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SOME INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ABOUT THE ARAB ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS

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Introductory Considerations on Arab Islamist Movements

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1. Islamism, which is not to be confused with Islam, is a recent political ideology, even though it originates from centuries of thought about relations between the Islamic religion and politics. The Islamist ideology is based on the conviction that a society of good Muslims can only be achieved if the political organization of society (i.e. the state) is Islamic. Not only must its foundations be Islamic (based on the sovereignty of God), but its laws (*Shari'a*), methods and ultimate objectives must also be Islamic. From an ideological point of view, the distinctive feature of Islamism is the centrality of the role of the state, which Islamists feel to be responsible for the deviation of the Muslim community when it is not Islamic and the instrument of its salvation when it is.

Islamism is not, however, pure theoretical speculation, unrelated to the social and cultural reality in which it exists. On the contrary, as often pointed out, the theoretical-ideological dimension of Islamism is relatively underdeveloped. In some ways, Islamism does not exist in the abstract.

Islamism has its leaders, activists or simply sympathizers and, above all, it has its movements. The political role in the contemporary Arab world of these movements, which are active throughout the Muslim world, is the object of study of this conference and the research underlying it. Although differing in background, circumstances and types of political and social action, Islamist movements share the common final

objective of establishing an Islamic state--the political form considered not only ideal but also essential for the well-being of every Muslim.

As some of the current Arab Islamist movements date back to the thirties and are politically active in such disparate countries as Yemen and Lebanon, Kuwait and Algeria, it is no wonder that they are not alike. Indeed there are differences in organization, type of political action, historical affiliation, source of ideological inspiration, territorial and social diffusion, legal status in the various national contexts (legal, semi-legal, clandestine). On the basis of these parameters, scholars have worked out two main distinctions between Islamist movements. The first, based on how literalist the approach to religious orthodoxy is, distinguishes between movements that could be called pragmatic or evolutionist, and those that are conservative or neo-fundamentalist. The second distinction is based on the prevailing approach to political action and discerns between revolutionary and reformist movements.

Conservative or (neo)fundamentalist are those movements which, like the Wahhabi founders of the current Saudi state and an important school of thought in the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (ISF), feel that religious law, the Sharia, is an all-embracing and unchanging system of rules that must be applied, not interpreted. By way of example, interpreting the indications on sexual differences set down in the orthodox sources to the letter, fundamentalists are against granting (or for limiting where they have already been granted) both active and passive voting rights to women.

Evolutionist or pragmatist movements, on the other hand, feel that the Sharia constitutes a universal system of reference values that must be interpreted and updated in order to be implemented, wherever duties and prohibitions are not explicitly

laid down. Even so, interpretation can still be what the West would define as either progressive or restrictive (e.g. the question of the veil). Nevertheless, the effort to interpret and the debate it triggers is the common denominator of a wide range of otherwise very diverse pragmatist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood (present throughout the Arab world and beyond), the Nahda in Tunisia and the Islamic National Front (INF) in Sudan. Above all, it provides an ideological instrument for the democratic evolution of these movements.

Making classification even more difficult is the fact that the distinction between evolutionist and conservative movements does not coincide with the distinction between revolutionary and reformist movements. The revolutionary movements, whether fundamentalist or evolutionist, postulate that the construction of an Islamic state must take place "from the top down", by means of revolutionary--if necessary violent--takeover of political power, as no compromise with the regimes in power is legitimate. To this category belong the clandestine groups of the Egyptian Jama'at, the elitist groups not involved in national political action of the Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami and a myriad of tiny groups scattered throughout the Arab world.

The reformist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Algerian ISF and, *de facto*, all those movements that participate in the institutional political game, postulate that the Islamic state can also be built "from the bottom up", through consensus and a gradual change in individual, social and political behaviour.

The analysis of the case studies and the intersection of regional alliances to be carried out at this conference will make it clear that the socio-political realities in these countries cannot be squeezed into ideal typologies. In fact, it is rare that Arab Islamist movements fit fully into the simplified and undoubtedly debatable (from a

terminological point of view) categories just mentioned. Indeed, very different trends are frequently part of the same movement.

It is even more important to underline that these typologies, based mainly on analysis of what the movements say to legitimate their existence and actions, cannot alone explain the existence of conspicuous differences in the political projects and strategies of the various movements or the development of their orientations over time.

