Are Al-Qaeda and Islamic State modern? Reflections on Islamic fundamentalism and modernity

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News

During the International Seminar on Gender-Specific Prevention of Radicalization and Extremism on 13 April 2018 in Copenhagen one of the questions discussed was whether the female jihadi Salafi discourse enables Muslim women to construct themselves as autonomous, thereby challenging the liberal notions of Muslim women as subjugated by men.

Summary

The article discusses whether Islamist fundamentalists, regardless of whether they are violent or peaceful, are modern. Constitutive elements of modernity and the concepts of counter-modernity and demodernization are presented. It is concluded that fundamentalism, in whatever form it emerges, cannot be considered as modern. Fundamentalists are in modernity, but not of modernity.

Key Words

Modernity, Al-Qaeda, Islamic State, fundamentalism, counter-modernity

About the Author

M. Ümit Necef is an associate professor. He works on a 4-year project financed by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FORTE) on the motivations of young Swedish and Danish Muslims to join Islamic State (IS) and other jihadist groups.
Analysis:

Do female jihadi Salafists acquire through jihadi Salafism a counter-identity to liberalism through Islamist and Salafist ideologies? Is jihadi Salafism a source of power and empowerment for Muslim women?

Some of the speakers at the conference stated that Salafi women engaged in violent jihad emphasize first their free will - that is that they have autonomously chosen violent jihadism. Secondly, they stress authenticity - that is their frame of reference consists of the Koran, the Sunna and the classical doctrine of jihad.

During the discussion, the Egyptian-American anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s book The Politics of Piety\(^1\) was mentioned as an example of scholarship which documents that fundamentalist women challenge the conventional roles assigned to them and thus supports the thesis that they are as autonomous as women in Western liberal societies.

Mahmood’s book is an ethnographic study of the women’s mosque movement in Egypt. The movement has grown out of opposition to an increasing “secularization” and “westernization” of Egyptian society. The aim of the movement was to “make our lives congruent with our religion”\(^2\) instead by retrieving the true essence of Islam from the Koran.

Mahmood presents two contradictory positions among scholars of gender towards pious Muslim women. The first position claims that these women are performing self-willed obedience to religiously prescribed social conventions\(^3\). From this perspective, such behavior can be described as blind and uncritical emulation. Pious movements, whose main aim is to live in accordance with the holy scriptures, only serve to reproduce the existing patriarchal order and to prevent women from distinguishing their own desires and aspirations from those that are socially dictated. These women are “often seen as depriving themselves of the ability to enact an ethics of freedom, one founded on their capacity to distinguish their own (true) desires from (external) religious and cultural demands”\(^4\).

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\(^1\) Mahmood, Saba 2005: *Politics of Piety*. Princeton: PUP.

\(^2\) Ibid. 45.

\(^3\) Ibid. 148.

\(^4\) Ibid. 148.
“Voluntary slave”

The second position, on the other hand, advances the idea that pious women exemplify the autonomous liberal subject because they are enacting their own desires for piety, despite the social obstacles they face, and are not following the conventional roles assigned to women. Therefore, a true liberal should be tolerant of this movement even if she disagrees with the movement’s larger roles. Mahmood believes that this view is well captured by the formulation “voluntary slave”.

Several reflections Mahmood presents on the mosque movement suggest that she agrees with the first position. For example, she concedes that “(t)he discourse of the mosque movement is shot through, of course, with assumptions that secure male domination”. Moreover, the “discourses of piety and male superiority are ineluctably intertwined”. We are emphatically told that “the very idioms that women use to assert their presence in previously male-defined spheres are also those that secure their subordination”.

However, it seems as if she wants to keep her position as, in the German political sociologist Christian Joppke’s formulation, “sympathetic observer”. He believes Mahmood helps herself out of the dilemma by arguing that heteronomy, that is subjection to conventions, traditions, religious beliefs and discourses, is a part of the human condition. This, according to Joppke, means, there cannot be a self before socially prescribed forms of behavior. Therefore, the autonomous self so dear to liberalism is a mirage, an Enlightenment fiction. He argues that no matter the theoretical framework in which the situation of the pious women is presented, it does not change the fact that “female subordination and affirmation of patriarchy is still the outcome”. He stresses that Mahmood, in fact, concedes this when she writes: “the very idioms that women use to assert their presence in previously male-defined spheres are also those that secure their subordination”. To substantiate his critique Joppke also quotes the Turkish sociologist Nilüfer Göle, who in her analysis of the veiling movement of female university students in Turkey had come to the same conclusion: “With the act of veiling women perform a political statement against Western modernism, yet at the same time

5 Ibid. 149.
6 Ibid. 149.
7 Mahmood, Saba 2001: "Feminist theory and Embodiment, the docile agent”. Cultural Anthropology, 16 (2), 202-36. P. 175.
8 Ibid. 175.
9 Ibid. 205.
11 Ibid. 6.
12 Ibid. 6.
they seem to accept the male domination that rests their own invisibility and their own confinement to the private sphere”.

