Islamist Rhetoric

Language and culture in contemporary Egypt

Jacob Høigilt

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A note on transliteration and translation

Transliteration has been kept to a minimum, on the assumption that those who are able to benefit from it can also read Arabic, and because no fine points of morphology or phonology are discussed anywhere in this work. Consequently, transliterating the many quotations from Arabic sources would be an unnecessary act of violence against a language and script which manage perfectly fine without the help of Latin letters. However, short bits of Arabic in the text, like names and expressions, have been transliterated, as have all book titles in Arabic. This is almost entirely for aesthetic reasons, since left-to-right and right-to-left scripts do not really enjoy each other's company on the same line of writing. In addition, there is the advantage that transliterating book titles and names enables readers who do not know Arabic to see which works and authors are being referred to at all times. Except in the cases where a non-scientific transliteration has become the norm (as for instance in 'Nasser', 'Sunni' and 'hadith'), I follow the norm of *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (*IJMES*), which is simple, but sufficient on account of the short segments of texts transliterated. Since *IJMES* tends to vary in its approach to alif-lam transcription, I have adopted the norm followed in the reference grammar of Arabic by Badawi, Carter and Gully (2004), but I do not inflect nouns in transliteration, and represent alif-lam as either *al-* or *-l*.

Even though this study is primarily intended for people who understand Arabic, I hope also to reach a secondary audience consisting of all those with an interest in the relation between language and religious ideology. Therefore, all quotations in Arabic have been translated and put beneath the Arabic text. Even in the tables presenting grammatical analyses, I have included a literal word-for-word translation beneath the Arabic script. This makes the text more cumbersome to read, but it will hopefully enable readers who do not know the language to make sense of the arguments, even if certain rhetorical effects and semantic and syntactic points inevitably get lost in translated examples. In an attempt to retain the effects of style in the translation, the English translations are literal renderings of the Arabic and are not meant to be idiomatic, well-formed English sentences. I have been as faithful as possible to the wording, constituent order and punctuation of the Arabic texts, except where such a direct translation proved to result in hopelessly unreadable English. All translations are my own, except for Qur'ān quotations, which have been taken from Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall's translation (Pickthall 1953).

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1 Introduction

This book is an attempt at making sense of Islamism in Egypt from a linguistic point of view. It started with the idea of analysing critically the discourses of liberal Muslim thinkers and their Islamist counterparts to study the way language is put to use by different ideologies. My interest in this subject stemmed from the fact that the current intellectual climate in both Europe and the Arab world is characterized by what might be termed a war of ideas (between Islamism and secularism, liberalism and neo-conservatism) where printed texts play an important role. In Egypt, these conflicts have attracted much popular attention and have involved universities, the press, the Ministry of Culture and the courts.

My attention soon centred on the diversity of what Egyptians often call the Islamic trend (*al-tayyār al-islāmī*), a less restrictive term than the more regular label 'Islamism'. I was baffled by the vivid and seemingly chaotic panorama of Islamist tendencies that shape the public sphere in Egypt. I do not mean here the various overt signs of a growing preoccupation with religion, like the prayer mark on the forehead of more and more men, the throngs of people gathering on pavements outside mosques at prayer time, and the many clothes shops selling 'Islamic wear' for women. My confusion resulted not from the eclectic blend of pop culture and an Islamic ethos on the streets of Cairo, but from the bewildering array of actors, conflicts, convergences and analyses in and of the Islamist trend. People who presumably shared more or less the same religious outlook, such as TV preachers, renegade shaykhs from al-Azhar and officials from the Muslim Brotherhood, were often in public skirmishes with each other.

In a much-cited volume about media in the Muslim world, Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson state that '[a] new sense of public is emerging throughout Muslim-majority states and Muslim communities elsewhere. It is shaped by increasingly open contests over the authoritative use of the symbolic language of Islam' (Eickelman and Anderson 2003: 1).

