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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Visible and Invisible Religiosity Probing into issues of Islamism and Post-Islamism

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**Abstract:** In this paper the author is attempting to assess both Islamism and Post-Islamism discourses and sees whether it is possible to talk about a Post-Islamist turn in the Muslim World, in general, and Iran, in particular. The author believes that we are still in an Islamist era but the challenges ahead belong to competitions between different approaches to Islamism rather than post-Islamist discourses. By arguing this, the author attempts to analyze how these competing discourses may affect the notion and locus of the state in Iran.

**Keywords:** Visible and Invisible Religiosity, Islamism, Post-Islamism

## Introduction

### In Place of the Introduction

On May 2012 I was invited for an international conference in Moscow by the Russian Academy of Science where the participants wanted to inquire about eastern and western philosophical traditions. There I met a scholar from Turkey who presented a paper on Fetullah Gulen as the only authentic philosopher in the Muslim World. When his presentation was over I approached him and asked him if he knows about contemporary Iranian philosophers and social theorists. He got

upset and told me that I should not have a fetishist attachment to the past and I should wake up to the sour reality of today. He continued by preaching me that ‘we do not have any real philosopher or social theorist today. The only thinker who is able to generate a sense of authenticity among us is Fetullah Gulen’. I tried to dialog with him by mentioning few names of contemporary Iranian thinkers, intellectuals and philosophers but he refused to listen. His answer was that if they are really world-class philosophers then why we have not heard of them as we do hear about Richard Rorty, Jurgen Habermas and other western intellectuals. I realized that he has a point. What is the problem? What are the underlying factors which contribute to deepen the question of underrepresentation? How could one overcome the paradoxes of local publishing and global perishing? Islamism is one of the most progressive political ideologies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which is rooted in the unique experience of non-European intellectuals with modernity. Of course, like many other ideologies one can discern different and contrasting spectrums within the parameters of Islamism which could be hard to put them under one and the same conceptual umbrella. However there is no doubt that the future of Islamicate societies is deeply intertwined with Islamism as one of the most powerful streams in the Muslim and even non-Muslim world. Nonetheless it is strange to see that this political position is formulated in academic fashion by thinkers, scholars, researchers and intellectuals who are mainly in opposition to this political position. If you look at other ideological streams such as Liberalism, Conservatism, Socialism, Communism, Libertinism, Anarchism and Radicalism you will soon find out that the respective proponents of these aforementioned ideologies have meticulously carried out exegeses of their political systems in grand scale. This is not the case with Islamism. Islamism has been represented by Liberal scholars, communist intellectuals, conservative social thinkers and libertarian sociologists who have, in fact, underrepresented Islamism through *strategies of underrepresentation*. By strategies of underrepresentation I refer to *concealment* rather than *disclosure* of the conceptual paradigm of Islamism. How are these strategies applied in academia by so-called value-neutral scholars? There are many studies on these discursive strategies which

function in panoptican fashions in suppressing competing discourses but one of these strategies is what Syed Farid Alatas terms as *academic imperialism*. Here I am not going to repeat what Syed Farid Alatas has eloquently explained but it is important to note that these strategies are not only real but even powerfully efficient. (Alatas, 2003. 599)