Contrary to popular belief, the social models and political strategies of the various Arab (and non-Arab) Islamist movements diverge—sometimes substantially—on fundamental aspects of socio-political organization. Although all can be set into the ideological framework of the Islamic state and all share certain views on key issues (above all, control of morality through separation of the sexes outside of the family), they also differ on such matters as the nature and functioning of state institutions, the instruments for political participation, the role of the public and private sectors in the economy, and the status of political, ethnic and religious minorities.

Of course, these differences have only come to light when movements have come to power, such as in Iran and Sudan, or when they have been involved in election campaigns requiring them to define their political platforms rather precisely.

Nevertheless, there are substantial differences in the political strategies and tactics of the various movements that are still on the opposition. While the Sudanese INF contributed to the abolition of a multiparty system after having shared in it, the Lebanese Hizbollah and the Palestinian Hamas finally chose to participate in the electoral process after having refused to do so for a long time.

Generic analysis of the social and cultural causes for the spread of these movements and their common ideological denominator is important, but not enough

to explain the development of their political behaviour.

The media--and not only the media--often overlook the differences between the various Islamic movements and prefers to give a mystifying global view that tends to present them as either the champions of the oppressed masses of the Arab world or the instruments of the blindest reactionary forces.

More thorough analysis, however, shows that the Arab Islamist movements are complex and multi-sided political actors which interact above all with their domestic social environment. Not only do they draw from it the resources needed for their organization and reproduction, but they change its reference values and are, in turn, changed by it. They are part of a system of relations and conflicts with the other active actors on the Arab political scene--both in government and on the opposition--with which they contend for consensus and power.

These general considerations provide a background for further observations on the national, regional and international dimensions of the Islamist phenomenon.

2. As of the mid-eighties, the transformation of the political systems of the countries of the second and third worlds has accelerated--at times dramatically. The main causes for this wave of change (the failure of centralized economies, the delegitimation of dominant ideologies, the emergence of so-called civil society) also apply to the Arab world, which has been wracked by contradictory phenomena of political change since the mid-eighties.

Within the framework of this broader process of change affecting most developing and former communist countries (perhaps too often cursorily identified as the transition to democracy), the Arab countries stand out for the important role played

in political transformation by Islamist movements.

Other speakers in this first session will analyze the various specific and sometimes contradictory features of the political transformation under way in the Arab world. I, however, would like to point out that one of the most important features of this change--besides Islamism--is the enlargement of the "political market". Certainly, the enlargement of the political market in the Arab world is still fragile, on both the supply side, represented by the legal framework of pluralism and the presence of real political parties, and the demand side, represented by the qualitative and quantitative extension of participation in the political process. But this increase in demand may well be the most innovative aspect of Arab politics today.

It was on this aspect that the research study that has given rise to this conference concentrated its attention, analyzing Islamist movements as participants in a broader political market. This approach explains the choice of the case studies that will be discussed in the afternoon work groups. In fact, the common denominator of the various Arab Islamist movements studied is not only the common ideological basis mentioned in the beginning, but also the experience of participation in an at least partially competitive political market.

The diversity of the experiences examined (and analogous ones not considered) is so evident that the title of this conference should perhaps more correctly refer to the "political roles" of Islamist movements. This could lead to the identification of other roles such as the joint exercise of power, social mediation and constructive opposition, in addition to the movements' obvious roles of protest and opposition.

In the cases analyzed, the participation of Islamic movements in pluralism does not seem to adhere to a single model and the differences in the experiences seem to

be engendered more by the specificities of the national settings than by the differences in the various movements.

However, it may be better to save any further observations on this subject for the conclusions of the conference and to turn to the international dimension of the phenomenon.

3. This dimension has many manifestations, ranging from intellectual Islamist debate about relations with the West and its values, to the Islamists' contribution to the ambiguous geometries of international terrorism, the exile in the West of Islamist leaders and the problem of the so-called conditionality of international aid.

Basically, these diverse manifestations pose the question of the feasibility of what I would call "dialectic globalization".

While interdependence is the result of the increasingly rapid and intense links between social phenomena at the transnational level, the term globalization defines both the process of linkage itself and the trend inherent in it of perceiving such matters as environmental protection, peace, human rights and development as global interests and values.

The process of globalization tends to make form and content planetary. At the same time, it interacts with processes that move in other--if not necessarily opposite--directions, asserting the validity of specific forms and contents. The dialectics between globalization and identity on the cultural plane and between globalization and regionalism, nationalism and localism on the political and economic planes is one of the main factors affecting and structuring contemporary international relations.