Observing the pulsating and heterogeneous Islamist scene in Egypt and the pundits' disagreement about what it all meant, I could not help asking if what is being shaped, or rather transformed, is not merely the public, but the whole Islamic field itself, driven first and foremost by a multi-faceted Islamic awakening that is to some extent self-contradictory. In particular, I was struck by the great stylistic and rhetorical variety in Islamist discourse, as well as the convergences and differences

it exhibits in relation to other discourses in both Egypt and Europe. It occurred to me that one among many ways of making sense of contemporary Islamism in Egypt is to explore the different kinds of rhetoric through which it is expressed. Consequently, I ended up writing a book mainly about the rhetoric of the Islamic trend in Egypt, with a view to understanding its complexity rather than criticizing its ideology. The discourses of three prominent Islamist figures were singled out for analysis: Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, ʿAmr Khālid and Muḥammad ʿImāra.

This, then, is a study in discourse. The term 'discourse' here means two things: first, the material fact of written texts. My source material *is* discourse in that it is composed of books written in some form of Modern Written Arabic, and, by studying the linguistic structure of these texts, the book aims at contributing to a better understanding of the Islamic field in contemporary Egypt. In addition to this meaning, I think of discourse in a more abstract sense: as a way of representing and organizing social relations and institutions. The presupposition I work from when thinking of discourse in this sense is that Islamic authors engage implicitly in cultural politics by their way of writing. Consequently, by studying not only what is said, but also *how* it is said, we can understand better what these texts do in their social and political context.

The epistemological framework for this inquiry is a moderate social constructionism based on the supposition that language use not only mirrors but also affects social reality. Specifically, the ideas and methodology of the British linguist Michael Halliday are central throughout the book. Halliday conceives of language as a 'social semiotic', by which he means 'a system of meanings that constitutes the "reality" of the culture' (Halliday 1978: 123).

In other words, the social system (or the 'culture') can be represented as a construction of meanings – as a semiotic system – and language is one way among many of exchanging these meanings (ibid.: 189). It follows from this that there is no clear line between what language is and how it is used; 'all language is language-in-use, in a context of situation, and all of it relates to the situation' (ibid.: 33).

This book focuses on the links between the 'language', 'construction of meanings' and 'situations' pertaining to the Islamic field in Egypt. More specifically, it revolves around the language use of different kinds of Islamists, who see it as their task to achieve an Islamic reform or awakening in Egypt and the Arab world. Although it is expressed in various terms and through various strategies, this is the shared aim of the authors examined here. They all call for religious reform, whether on the personal, social or political level.

At this point, I should specify what I mean by the term 'Islamism'. A more detailed account of Egyptian Islamism is presented in Chapter 3; presently, I want to clarify how I conceive of this phenomenon in a general way. Islamism in this work is not defined exclusively in terms of organized political activity, exemplified by organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the call for the implementation of *sharīʿa*, as is usual in many contemporary works about the subject. While it may often be useful to restrict the analysis to political movements and processes, such an approach leaves out important social and cultural elements

that are central to the development and current form of Islamism. Salvatore and Eickelman (2004: 14) have made a pertinent observation in this regard: 'It is easy to think of such movements primarily in terms of their political influence. At their base, however, they appeal to their respective constituencies through their implicit and explicit invocation of shared moral understandings of social action.'

In line with this way of approaching the phenomenon, I think of Islamism in a wide sense, as a context more than a specific movement. Gregory Starrett has formulated the idea in an eloquent way:

> The Islamic Trend, as I have labeled the wide range of cultural and social phenomena that include specifically political movements, is extremely complex. It ranges from the Islamization of the publishing industry and the increase in enrollment in Islamic studies programs, to the odious violence of terrorist organizations with scripture-based ideologies and the sophisticated legal maneuvering of Islamist lawyers within the court system. (...) [T]he Trend has moved beyond the level of a 'movement' to become one of the most important contexts in which everyday life is lived.
>
> (Starrett 1998: 191–192)

What ideas this context consists of and the restrictions it imposes on public discourse are central concerns in Chapter 3. I should make it clear that my aim is not to describe and analyse Islamism as a system of thought, in part because excellent work along such lines has been carried out already (e.g. Al-Azmeh 1996; Euben 1999). Instead, I look at relationships between actors who can be labelled 'Islamist' and their relationship to other ideologies and communities, all from a linguistic point of view.