### **Multiple Forms of Islamism**

It should be noted that I distinguish between different streams of Islamism and it would be wrong to treat them all as a monolithic whole and then according to this misleading interpretation conclude that the era of Islamism is over – which would allow us to assume that we have entered into a new age of Post-Islamism. (Kuru & Stepan, 2012) This is not correct conceptually and misleading due to sociological observations which we can deduce from existing data in Iran and other major Muslim countries. To be more accurate we can argue that Islamism has just begun in Muslim countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Kirgizstan, Kazakhstan, Bosnia, Albania, North Caucasian and Tatar and Bashkir Regions (within Russian Federation), Uyghur and Muslim Regions (within China), Malaysia, Egypt, and Nigeria. Of course, we should distinguish between distinct *phases* and *faces* of Islamism in, for instance, Iran and Turkey in comparison to other parts of the Muslim World. In Iran, we cannot talk about post-Islamism as though the Islamist discourse is over and soon we should expect a new set of ideas where the role of political Islam is reduced to nil. On the contrary, we may be able to expect within the next coming decades a shift from jurisprudentialist Islamism toward a post-Jurisprudentialist system of governance where other competing interpretations of Islamism could play a more visible role. For the sake of argument, I can conceptualize various streams of Islamism into five broad categories of Jurisprudentialist Islamism (e.g. Ayatollah Khomeini); Socialist Islamism (e.g. Dr. Ali Shariati), Liberal Islamism (e.g. Mohandes Mehdi Bazargan), Democratic Islamism (e.g. Ayatollah Taleghani) and Salafist Islamism (e.g. Sheikh Bin Baz). Needless to argue that within each of these paradigms there are, at least, five or six other sub-streams and each of these ideological sub-streams

demonstrate authentic diversity in regard to issues such as the role of 'state', social position of 'women', the state of 'property', and other pivotal issues in the political context of Islamism. However, today in Iran the political actors and intellectual agents are working through ideas and ideals which are within the parameters of Islamism but the question is not how to overcome Islamism. On the contrary, the crucial question is how to change the tide in terms of democratization of Islamism which was very much present in certain streams of political Islam around the 1979 Revolution. For instance, Ayatollah Taleghani's approach to Islamism represents an alternative paradigm vis-à-vis the jurisprudentialist interpretation of Islamism. The democratic approaches toward Islamism have been marginalized during these past four decades in Iran and this marginalization has not only weakened the growth of civil society in Iran but it has had a negative impact on the political trends in the Muslim World too. In other words, a return to democratic interpretation of Islamism could not be interpreted as a move toward post-Islamism as some scholars have suggested. (Miri, 2013) In my view, the present century, as far as Muslim societies are concerned, is the century of Islamism both as an ideological force and as a governing paradigm. To put it differently, Islamism would gain more support within Muslim countries due to the fact that it is rooted in the soil of Islam (as a revealed religion which has shaped the mind and heart of people in the vast empire of Islam for more than a millennium). However the real question is that whether Muslims are able to create unity and live with diversity within the parameters of Islamism. To put it otherwise, what kind of interpretations of Islamism could bring stability and popularity, efficiency and prosperity, security and freedom, legitimacy and inclusiveness, might and cooperation (both within and without) and so on and so forth?

In other words, to address these questions require serious engagements with Islamist discourses which have reigned supreme in the Empire of Islam for the past one hundred years. It is impossible to understand these discourses through *eurocentric* paradigms which take liberalism, communism, socialism, conservatism or secularism as their respective points of theoretical departures in conceptualizing Islamist political trends in Iran or elsewhere. This is to argue that scholars who

talk about post-Islamism have not a clear idea about the major trends in Iran and these kinds of conceptualizations demonstrate intellectual prematurity and sociological insensitivity.

### **Founder versus Expositor**

Where does, for instance, Allama Jafari stand in relation to these categories? Before answering this question, I think it would be more constructive to look at Islamism as a modern school of political philosophy as this would assist us to understand the political landscape in contemporary Iran and the world of Islam in a more profound fashion. In my view, we should distinguish between a founder (*Moasses*) and an expositor (*shareh*) in the context of political philosophy as this distinction would enable us to contextualize better the political thought of a thinker such as Allama Jafari in relation to Islamism as a modern political stream which arose as a reaction to native despotism and foreign colonialism. Ayatollah Khomeini is doubtless the founder of Islamism within the paradigm of jurisprudentialism but scholars such as Morteza Muttahari, Ayatollah Beheshti, Seyyed Mohammad Baghir Sadr and even Allama Mohammad Taghi Jafari were expositors of jurisprudentialist Islamism. Of course, by reading their respective works one can see how diverse are even jurisprudentialist Islamist thinkers in their respective approaches toward West, Modernity, State, Women, Philosophy, Theology, Reason and Revelation and so on and so forth. This is not to dismiss their respective novel approaches to political questions but it is to emphasize the pivotal distinction which exists between a founder and an expositor within the parameters of philosophical schools. One may wonder how or where one would locate the discourse of Ayatollah Montazeri? Should one count him as a founder in the context of jurisprudentialist Islamism or an expositor? Of course, it is undeniable that Ayatollah Montazeri underwent through colossal intellectual transformations but it is more adequate to classify him neither as an expositor nor a founder. It would be fair to consider him as a co-founder of school of jurisprudentialist Islamism. Needless to state that Ayatollah Montazeri became very critical of the state politics in Iran and he revised many of his views on the political role of jurisprudence in the

