Reflections on Islamism: From the Muslim Brotherhood to the Islamic State

2014 Zeev Schiff Memorial Lecture

by Shimon Shamir **(/experts/shimon-shamir)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: Zeev Schiff Memorial Lectures (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/zeev-schiff-memorial-lectures)

or see Part 1: The Unlikely Peace: Prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian Agreement in 2008 (/policy-analysis/unlikely-peace-prospects-israeli-palestinian-agreement-2008)

Israel's former ambassador to Egypt and Jordan discusses the changing face of Islamism for the Institute's annual lecture in honor of the late Zeev Schiff.

*On October 23, 2014, Prof. Shimon Shamir of Tel Aviv University delivered The Washington Institute's annual Zeev Schiff Memorial Lecture. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his speech and the subsequent question-and-answer session. To read his full speech, **download the PDF (/media/2611)** .*

In historical terms, Islamism is a modern movement. While its adherents claim that it is a purely indigenous effort to purge foreign elements that have penetrated Islam in the modern period, the irony is that Islamism itself was born of the friction between religious loyalties and modern, Western-dominated realities. From the start, the movement thrived in places where Western power and culture abounded -- many Islamist activists were Western-educated professionals who spent years in Europe or the United States, while many terrorist cells were formed by Muslims living in the cities of Germany, Britain, and Belgium. This Western connection facilitated the absorption of modern methods and instruments, including weaponry, Internet communications, aircraft, banking systems, smartphones, and so forth.

Beginning in the 1930s, the Muslim Brotherhood established some of the main elements of Islamism: defining the enforcement of sharia as the ultimate goal, proclaiming jihad, sanctioning political assassinations, placing the *umma* (community) of Islam above the nation-state, and creating a binding spiritual-political leadership. In the decades since, Islamist movements have undergone three major developments: radicalization, globalization, and territorialization.

First, popular thinkers such as Egypt's Sayyed Qutb inspired Islamists to emphasize offensive rather than defensive jihad, and to focus on the West -- and Western-allied Muslims -- as their target. Later, globalization played a role when mujahedin from all over the Muslim world flocked to conflicts in Afghanistan and Bosnia, then returned home thoroughly trained, indoctrinated, and ready to form extensive webs of Islamist activism. The Islamic State/ISIS is the latest example of the third trend: Islamists controlling territory of their own in which they are free to establish institutions, make sharia the law of the state, form regular armies, use schools and the media to disseminate their ideology, recruit more followers, and launch interventions in other countries.

As for why Islamism emerged and grew in the first place, it was largely a product of the disorientation, humiliation, and frustration that resulted from Western conquests of Muslim lands and the subsequent discovery that Westerners possessed greater wealth, more advanced science and technology, thriving industries, impressive political institutions, and innovative ideas. The eventual liberation of these lands only intensified the crisis because it revealed that their problems did not result just from occupation as claimed, but also from within. These problems have persisted ever since -- as the scores of Arab experts who prepared the UN's 2002 Arab Human Development Report showed, countries in the region lag behind most of the world in all dimensions of development: economic, social, civil, political, and cultural.

Among many Muslims, frustration about their circumstances turned into anger over the years, and Islamists gave expression to this mood, magnified it, and derived their strength and influence from its prevalence. In addition to externalizing blame, their doctrines pushed the argument one step further: if the West, particularly America, is the source of Muslim predicaments, then Muslims must mobilize for a holy war against it. This Islamist mindset persists today, stoked by a growing conviction that the fortunes of the West are waning. Meanwhile, Islamism has proven its durability, and policymakers should reconsider their expectations that a "war on terror" alone will eradicate the threat it poses. Islamism today is quite literally on the map and should be handled accordingly.