Islamism is intimately bound up with the question of orthodoxy in current Islamic thought, since, as Albrecht Hofheinz states, 'orthodox is the normative order that is dominant in a particular society' (Hofheinz 1996: 13). This concept needs to be mentioned here, since the object of analysis is texts that contribute, in different ways, to define specific views of Islamic thought and practice. This is a highly political and dynamic process; Islamic orthodoxy should not be understood as a static set of doctrines integral to Islam. As Talal Asad writes:

> [O]rthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship – a relationship of power. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace *incorrect* ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy.
>
> (Asad 1993: 15)

Consequently, orthodoxy can mean different things in different places. In Egypt, the Islamic scholars (ulama) gradually became more integrated in the public sphere and became a socially and politically vocal group at the same time as Islamic activism was on the rise. I argue that recent decades have seen a convergence between Islamism and orthodoxy, where the Islamic scholars have an important

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role – shown, for example, by the prominent place that fatwa-seeking and professional religious advice and instruction have gained in the public sphere, especially in the mass media.

It has become clear that practices pertaining to the domains of both Islamic thought and Islamic behaviour are subject to all the regulatory processes mentioned by Asad in the quote above (the upholding of correct practices and the condemnation of incorrect ones, etc.) in politically and socially salient ways. They are administered by a highly diverse group of public Islamist figures and institutions that nevertheless share the aim of islamizing Egyptian society by way of a golden mean: centrism, or *wasaṭiyya*, a term that harks back to the Qur'ān's mention of a middle nation (Qur'ān 2: 143). Whether their targets are Islamic militants, the repressive state or liberal thinkers, these centrists see it as their task to defend an Islamic awakening (*ṣaḥwa*) that stays true to a perceived correct practice and is at the same time able to meet the challenges of contemporary society.

Perhaps as a consequence of this fact, the Islamic awakening is usually talked about in the singular by both actors and observers. Although such generalization is sometimes useful, it tends to obscure the many different ways in which Islamism is spread in society. My own disorientation when coming to Egypt stemmed exactly from the many actors and voices that met me in the limited domain of printed text about Islamic reform, and not least the various interpretations of these actors that I came across among observers. Treating Islamism as one undifferentiated entity runs the risk of blurring the vision and misunderstanding not only the positions of the different actors in the Islamic field, but also the processes going on there. Perhaps now more than ever, it is important to arrive at nuanced and sound conclusions about religious phenomena in a world that is becoming steadily more attentive to the role of religion in society and politics. Accordingly, my aim is not to analyse the systems of thought underlying Islamism as such. It is restricted to the less ambitious task of examining how various Islamist writers carve out roles for themselves and their readership, and how their textual strategies contribute to positioning them in the field of Islamic thought. My way of approaching this task is through a detailed linguistic analysis of selected textual features in written texts.

Two general sets of questions inform the analysis in the pages that follow. The first is to do with the different dimensions of Islamism, studied from the vantage point of rhetoric. In short, what persuasive tools are used to get this ideology across to people? Two points in particular are explored: the ways in which Islamist authors use pronominal reference and mood structures to build different kinds of relations with their readers; and their use of grammatical devices to construct images of Islam, Muslims and the 'others'. Among the wide variety of possible discourses, I singled out three that are associated with different discourse communities: traditional religious guidance as found in the writings of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī; the books of ʿAmr Khālid, who is the leading figure among the 'new preachers' in Egypt and the Arab world; and the works of Muḥammad ʿImāra, who is a representative of centrist, intellectual Islamism. All three discourses are central in contemporary

Islam and the Arab world, but, compared to their importance in the cultural sphere, attention to what they actually say and how they say it has been small in Europe and the USA. This lack of attention is one of the reasons why I have chosen to quote extensively from their texts and provide English translations of all the quotes. In this way, both Arabic speakers and observers of the Arab world who do not know Arabic can get to know discourses that are shaping current Arab practices and conceptions of Islam, together with an analysis that situates these discourses within the wider cultural and religious sphere in Egypt and the Arab world.