context of the state but, in despite of many revisions, it would be a mistake to classify him as an anti-jurisprudentialist Islamist thinker. The political thought of thinkers such as Allama Jafari is compatible with the general trends within the jurisprudentialist school of political Islam. In other words, Allama Jafari or Morteza Muttahari has invented a novel language in demonstrating the jurisprudentialist authority within the parameters of Islamic Republicanism as founded by Ayatollah Khomeini. This is why we have classified them as expositors as far as political philosophy is concerned but needless to reemphasize that they in other domains of intellectual inquiries should be viewed as few of the most creative social theorists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Pitfalls of Jurisprudentialist School of Islamism**

It is interesting to note that Islamism as a political ideology is as relevant as ever but this should not be interpreted as the relevance of the jurisprudentialist school of Islamism. The pitfalls of the jurisprudentialist Islamism could be overcome if Islamist scholars and thinkers realize that the frame that could accommodate Islamism in a more effective manner is not jurisprudentialist interpretation but democratic frame of reference. This is to argue that the Muslim world is not moving toward a post-Islamist era due to the fact that people in Muslim societies tend to have a *visible religiosity* rather than invisible religiosity which is emblematic of Euro-Atlantic societies where the public is more inclined toward an *invisible religiosity*. This is to argue that we can explain contrasts and commonalities in terms of visible versus invisible religiosity as sociological concepts. Let me explicate my points in a different fashion, it is a grave mistake to assume the challenges before *Restern Countries* as conflicts between religion and modernity. As far as the Muslim World is concerned the conflict is between competing ideologies which aspire to monopolize the public square in autocratic fashions. To put it differently, the conflict is not between Modernity and Islam and any dichotomization of this kind is doomed to failure due to the fact that religion is not either an ideology or solely a cognitive paradigm. Religion may beget ideology or schools of thought but it is not either an ideology or a school of thought. It is, so to speak, better understood in a Jungian

fashion rather than in a Freudian manner which approaches religion in a solely cognitive fashion and therefore finds it as an illusion which shall not have a future in the constitution of a rational self and a rationalized society. In other words, if we assume that there is a conflict then the conflict is between ideologies such as Liberalism and Islamism. In my understanding, within many Muslim countries there is a public demand which could be conceptualized as 'Visible Religiosity'. This is to argue that the majority in the Muslim countries favors a more visible presence of religion in their public life and this fact is sociologically discernible and hard to deny. This is my first hypothesis. My second hypothesis is that the conflicts which social theorists, sociologists, political scientists and even orientalist (within departments of Middle Eastern Studies) have conceptualized (on religion and modernity) are not, in fact, between Islam and Modernity or Islam and Democracy as these two are not comparable. On the contrary, if there is any conflict or contrast then that is between Islamism and Modernism or Islamism and Democratism. However, it should be mentioned that it seems the real conflict is not between Islamism and Modernism as the former is an offshoot of modernism and the real challenge is whether Islamism is essentially in opposition to Democratism. There are many scholars who would like to take Liberalism as the best frame of democratic reference which has surpassed historical pitfalls of modern ideologies such as Communism, Socialism, Fascism, and Nazism. In other words, the best model which one could fathom democracy is the one provided by Liberalism that has been institutionalized in countries such as America. In addition, there are many scholars who argue that modernity is a path that all successful nations should pass through and the roadmap is the one provided by Euro-Atlantic countries such as France, Germany, England and America. Both of these views are what we call Eurocentrism which has been critiqued by many uneurocentric intellectuals and thinkers who have argued that democratism is not equivalent to liberalism and it is wrong to assume that the road to modernity could not be fathomed in multiplicities. In other words, one could assume that Islamism is a modern form of reconstructing Muslim societies which differ from the Euro-Atlantic models of social engineering but it would be a remiss to assume that democratism is a western product and inapplicable to Restern societies. My sociological observations lead me to believe that Islamism