Yet far too many Westerners, especially in Europe, are unaware of Islamism's full dimensions and the fact that its adherents hate the West not simply because of what it does, but because of what it is. These and other misunderstandings impede the formulation of effective policies for coping with the Islamist challenge. For example, when Hamas first emerged in Gaza in the 1980s, Israeli authorities did not bother to examine its links with the Muslim Brotherhood, which would have shown them that there was no true separation between the group's socio-religious, political, and militant aims. Only later did they outlaw the group, after it grew significantly in strength.

More recently, U.S. officials made similar miscalculations in their handling of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. If Washington had better understood the group's temporary political pragmatism, it likely would have seen that the Brotherhood is the same movement it always was -- one that came into being as a militant response to the West and is still committed to imposing sharia on Egypt. This misapprehension raised eyebrows not only among many Egyptians, but also in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, whose leaders began to doubt the reliability of the U.S. partnership after 2011.

The take-home message seems clear: when situations such as the Egyptian revolution arise, an outside player who does not have a hand on the pulse of a different society, who is not adequately conversant with its culture, and who does not thoroughly apprehend the nature of the forces at play should not take sides. Only when one of these forces emerges as a grave threat to vital interests is intervention called for -- as is definitely the case with ISIS in Syria and Iraq today.

FROM THE Q&A

The United States and the West should understand that their expectations of a Middle Eastern society cannot be the same as their expectations of a Western society. To be sure, skepticism about whether Muslim countries can be democratic is as wrong as the 1930s skepticism about whether Catholic countries can be democratic. Some elements of Islam support democracy, and others do not; in the end, it depends on the people and how they interpret Islam.

Yet the prevailing assumption in the West -- that once a dictator is removed, democracy follows -- does not reflect reality. Elections do not mean democracy unless they develop from the grassroots, which is not happening yet in most Arab societies. Moreover, the role played by religious ideologies is much stronger than what can be understood based on Western experience. Separation between religion and state, a central theme in the West, is not accepted among most Arab Muslims.

Many of these issues are readily apparent in Egypt, where the people ousted Mubarak, held free elections, voted Islamists into power, and then, when they found out that was a mistake, looked for an alternative who was more or less a Mubarak type of a ruler: namely, Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, a leader who came from the army like Gamal Abdul Nasser and Anwar Sadat before him. Despite the misgivings Westerners have about politics that do not match their expectations of democracy, they should realize that this is what Egyptians -- and most other Arab nations -- can sustain at this stage of their history.

Going forward, it is in America's interest to develop as much cooperation with Egypt as possible, since it is the most important country in the Arab world. The current government in Cairo is pragmatic -- it is willing to work with the West and is also open to cooperation with Israel on security matters.

Elsewhere, the U.S.-led campaign against ISIS is a positive sign, but the general impression is that the United Stated is tired from its interventions around the world. As a result, Washington has seemingly chosen a compromise approach: bombing ISIS targets without committing ground forces. The danger is that the bombing campaign validates the group's claims about its fight against the West, thereby boosting its recruitment efforts. The key to defeating ISIS ideologically is to defeat it militarily, since the group draws legitimacy from military success.

For its part, Israel sees the Islamic State as a very serious threat. The group's fighters are present on the Golan ceasefire line, along with al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. Israelis also worry about Jordan, since ISIS is gathering on its border as well and sees the Hashemite regime as illegitimate. And in Sinai, the terrorist group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis is shifting toward ISIS.

As for the Palestinians, it is important to remember the central role that ideology plays in Middle Eastern politics. The PLO's ideology is political, and therefore compromise is possible if its supporters so choose. Yet religious ideology is a different matter: its claim to legitimacy is divine wisdom, not popular will, and so it cannot change goals, though it can agree to temporary compromises such as ceasefires. The Palestinian movement has a long history of combining political and religious ideology; Hamas, for example, has an Islamist ideology yet still aspires to represent Palestinian nationalism. But such contradictions are common among political movements and should not obscure the core nature of groups like Hamas.

This summary was prepared by Oula Abdulhamid Alrifai.

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