This leads us to the second set of questions. What are the social and political roles of these discourses and their proponents in contemporary Egypt? Can the differences between their uses of persuasive tools tell us anything about the dynamics of Islamism as a phenomenon in Egypt? Are there significant ideological differences even within non-violent, mainstream Islamism? Within this cluster of questions, two lines of inquiry are focused on. The first concerns the Islamist attitude to the 'other', represented by both the West and liberal and/or secular Arab tendencies. This subject has been a central one in studies of Islamist ideology since Foucault's impact on studies of ideology and Edward Said's Foucault-inspired criticism of Orientalism (Said 1995). In cultural terms, the consensus is that Islamism in its various forms presupposes an absolute and essential difference between an authentic 'self' based in Islam and a corrupted and corruptive 'other' that has been associated with Western thought and society since the early 1900s. Thus, Islamist discourse takes the form of 'confronting the Other' (Ismail 1998), to the extent where it constitutes an 'Orientalism in reverse' (al-Azm 1984). My aim is to take a detailed look at the extent to which and how the 'other' is approached and defined in the three discourses in question here. Can any differences be discerned and, if so, what is their significance? The second line of inquiry addresses the complexity of the Islamist scene in Egypt and the Arab world. While it is relatively unproblematic to claim that all Islamists subscribe to basically the same religious *doxa*, there are obvious differences between them regarding their social positions and subject matters. The question is then how a study of their rhetoric can make sense of the tension between their shared ideology and different social positions and, as a result, refine our understanding of contemporary Islamism.

In addition to these two practical aims, the book attempts to contribute new insight on the theoretical level. It applies a theory and methodology that are relatively new to the field of Arabic text linguistics on texts that have been little explored from a linguistic viewpoint previously. By this approach I hope to be able to compare my results with previous research on Arabic discourse and society, and to add to our knowledge of contemporary Arabic rhetoric generally. At the general level of discourse studies, the Arab world and the connections there between discourse and society remain surprisingly understudied, and this is also the case with modern, critical text linguistic analyses of religious discourse. Instead, fields like gender, politics, racism, education and institutional language have received much attention in discourse studies. On this background, the present work will hopefully show that religious discourse is a vital and interesting field for discourse studies.

These comments situate the book at the intersection between contemporary Islamic studies and text linguistics, or Arabic text linguistics, to be specific. Short and selective surveys of both fields are necessary to indicate the potential usefulness of this book in relation to them.

The field of Arabic text linguistics and rhetoric is not a wholly new one. In fact, the latter discipline has a long and rich tradition. The Arab rhetoricians developed amazingly sophisticated and subtle concepts about language use. In contrast to the grammarians, they 'systematically interpreted the formal and semantic properties of utterances as related to the communicative functions they fulfil in the interaction between speaker (*mutakallim*) and addressee (*muxāṭab*)' (Bohas *et al.* 1990: 121).

Despite its merits and intrinsic interest, however, classical Arabic rhetoric is not a suitable analytical tool for the problem at hand. The most important reason for this is that, perhaps as the inevitable result of its evaluative character and religious source, it soon became distinctly normative. This is a tendency that seems to have persisted in modern approaches to Arabic rhetoric (e.g. Abdul-Raof 2006), where the concern is mostly pedagogical: how to speak and write effectively. It should also be mentioned that there exists another tradition, less known, of oratory art, namely *'ilm* (or *fann*) *al-khaṭāba*, which is associated with preaching. This is an area of research that has recently received some attention (Gaffney 1994 and, to a greater extent, Halldén 2001 and 2005), but, since we are concerned with written books here, I will not delve into the issue of preaching.

Accordingly, we have to make recourse to the intersection between modern Arabic linguistics and discourse studies. Modern Arabic linguistics is a well-established discipline with many subfields, but rather scant attention has been given to text linguistics or discourse analysis. In an overview from 1990, Mushira Eid identifies only two works in Arabic discourse analysis, and neither of them is concerned with the relationship between discourse and social structures or ideology (Eid 1990: 26). Eid's overview was actually the start of the series *Perspectives on Arabic Linguistics*, which continues today, but, barring the obvious exceptions of diglossia and dialect studies, which are anyway issues in *spoken* language, relatively little has appeared in this series about discourse and society.