is the future of the Muslim world in a political sense but at the same time my observations demonstrate that if we don't distinguish between local and universal then the future of Muslim societies would be very gloomy. To put it differently, Islamism needs to be relocated within the parameters of democratic boundaries and one should distance Islamism from regressive and anti-democratic readings which justify their regressive principles on unjustifiable grounds such as incompatibility of Islam and Democracy or incongruity of Islam and Liberalism and clash of Islam and Modernism. In the modern context which Muslim societies find themselves the comparisons are not between Islam and aforementioned ideologies; on the contrary, the real comparison is between Islamism which is the dominant ideology in these countries where we can witness other ideologies such as communism, nationalism, liberalism and socialism. But the dominant trend which has shaped the public square in a fundamental fashion is the ideology of Islamism. This ideology due to various socio-cultural factors have leaned more toward despotism, autocratic rule and jurisprudentialism rather than democratic interpretations of social governmentality and politics. We should realize that Liberalism is a eurocentric vision of governing society which could be of great importance in many western societies but it will not work properly in countries such as Iran where 'Visible Religiosity' is favored in the public square. Of course, this does not mean that Iran is a more religious country than America or Sweden where the public square is better understood in terms of 'Invisible Religiosity'. This could only mean that different societies express distinctly their symbolic realities both on individual levels and social dimensions. There is no reference to normative superiority or inferiority when one speaks of visible or invisible religiosity in sociological parlance. However, uneurocentric thinkers should be more innovative and attempt to deconstruct democratic discourses which have come to be solely interpreted in reference to dominant eurocentric ideologies such as social democracy, liberalism or neo-liberalism as there are other ways of conceptualizing democracy which may fall without the parameters of the aforementioned ideologies. In my view, Islamism is such a progressive ideology which could be the alternative model of governance provided it is interpreted within the parameters of democratic principles. These principles are very simple and straightforward, i.e. the source of power within



the nation-state society is people and the state should be accountable before the people and transparency should be implemented in all spheres of social life. When we speak of source of power this should not be taken in an absolute fashion. There are many theologically-oriented scholars who aspire to create a bogus conflict by emphasizing on the divine source of power. To this argument one could put a counter-argument by stating that we are not talking about the source of power in reality as such. On the contrary, the source of power in a given nation-state which exists as a contingent historical reality which may disappear tomorrow and hence the source of power may shift to another entity. Needless to argue that in many societies today we can talk about the shift of the power-source from the state to multinational corporate companies which do not follow any democratic rule. If these premises are sustainable then one could argue that democratic alternative is the most comprehensive model of political management before us. By critiquing contemporary scholars who have been oblivious to these fine distinctions between Islamism and Islam, Democratism and Liberalism and multiple modernities I intend to argue that false comparative strategies may prove useful in short-runs but it will backlash in the long-runs and now the turmoil which have enveloped the entire Muslim World could be understood partially in reference to false comparative strategies. Another important question is the recent discourses of Post-Islamism by scholars such as Asef Bayat who compare the incomparable couple of Islam and Democracy and based on this false dichotomy argue that Islamist movements in Muslim societies are undergoing a post-Islamist turn. (Bayat, 1996)