These dialectics need not be conflictual: on the economic plane regionalism

can, under certain circumstances, strengthen the free market. Similarly, on the political plane, the transfer of state sovereignty to the regional and local levels can favour greater efficiency and democracy.

If the reassessment and assertion of identity (whether ethnic, religious or national) is one of the main phenomena involved in dialectic globalization on the international scale, Islamism is a manifestation of it that is particularly relevant for North-South relations.

In fact, Islamism advocates the consolidation of a global form of the state based on the specific values represented by Islam. Yet, many people feel that in the specific case of Islamism the dialectics between globalization/identity will inevitably be conflictual. The Islamist perception of the existence of an imperialist/Zionist (or Christian/Judaic) plot against the Muslim world is, in this sense, a mirror image of the Western perception of the "green peril" looming over Western civilization. These opposing but convergent perceptions lead some people to believe that an epic "clash of the civilizations" is inevitable.

Conceptually, it is clear that the essential condition for dialectic globalization is the ability for evolution and syncretism of the schools of thought involved in the process: an ability that is surely lacking in the rigid and often formalist views expressed by some Islamist leaders as well as some Western intellectuals on concepts such as democracy, development and security. In theory, only real dialectics between globalism and identity can ward off the authoritarianism potentially inherent in both these trends and can produce constructive syntheses.

In practice, however, constructive syntheses are difficult to put into effect because the borderline between the conceptual plane of debate on values and the

political plane of assessment of interests is vague, to say the least. The debate on human rights is emblematic in this sense: in fact, as a result of intersecting values and interests, the individualistic conception born in the West has been only partially integrated into the collective view of rights worked out by the socialist and developing countries.

Indeed, the more immediately political dimension of the debate on the international dimension of Islamism is often expressed in terms of interest, especially in the West. But what Western interests are actually threatened by the possible establishment of one or more states embodying the model advocated by the Islamists? Many seem to feel that any new Arab Islamist regimes would be structurally less inclined towards international political and economic cooperation than the current regimes in power. But the correlation between the application of the Sharia and the adoption of foreign policies marked by radical nationalism has yet to be proven.

Another interest often cited in the West is the stability of the Arab world. Undoubtedly, if stability is taken to mean keeping up the status quo, then Islamist movements are a threat. If, however, Western concern for stability does not translate into opposition to change--as long as it is peaceful--then not all Islamist movements are a threat *per se* and the assessment of possible Western interests at stake should take account of the actual political role played by the movements in their respective national settings.

Naturally, these summary observations can no more than touch on the many contradictory regional and international aspects of the Islamist phenomenon. The socio-cultural, politico-strategic and economic dimensions will be analyzed in detail during debate on day two.

4. After this brief review of some of the main questions raised by the subject of this conference, I would like to conclude my introductory remarks by underlining the difficulty in analyzing a subject like Islamism. Islamism is at the center of dramatic political struggles produced by dissimilar views of the world, but also by the defence of opposing interests; these political struggles generate day-to-day violence, violations of human rights, suffering and repulsion.

Political passion inevitably reflects on scientific investigation, sometimes inspiring analyses that are more prescriptive than descriptive. But it is the intensity of these passions and the scope of their political, strategic and economic implications that make more up-to-date information and a comprehensive study of Islamist movements an urgent necessity.

The difficulty deriving from the topicality of the subject of this conference is compounded by other, more methodological difficulties, such as the relatively rudimentary state of political sciences applied to non-Western situations. Even the categories for analysis of subjects like Islamic movements--movements that lie halfway between a social movement, a charismatic party and a real party for social integration--are sometimes lacking. Other no less important methodological difficulties derive from the scarcity of the empirical data available on these movements. This scarcity, along with the Orientalist--and in some ways literalist--distortion of knowledge about the Arab world and Islam makes scholars fall back onto the analysis of writings, but sufficient account is often not taken of the fact that ideology is only one of the elements helping to orient the strategies of the Islamist movements.

The studies that will be presented in the course of this conference will have been affected to some extent by the constraints and difficulties just mentioned. Based

as they are on almost two years of research and intellectual debate, they nevertheless constitute a serious attempt to overcome them. I would, therefore, like to conclude my introductory remarks by thanking all the scholars who participated in the research project and all those who have agreed to come to Bologna to discuss the study in the presence of a qualified audience. And we certainly hope that we will be able to satisfy the audience's interest in a subject which is debated relatively little in Italy today.

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