An updated overview of the field is given in the informative entry 'Discourse analysis' by Ahmed Fakhri in the new *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics* (Versteegh *et al.* 2006). This entry shows that discourse studies is still a relatively new field in Arabic linguistics, although important advances have been made in some areas. Fakhri makes a useful distinction between two general kinds of Arabic discourse analysis. On the one hand, there are studies that deal with

> how sentences are put together to form larger chunks of discourse and with the identification, description, and explanation of systematic patterns of discourse organization. On the other hand, there are studies which investigate how language is used in social interaction and attempt to relate aspects of the structure of discourse to contextual factors such as the purpose of the interaction or interlocutors' traits, shared knowledge, and role relationships.
>
> (Fakhri 2006: 647)

The present book falls within the second group of discourse studies. However, the work on discourse organization is also relevant to the present study, so I will give a brief survey of both research directions. Studies of text organization have been made largely, but not exclusively, in the context of teaching Arabic as a foreign language (TAFL), where Mahmoud al-Batal has done important work on cohesion (e.g. al-Batal 1990). Continuing this trend, the Swedish scholar Heléne Kammensjö has examined discourse connectives in spoken Standard Arabic (2005). Their concern is discourse organization as such and not the connections between discourse and society, and thus their analyses are given to taxonomies and descriptions of language structures rather than the connections between language and society.

The relevance of this kind of work therefore lies not so much in its subject matter as in the fact that it explicitly and successfully draws on Functional Grammar as a theoretical framework to explain the function of discourse connectives in Arabic from a communicative perspective. Functional Grammar, developed largely by Michael Halliday (e.g. Halliday 2004), is also an important part of the theoretical and conceptual framework in this study, and will be presented thoroughly in the next chapter. Here, it suffices to say that Functional Grammar is concerned with not only how grammar organizes a message textually, but also how it organizes experience of the world and creates interpersonal relations. In this connection mention should be made of Basil Hatim's studies on translation and contrastive rhetoric (e.g. Hatim 1997), since he approaches Arabic discourse from a Functional and discourse analytical perspective. Whereas al-Batal, Kammensjö and Hatim deal with the textual function of discourse, I focus on the ways in which the grammar of texts contributes to construing the world and creating social relationships.

In this way, the present study is an attempt to expand the application of Functional Grammar in Arabic and investigate it to understand how the use of language constitutes culture. The latter question is still largely unexplored territory, but some previous studies do exist. For example, Barbara Johnstone's pioneering study *Repetition in Arabic Discourse* (Johnstone 1991) analyses parataxis and repetition in persuasive discourse and connects the linguistic aspects of the texts to the political and social realities of modern Arab societies. Her analysis will be the object of discussion later; here, I merely wish to mention Johnstone's book as an early and original example of a discourse analysis of Arabic texts that connects language structures and social reality.

More recently, Niloofar Haeri's study of the modernization of classical Arabic in Egypt provides, among other things, an excellent account of the social meanings inherent in the use of and attitudes to classical Arabic (Haeri 2003). Haeri's approach is to a large extent ethnographic. Like Yasir Suleiman's study of language and political conflict (Suleiman 2004), her contribution revolves around the issue of culture and language in a wide sense, taking as its object of inquiry '[h]ow the Arabic language shapes and is in turn shaped by its various cultural contexts' (Haeri 2006: 527). Haeri and Suleiman focus on social, political and linguistic structures. By concentrating on text analyses and individual rhetorical strategies, the present book hopefully complements these analyses.

Despite the fact that the source material is composed of long texts – books and booklets – the analysis is based on qualitative methods. This is because of the creative possibilities they give for combining insights about a text's message, the linguistic features prominent in getting that message across, and the socio-religious and political context in which the text functions. My ambition is to tread an analytical middle ground between an analysis that uses linguistic data to state universal hypotheses about Arabic rhetoric and an analysis where the importance of the linguistic component is secondary to the sociopolitical context. In this way, I hope to contribute to a critical understanding of religiously and politically salient discourses in the Egyptian public sphere. However, my main aim is to increase and refine the understanding of Islamism as such, not to unmask and resist its possibly coercive or oppressive discourse.

