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REFORM AND RESURGENCE: THE TRANSFORMATION OF ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

ABSTRACT

This paper studies the development in the thought and praxis of Islamic movements that aim to revive a political system governed by Islamic law. Post-Caliphate Islamic movements – the subject of the current study – have undergone recent reforms in thought, approach, and even branding since the Arab Spring. Notwithstanding the movements' legal and theological diversity, the author argues that they share common features of reform characterized by (a) appeal to public opinion and grassroots work; and (b) willingness to work with groups outside their movement. These reforms were shaped in tandem with and in reaction to the War on Terror, the Arab Spring, and the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan. The author argues that these changes gave rise to dynamic reform in the latest generation of Islamic movements, leading to substantive revisions in their approach (*manhaj*) to achieving Islamic change. Despite tightening proscription and censorship, the author argues that the fruit of these reforms has been a resurgence in the form of highly efficient and creative collaboration between movements. Examples studied include collaboration between the Muslim Brothers (MB) and Hizb ut Tahrir in the West, and between former-al-Qaeda and MB affiliates in Syria. The author estimates these strategies – following a period of political failure and internal skepticism – have precipitated a resurgence that makes the future of Islamic movements highly potent, despite resulting in a dilution of each group's identity and possible decline in membership. As a result of this trajectory, this study argues for the need to theorize contemporary Islamic movements beyond historical categories that have fossilized in Western academia, and often do not capture the dynamic, fluidity and comprehensiveness of Islamic struggle. This study utilizes a mixed methodology, including archival analysis and intellectual genealogy.

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Introduction: Identifying the Movements

The classification of contemporary Islamic movements has become a truism in Islamic Studies literature. Ranging from the sociology of religion to Islamic intellectual history and political science, there is a tendency to problematize, study, and understand Muslim social movements and institutions as autonomous and monolithic schools, institutions, and intellectual leanings. There is a simple rationale for this – several movements themselves portray and understand their thought and praxis within the framework of their movement. In this regard, a variety of Muslim social organizations are centred around the concept of *bay'a* (pledge of allegiance), a practice with Prophetic origins serving as a strong social indicator of group allegiance (Salahuddin 1986).[1] This is, interestingly, the case across various unrelated movements, including Sufi Orders (*turuq*) which require *bay'a* to the Shaykh, political parties like Hizb-Ut-Tahrir imitating the pledge of allegiance of the rightly guided caliphs, and Mujahideen[2] pleading obedience to the leader of an armed group within a military context.[3] The existence of such practices, in addition to groups' self-portrayal as intellectually and logistically autonomous understandably undergirds the literatures' concern with studying their dynamics and trajectories.

Another reason for the preponderance of movement-based classifications relates to the academic observer's understanding of those groups and purposes. These assumptions are inextricably linked to the political and ideological motivations of the observer, and ultimately the purpose behind the production of knowledge. As I have previously shown in my research on Mujahideen for example, there is an especially strong tendency in the field to study armed groups with the objective of eliminating the subject of the study, thus leading to overgeneralizing social phenomena and denial of the subject's thought any precedence in the premodern tradition.[4] In this regard, several scholars have observed a highly problematic phenomenon across the field wherein researchers project their preconceived notions of Islam – and especially a division between liberal 'good' Muslim and illiberal 'bad' Muslim – into their portrayal of both contemporary and premodern Muslims (Siddiqui 2020: 6). In the study of Muslim social movements, furthermore, scholars like Farid Hafez (2014, 2017) have critiqued the use of political parties and even academics' use of unscientific conspiracies of a 'Trojan horse' in insinuating ulterior political

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1   That is, in the Khaldunian sense of '*asabiyya*, where the *bay'a* formalizes '*asabiyya* required for the constitution of society around a religious-political system, including in non-Muslim societies (Ibn Khaldūn 1958: Ch. 3, pt. 27).
2   My choice of "Mujahid(in)" to "Jihadist(s)" is made deliberately to avoid the systematic misconceptions that jihadism constitutes a definable school within contemporary Islam, which incorrectly assumes jihad lies at the centre of their Muslim identity. See: Darryl Li (2020: 10), Islam (2023a).
3   The *bay'a*, despite remaining standard in articulation, varies vastly in its practical scope and type of authority (Malik 2023: 188).
4   That is, in addition to assuming their motivations and even personality traits, such as being driven by blind rage or 'nihilistic violence'. See: Islam (2023a, 2023b).

