, even where this impact is felt, these papers remind us of the need to tread carefully when describing how these groups relate to and influence one another in their ambitions and priorities... ❖

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