### **The Post-Islamist Turn?**

It is correct that these movements are undergoing colossal changes but it is too hasty to assume that these transformations are of post-Islamic natures. The problem with these kinds of researches is that scholars who are working within binary frame of references tend to compare incomparable entities. The question is not that within Islamist camps there is no room for change or pluralistic approach. On the contrary, there are many nuances within Islamist discourses but it is wrong to

assume that we have entered a new stage which could be considered as a post-Islamist era. The fundamental factors which brought about Islamist discourse to the public square, in the first place, have not changed yet, i.e. people's demand of a visible form of religiosity. Although Bayat himself states that post-Islamism does not necessarily mean the historical end of Islamism but constructing 'postness' in conjunction to Islamism along with false dichotomization of Islam and Modernity (Islam and Democracy and so on and so forth) is simply wrong. Because it diverts or even distorts the sociopolitical energies from tackling real issues in the Muslim World, i.e. the process of democratization of Islamism which needs to be taken into consideration as one of the most challenging questions before elites in the Muslim World. In other words, the challenging question is how to democratize Islamism which is, in principle, a progressive ideology as it is Liberalism, Socialism, and other forms of ideologies which create sufficient space for human agency. More importantly, the serious problem with post-Islamist discourses is the fact that if we assume that Islamism has come to its end then what next? Should this mean that we should adopt a secular form of political system? If the answer is affirmative then what should we do about post-secularist discourses which have emerged today in most secularist societies and contexts? To put it differently, the main argument of scholars who argue for post-Islamism is that

*... post-Islamism refers to a political and social condition where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted even among its once-ardent supporters. (Bayat, 1996)*

However the problem with this argument is that the proponents of this position do not distinguish between various forms of Islamism. Islamism is not a monolithic position in the political landscape of the Muslim political thought. On the contrary, it is very pluralistic and multifaceted. To argue that Islamism has got exhausted even among its extreme supporters is a simplistic interpretation of sociological events on the ground. Bayat mentions Iran as an example (1996) and argues that *... Islamism ... both by its own internal contradictions ... and by societal pressure ... [has become compelled] ... to reinvent itself, but does so... ... at the cost of a qualitative shift (Bayat, 1996).*

Here Bayat talks about Islamism in a singular fashion as though there is only one unified version of Islamism. This is the first critique which comes to mind when reading Bayat and other scholars who argue for post-Islamism. Secondly, when we talk about the Iranian political system it should be noted that there is a distinction between Islamism as an ideology and jurisprudential interpretations of Islamism. We should not think that this is an irrelevant distinction which could be easily glossed over. On the contrary, the exhaustion which Bayat refers to is due to the jurisprudential interpretations of Islamism and those ardent supporters of Islamism who are allegedly exhausted today – we need to recast their exhaustion within a more nuanced frame of theoretical reference. In other words, they are not exhausted from Islamism as such but they are trying to reconceptualize Islamism outside the parameters of jurisprudentialist framework. We cannot understand these theoretical issues if we are oblivious to sociological issues on the ground. This is what I have termed as ‘visible religiosity’ which seems to determine the political contours of Muslim societies, politicians and political actors who aspire to shape, reshape and reform the future political landscape of Iran and the Muslim World in 21<sup>st</sup> century. In other words, instead of talking about post-Islamism and secular strategies in Muslim societies it is more accurate to conceptualize post-Jurisprudential tendencies in conjunction to post-secularist strategies within Islamist frame of references. To put it differently, in order to overcome violent changes and bring about peaceful transformations in the Muslim world we need to design subtle strategies whereby Islamism lends itself more to democratic interpretations rather than elitist or autocratic readings which exclude the pivotal role of ‘popular sovereignty’. Bayat argues that

*... we may witness for some time the simultaneous process of both Islamization and post-Islamization*  
(Bayat, 1996. 43).

## **Conclusion**

In the light of what we have argued earlier it is more likely that we shall witness for some time the parallel process of both post-Jurisprudentialization and democratization rather than post-Islamism in the sense Bayat, Gilles Kepel (2010) or Olivier Roy (2006; 2007) have argued. It may be too early to judge as we are very close historically to 'The Green Movement' which occurred in 2009 but it is undeniable that the aspirations of those who staged and directed this movement were not one of post-Islamization. It is better to view their aspirations as attempts to overcome undemocratic tendencies within Islamism which relies more heavily on elitist jurisprudentialism rather than leaning on popular authority in running the affairs of the state. Of course it is hard to predict the future but it may not be very farfetched to state that those strategies which are more democratic and within the parameters of Islamism would surely determine the future of Muslim World in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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