motives behind ordinary Muslims living in the West. The line between academic work and Islamophobia becomes even more blurred when studying the role of this 'research' in serving as a blank cheque for the surveillance state to continue and expand its violations against Muslims living in their borders and internationally.[5]

The neocolonial state – with these elements in Western academia as its principal witness – has unwittingly served its ever-expanding power to control and eliminate Muslims around the world despite the passing of over two decades since 9/11, and one decade since the rise of ISIS. This observation ushers the important question of how these biases impact the academy's portrayal of Muslim movements. Perhaps more importantly – and the central concern of this paper – is the question of how the Ummah's spiritual and political disenfranchisement has caused Islamic movements to reform, adapt and revive their projects in pursuit of unity.

Following the deposition of the Caliphate in 1924, Pankhurst as well as Hassan have meticulously documented the spiritual and political turmoil experienced across the Muslim world (Pankhurst 2013: 162, Hassan 2016: 184–216). The caliphate, viewed as a bastion for political unity, Islamic legitimacy, and an essential component of Islam as a way of life, became the primary pursuit—or at least the final objective — of diverse Muslim groups, ranging from political parties to revolutionary militias. Most importantly, this remains a central priority for many Muslims, despite the popular decline and failure of such groups since their post-caliphate establishment. These include the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb Ut Tahrir, and Al-Qaeda; three groups commonly studied in the literature and which are to different extents largely responsible for the formulation of post-caliphate Islamic political thought – including the drivers behind the Arab Spring (see, for example: Pankhurst 2013).

It is my central contention in this paper that despite an official decrease and even erasure of these movements – what some have described as "burnout" (Aboushady 2023: 131) – including political-military failure and decline in membership, such perceived failure is in fact reminiscent of significant reform and revival across Muslim groups after the failed Arab Spring. Furthermore, it is highly plausible that these changes were not observed precisely because the literature, in a form of selection bias, has largely not looked outside the defining lines of these old movements. Specifically, I argue that two important factors are behind this new praxis – a reformed quid pro quo – defined by ideological reform, social and logistical adaptability, and cross-movement alliances. Firstly, it is possible to observe a significant intellectual trend in shifting towards local, grassroots levels of organization across groups, strengthening their effectiveness despite decreasing the reach of their global message. Secondly, there is an increasing tendency to form new initiatives – and not full-fledged

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5   Most recently, UK MP Michael Gove released a highly controversial report, providing an expanded definition of extremism, suggesting that Muslim advocacy groups may be investigated for promoting extremism. CAGE International (March 13, 2024).

groups – allowing for the dual combination of cross-movement specialization and inter-movement collaboration without the social cost of severing ties with existing movements. To study these exciting developments key to the future of global Islamic thought, I refer to several minor case studies where these patterns can be observed, discussed in the following sections.

Understanding Islamic Movements: Goals, Ideology and Praxis

The post-caliphate period was marked by a state of spiritual and political dispossession. Its subsequent replacement with the modern state system through colonial imposition and rapid modernization and secularization uprooted deep-seated Muslim societies, including systems of education, law and adjudication, local forms of government and the role of Islamic institutions, penetrating even the most deep-seated normative values and communal ties (see: Asad 205–256, and Moumtaz 2021: 31–68 on the waqf system, Hallaq 2013: 1–19 on the modern state). Given the enormity of sociopolitical change, this transitional period expectedly gave rise to several 'Islamiscizing' movements centred around several interconnected goals in pursuit of 'preserving', 'reviving' and 're-establishing' Islam as the central frame of reference. Several of these movements were analyzed in detail in Reza Pankhurst's study on Islamic political organizations, which in the literature have formed the staple set of movements studied in political science literature. All of these movements are united around a central goal, despite the diversity in their articulation, theorization and method of implementation. Effected by post-caliphate dispossession, filling the spiritual-political gap through the revival of its central properties – including conceptions of Islamic justice and political unity – lies at the centre of these movements (Pankhurst 2013: 191–208).