It seems as if behind Mahmood’s arguments lies what has been called “postcolonial feminism” which is criticized for tending to ignore difference in degree when comparing women’s rights in liberal democratic societies and in non-liberal societies. Postcolonial scholars ignore also that not only the individuals’ or groups’ practice, but a country’s or a culture’s principles play a role. This is partly due to the fact that principles have a certain influence on many people’s factual behavior, and partly to the circumstance that individuals can use them to legitimize what they do. The principle of women’s right to choose what they want is presumably close to being generally accepted in liberal democratic countries, whereas this is not the case in countries in which liberal principles are not widespread.

Al-Qaeda’s modernity

This discussion on whether Islamists, be they supporters of either peaceful or violent jihad, are modern or not is neither new nor specifically about women. In a book entitled Modernitet og religion (Modernity and Religion) (2008) the Danish philosopher Hans-Jørgen Schanz stated that “It is a widespread misunderstanding to call Islamists modern”. He gave two examples from two scholars. The first one is the American sociologist of religion William Shepard (2004):

Radicals are quite modern . . . They are generally no less avid for modern material technology than secularists and modernists and make full use of modern methods of organization and communication. They form mass organizations and political parties and print and broadcast their propaganda. Today they make liberal use of the Internet. In fact, radical Islamism appears to have its greatest appeal to people with modern and particularly scientific and technical training and their leaders are usually not ulama but people with ‘secular’ training and careers.

“This view is really widespread” continued Schanz and gave the second example from the English political philosopher John Gray (2006):

‘Al Qaeda is an essentially modern organization’. It is modern not only in the fact that it uses satellite phones, laptop computers and encrypted websites. The attack on Twin Towers demonstrates that Al Qaeda understands that twenty-first century wars are spectacular encounters in which the dissemination of images is a core strategy . . . It is not only in its use of communication technologies that Al Qaeda is modern. So is its organization” 17

According to Schanz the concept of modernity has in these quotations lost its specificity as the concept exclusively concerns strategies of domination and mastery, especially of communicative type. 18 However, modernity, in his view, is a concept with four dimensions. Two of its dimensions, humans’ relations to each other and their relations to themselves play a constitutive role together with strictly pragmatic strategies of mastery and dominance. Additionally, these two types of relations are informed by respectively “rationality based norms and moral autonomy”. 19 Likewise, religion in modernity is a private affair and belongs to the private sphere. It is not an issue for the state or an imperative for a religious-political movement.

To characterize Islamists as modern would, in his eyes, be categorizing anybody who thinks it is fun to drive a car or that it is fascinating to go on the Internet as modern. However, the concept of modernity itself thus would lose its meaning and tend to be identical with fetishization of technique. The philosopher went on to say that one can as well then call Hitler modern, and thus overlook that he fought against modernity.

What is modernity?

The term modernity has a number of different meanings in different contexts and theories. By the term modernity, Schanz understands two different, but interrelated circumstances: modernity, partly, is a phase in history, namely from around 1750 through today encompassing Europe and USA, the major part of South America and parts of Asia. And it is partly characterized by an approach in and to life, where four

18 Ibid. 40-41.
19 Ibid. 41. In Danish: "Fornuftsbaserede normer og myndighed”. All translations from Danish are mine.
dimensions have decisive importance and should exist in certain forms so that we can talk about (have?) modernity. According to Schantz the four dimensions consist of humans’ relation respectively to nature, to each other, to itself and to God, the sacred or the absolute.\textsuperscript{20}

From approximately the middle of the 1700s the leading intellectuals and philosophers began to presume that everything which is important in the life of humans was historical, that is changeable. Vital aspects of social life could be objects for conscious human intervention with the aim of improving in the desirable direction.

Let’s take these dimensions one by one. Humans’ relation to nature should be desacralized, demythologized and without religious intervention, that is, thoroughly secularized and thus pragmatic.

Humans’ relation to each other should be determined by a separation between the private and the public. Moreover, the public sphere must be based on persistent endeavors to construct and realize rules for human association which is determined by generally substantiated, strictly humane, that is non-religious, principles.

