REACTION ESSAY

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My paper for this project focuses on a very specific episode:the fate of the Muslim Brotherhood's social services under Egypt's current military regime. In the papers, and in our discussions at the June 2015 workshop, one issue that came up was how social service provision plays into discussions over Islamist groups' decisions on how to manage the distinction between an inclusive, mass-based political party (*hizb*) and a hierarchical, exclusive social movement (*haraka*), and whether these can coexist. Social services, and in particular the way that they are targeted by the regime, serve as an ideal lens through which to examine the issue. This, in turn, helps highlight the dilemmas Islamist groups face as they attempt to build mass support.

Regimes in Syria, Tunisia, and Libya heavily repressed the Muslim Brotherhood, forcing it to operate clandestinely and largely underground. This historic alienation from society renders the task of building broad support in post-authoritarian situations difficult. It seems that to bypass these difficulties, today these branches tend to piggyback on existing social relations, such as familial networks, to build support. While this is most prevalent in Tunisia, it also finds parallels in Syria and potentially Libya. To the extent that this facilitates the maintenance of a high-quality, committed membership, it benefits the *haraka*. But because it replicates existing networks instead of activating new sources of support, it works to the detriment of the *hizb*. Indeed, in many contexts these two approaches are diametrically opposed. Islamists in democratizing Tunisia are grappling with this dilemma most directly, although one can see it potentially looming in the future for Islamists elsewhere in the region.

The problem of how to rebuild mass social support after a long absence is not unprecedented. The Egyptian Brotherhood encountered a similar dilemma when they re-emerged in the 1970s under Anwar al-Sadat. In that case, the Brotherhood's open and legalist social service provision helped to rebuild the organization's mass appeal—it benefitted the *hizb* over the *haraka*. Indeed, the group's ability to deliver social services to broad swathes of Egypt's public was a vital

component of its electoral success both under Mubarak and during the brief democratic interlude that followed. Yet following the military coup, as my paper details, the Egyptian government's broad crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood is forcing the organization to emphasize organizational survival and cohesion over mass political appeal. For social services, this potentially means a reorientation away from the traditional legalist, above-ground emphasis on non-discriminatory provision and towards a "club good" model, in which members of the Muslim Brotherhood have priority.

Coming out of long periods of political repression, Tunisian Islamists are forced to confront this dilemma directly. For decades, the group's social services were bent to the club good model. But now, as the organization increasingly emphasizes the importance of electoral competition and struggles to institutionalize a mass-based political party, the pull to reorient their social service networks towards the *hizb* style provision will only grow. This issue will potentially come to a head early next year as the movement debates whether to formally erect a firewall between the party and the movement. I suspect that the incentives for electoral competition will be so powerful as to make any distinction between the party and the movement essentially meaningless, as happened in Egypt.

In terms of broader themes that emerged from the papers, one consistency was an emphasis on how Islamism—as an ideology or system of governance—interacts with pre-existing structural cleavages. These cleavages differ in type and influence across multiple country contexts. In Jordan, for instance, the ethnic tension between Jordanian and Palestinian members in the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood seems to play a large role. In Yemen, the country's geographic schism potentially plays a larger role. In other cases, it may be tribal or socioeconomic divides.

Perhaps the most obvious cleavage is between Sunni and Shia Muslims. In some places, Islamist groups have been able to overcome this divide. In Kuwait, it is the Muslim Brotherhood which allies with the Shia blocs in parliament, while the Salafist parties abjure cooperation in principle. In Yementoo, the Brotherhood there and other mainstream Islamists downplayed the sectarian angle, at least initially. In other cases, however, the polarization has sucked in Islamist groups. Saudi Arabian Islamists fell in behind the King in support of the war in Yemen, painting it as a necessary intervention to push back Shia encroachments. In Syria, the influence of Said Hawwa and Ibn Taymiyya on the group's internal educational curriculum, and in particular their demonization of the Alawites, combines with the ongoing polarization in the country to supercharge the country's sectarian conflict. Indeed, in his paper on Pakistan, Matthew Nelson suggests that sectarian conflict—rather than ideological convergence—is one potential area where The Islamic State can make inroads and gain influence among South Asia's militant groups.

In terms of a research agenda, the interaction of underlying structural cleavages with an overarching ideology of Islamism recommends the continuing importance of comparative research, either cross- or sub-nationally. For instance, why have Kuwaiti Islamists been relatively more able to overcome the sectarian divide than their Saudi and Syrian counterparts?

How do tribe, Islamist movement, and political party interact in Jordan, Libya, and Yemen? Why have the Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama-based factions in the Syrian Brotherhood developed their own distinct identities, but comparable subnational or regional identities have never emerged in Egypt?

The question [Stacey Philbrick Yadav poses](#) in her introduction suggests a second broader theme: how do Islamists who, for years have situated their activism inside the institutional structures of the state, cope with the collapse of these structures? While not the only point of emphasis, the question of violence speaks directly to this dilemma. It seems that, at least in terms of how they conceptualize the use of violence, the ideological impact of the Egyptian coup and the rise of the Islamic State have been minimal: the Brotherhood has for so long been a gradualist, accomodationist movement that it cannot easily reorient to a revolutionary, confrontationist approach to political contestation. Indeed, it seems almost inconceivable to think of a *takfiri* trend re-emerging in the Islamist ideological corpus, even after the political failures of the past two years.

The Brotherhood also faces practical problems in the effective deployment of violence. As one of the participants in the June 2015 workshop noted, "the Muslim Brotherhood does not do violence well," meaning that the group lacks the leadership and skill for a sustained and organized campaign of violence. In Syria, for instance, the Brotherhood's networks could not engage in effective offensive operations, even though the resources and opportunities were available. Some, frustrated with the group's military impotency, have defected to avowedly violent groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra).

Prior to July 2013 the lack of this capacity for violence was, for many Islamist groups, a boon for the way that it helped demonstrate their commitment to the electoral process. Yet the Egyptian coup and subsequent repression of the Brotherhood complicated, if not reversed this calculus. After July 2013, Islamists' political progress was subject to the caprice of those with the guns. In terms of "Rethinking Political Islam," one potentially interesting research agenda is to further probe Islamists' divergent responses to their political opponents' ability to deploy—or threaten to deploy—violence to circumscribe their political ascent. For instance, why did political crisis cause [Tunisian Islamists](#) to back down and aggressively disavow and even clamp down on armed Salafi groups, [while in next-door Libya](#) it caused Islamists to ally with armed actors to preserve their political gains?

About this Series:

The *Rethinking Political Islam* series is an innovative effort to understand how the developments following the Arab uprisings have shaped—and in some cases altered—the strategies, agendas, and self-conceptions of Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world. The project engages scholars of political Islam through in-depth research and dialogue to provide a systematic, cross-country comparison of the trajectory of political Islam in 12 key countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, as well as Malaysia and Indonesia.

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- A **reaction essay** in which authors reflect on and respond to the other country cases.

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