This aim connects the book to the wider research area on Islamism, particularly Islamism in the Arab context. The body of literature on this subject is vast, the majority of works (and the most well-known ones) dealing with such issues as the political theories of Islamist thinkers and organizations and the structure and role of such organizations in the political process.[1] This work is vital to our understanding of Islamism, but the focus on mass movements and violence that is central to policy makers and thus also in much academic work and in the general public sphere leads to a relative ignorance of the many facets of Islamism, the diverse scenes and ways in which it operates, and the wide variety of agents and even ideologies that are subsumed under this general heading. The relevant context for the analysis carried out in this book is not the political process or social movement theory, but rather the general mood in the Egyptian public sphere, especially concerning culture and religious questions. These questions of course impinge on politics and other areas of society at times, and that is also when they receive some attention in media and research outside Egypt. The iconic example today is the forcible divorce of the Islamic thinker and Cairo University teacher Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd from his wife, on the grounds that his intellectual work supposedly showed him to be an unbeliever. The couple live today in the Netherlands, since they fear for their life in Egypt.

Apart from the occasional scandal and outrage, the cultural field has not attracted the same kind of attention that has been bestowed on Islam in the political process. Nevertheless, there is by now a fair amount of scholarship about Islam as a cultural force from which the present book departs and to which it is my ambition to make a small contribution. An important part of the background for the present book is the investigations into the intellectual genealogy of Islamism and its epistemology and cultural ideology. The research by scholars such as Aziz Al-Azmeh (1996), Roxanne Euben (1999) and Hamid Enayat (1982), to name some of the most interesting ones, has illuminated the ideological nature of Islamism and its relation to other political and cultural ideologies past and present. Some of the conclusions of this research are treated in the presentation of Islamic ideology and the public sphere in Chapter 3. Presently, it suffices to note that these studies show the importance in Islamist thought of cultural authenticity and communitarian ideals, which both foster scepticism against liberal culture. These traits are important

parts of the discourses under consideration here and consequently impinge on the rhetoric of the writers in different ways.

While no detailed linguistic study of how this ideology is enunciated has as yet been published, Salwa Ismail (1998, 2003) offers detailed descriptions and incisive criticism of Islamism's role as an order of discourse in contemporary Egypt. Ismail defines Islamist politics in terms of social control and hegemony rather than struggle for government and state, and shows that, in this sense, it is as strong as ever in Egypt. Defining islamization as the enforcement of public morality in the name of religious orthodoxy (2003: 81), she states that

> The Egyptian government has attempted to contain the militants by providing an alternative Islamic position, one which is also grounded in 'orthodoxy'. A gradual process of islamization of state institutions and the public space has ensued, with the cultural arena located at the centre.
>
> (Ibid.: 63)

Other approaches offer additional points of departure for our investigation. In a fascinating journalistic account of Islam's changing and increasing relevance in Egyptian public and private life, Geneive Abdo (2000) has documented how a variety of actors and socioeconomic strata participate in propelling Islam to the forefront of public consciousness. The primary merit of Abdo's work is that she was among the first to emphasize just how comprehensive the cultural drift towards Islamism is in contemporary Egypt, lending voice to a number of central actors and evaluating them critically. However, Abdo's account suffers from two weaknesses that should be mentioned here. First, she insists on creating a dichotomy between a 'secular' state and an Islamist popular movement, with the Muslim Brotherhood at the forefront. This is in my view a false dichotomy. As Gregory Starrett states in his study of Islam and schooling in Egypt, commentators who insist on this dichotomy 'are (...) constructing an astounding fiction: that Egypt's government is a secular one. Although this fiction is useful for purposes of political convenience and Western self-definition, it makes understanding of the current political tensions in Egypt impossible' (Starrett 1998: 16).

The struggle between the Islamist opposition and the state is about power, corruption, mismanagement and political oppression more than culture and religion. Furthermore, the aim of the Egyptian government, as well as of many liberal Muslim thinkers, is not to neutralize religion, as is implied by the term 'secularism', but to put it to a different use from that which the Islamists want.

The second critical remark I have about Abdo's account can be directed against much of the otherwise interesting and stimulating scholarship about Islamism today. Perhaps as the result of striving for generalization and (admittedly useful) categorization, there is a tendency to lump a lot of rather different actors together under ideological labels. Abdo treats a number of highly different phenomena as belonging fundamentally to the same ideological and social practice. A less sweeping term than 'Islamism', but one which nevertheless comprises a lot of different actors, is 'centrism', which has been the object of some interest recently (Baker

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