Self-determination or autonomy and authority on the personal level should characterize humans’ relation to themselves. And this is, in principle, valid both in the public and the private spheres. Here lies a break with all the handed-down powers such as religion, tradition and historically handed-down authority.

Finally, two points concerning humans’ relation to the absolute, God or the sacred, should hold good: the relation should be voluntary, that is, determined by the individual, and furthermore, it should in principle assert itself only in the private sphere. However, the idea that religious practices should in principle take place in the private sphere does not by any means preclude the establishment of religious communities.

Let’s finish this short presentation of Schanz’s reflections on modernity with this caveat: to be able to speak about modernity, it is important to underline that the four dimensions should, first of all, be present altogether, and secondly, they should develop simultaneously. If one or several of the dimensions is absent, or one or several of them are suppressed, we do not have modernity but modernization.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. 12 ff.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. 14.
Alternatives to modernity

If Islamists, regardless whether they are violent or peaceful, are not modern, how can we then describe their relation to modernity? Can they be considered as supplements or alternatives to modernity? Are they in, but not of modernity?

Berger et al. tackled this question in the beginning of the 1970s. They put forward that the question of alternatives to modernity can be approached in terms of two opposites. One could understand modernity as an indivisible unity, and modernization as an inexorable destiny, in which case there are no alternatives at all. Or modernity could be seen as a freely manipulable complex of ingredients, in which case the packages of modernity could be taken apart and put together in new ways at will. They thought that both these positions were “patently untenable”. They stated that the debate should be on the parameters of choice, that is, “to determine when modernity can be manipulated and when it cannot, and what chances can be assigned to specific alternatives”.26

Neither Schanz nor Berger et al. are discussing the relation between Islam as such and modernity. However, both have strong reservations about the compatibility of modernity and “fundamentalist Islam” or Islamism. Schanz believes here there is an unequivocal conflict, and this is true no matter if Islamism appears as a religion or a state religion or a religious frame of reference for political movements.

He states that in the universe of fundamentalist Islam, the basic ideas of modernity are rejected except the ambition of modernization, that is development of secular mastery over nature and techniques for communication and social domination. He underlines that fundamentalists do not only reject them, they also fight them by all means, depending in which context the measures are taken.

Why does fundamentalism emerge in late modern societies?

The debate about whether Islamists are modern or not is not only a theoretical discussion with no ramifications for, for example, explaining why violent jihadism

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23 Ibid. 19.
24 Ibid. 19-20.
25 Ibid. 20.
26 Ibid. 20.
27 Schanz 2008: 106.
28 Ibid. 106.
emerges in modern societies. What is it that basically triggers supporters of Islamic State?

Berger et al. present some reflections on “fundamentalism” which can be useful to explain why violent and non-violent jihadi groups emerge in a late modern society such as Denmark. In summary, they maintain that the process of relativization triggered by pluralism in modernity results in anxiety. There seems to be a need for certainty among human beings, at least certainty about basic existential questions of life. This anxiety is widespread enough to guarantee a market for the purveyors of alleged certainties. The latter may be religious or secular in content. Fundamentalism purports to restore the sense of certainty. They observe that there are many potential recruits for movements that offer renewed or newly invented certainties, and they propose “fundamentalism” as a good category under which to subsume all such movements. Some are religious, and can be Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or atheist. What all these movements have in common, in their eyes, is a project of restoring the taken-for-granted quality of worldviews which pluralism has undermined. They stress that fundamentalism seeks to bring about an archaic mindset under modern conditions.29

Islamism in a late modern society such as Denmark takes inspirations from both counter-modern and demodernizing ideologies. As Berger et. al. point out, a paradox of great importance is at play: modernity is understood by some as liberating, and by others as that from which liberation is sought.30 Modernity has indeed, they claim, liberated human beings from narrow controls of family, clan, tribe or small community. It has opened up for the individual previously unheard-of options and avenues of mobility. However, they underline, these liberations have come at a high price: humans have ended up in a condition which they describe as “homelessness”. Counter-modern and demodernizing ideas and movements promise liberation from the many discontents of modernity. The demodernizing impulse seeks a reversal of the modern trends that have left the individual “alienated” and beset with the threats of meaninglessness.31 Therefore, modernization, counter-modernization and demodernization must be seen as concurrent processes.32

Both groups like Al-Qaeda and IS on the one side and peaceful fundamentalist movements on the other should be basically seen as counter-modernization movements. Ignoring this would lead to the lack of an important piece in the puzzle.

29 Ibid. 65.
30 Ibid. 195.
31 Ibid. 196.
32 Ibid. 189.