The common identifying feature of post-caliphate Islamic movements is the ultimate aim of reviving Islam as the standard of reference – epistemologically, legally, socially, and normatively. As Sayyid theorizes in his theorization of a post-colonial caliphate, the defining characteristic of any such Islamic movement is to make Islam the central signifier. In the words of Sulaiman: "It is the privileged signifier of totality, which makes possible the closure and coherence of Islamic meanings and truths." (2018: 149). In an interesting parallel, this argument bears similarity to Talal Asad's (2009) anthropological argument that Islam must be studied and understood as a tradition derived from its primary revelatory sources, despite the plurality of interpretations and even greater diversity in social implementation. My argument vis-à-vis this study's thesis is that neither the diversity of interpretation nor the movements' coopting of colonial discourse or culture detract from their commonality as fundamentally grounded in Islam as the only legitimate source of knowledge, discourse and power. Importantly, I am not interested – unlike Shahab Ahmed (2016) or Wael Hallaq (2013), for instance – in the value-neutral judgement of premodern Islam, nor a rejection of the authenticity of Islam post-modernity. For the purposes of this study, I am specifically concerned with the way Islam as both

a tradition and (de-)legitimizing discourse has been articulated in similar ways across movements, even where movements may adopt different interpretive frameworks.

Furthermore, in addition to groups that are explicit in political affiliation, it is important to not mistakenly reify a categorization between 'political' and 'apolitical' Islamic movements. Although the revival of the caliphate may be explicitly clear for Hizb-Ut-Tahrir, for instance, it is also the case that pro-government Sufi Orders, like the Turkish İsmailağa *cemaat*, are profoundly political and highly active both in lobbying existing political elites and in articulating a vision for reviving the caliphate in the form of a centralized political authority.[6] Given the inconsistencies brought by insisting on isolating certain groups and schools, it is necessary – and especially pertinent for the current study – to move beyond simplistic categorizations. This study actively considers the role of multiple movements and intellectual trends influencing each other, and the possibility of articulating unique sociopolitical aims as part of an Islamic vision overall defined by another quality – including personal spirituality (as in the case of Sufism), grassroots organization, religious education and armed resistance.

I make these qualifications notwithstanding, of course, while acknowledging the existence of movements as often self-sustaining, coherent articulations of Islam, and often deeply influenced by modernity and the modern state. The colonial period witnessed the launching of the Muslim Brotherhood founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928 – an active political party with branches across the Muslim world, sister political parties, and a paramilitary wing (Soage and Franganillo 2010: 39–42, Pankhurst 2013: 63–70). Hizb Ut-Tahrir, founded by the Muslim jurisconsult, Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani in 1953, is an elite-focused movement concerned with theorization and reimplementation of the caliphate, advocating for non-violent means of political change and actively recruiting leaders of political elites in the Muslim world (Pankhurst 2016). Al-Qaeda – perhaps the hardest to pin down – was first founded under Osama bin Laden in the late 1980s, and has had a strong presence in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, Somalia, Mali, Yemen, and Chechnya, among other regions, and currently leads several active insurgencies.[7] In addition to these three strongly-defined movements, there are additional spheres of influence that pervade the identity-formulation and praxis of Muslims in local contexts – often in ways that break isolated conceptions developed in the literature, and which are important to understand to theorizing the future of Islamic movements. Sufism, as defined in particular orders (*turuq*) and an interpretive complex, has heavily influenced and sustained groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and its sister

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6   On the increasingly political nature of Turkish religious movements, see: Özdalga (2010: 69–91); on government-aligned Sufi movements, see: Cankal (2021: 141–163).
7   Darryl Li (2023) in his analysis of Al-Qaeda's founding document mentions the unclear origins of what was initially referred to as a 'base', and later conceptualized by the American government into a coherent and targetable group to justify foreign military intervention and the expansion of state coercive structures.

organizations, including most famously the AK Party in Turkey (see: Kenkins 2020: 155–169). In contrast, Salafism as a hermeneutical phenomenon is partly theorized as scripturalism, including in its opposition to religious innovation (*bid'ah*) and rejection of participation in democratic institutions, even where there is no discernible influence or connection to Wahhābism (Islam 2024). The existence of diverse articulations of Islam as a frame of reference within a given movement lies at the core of understanding the possibility of a post-movement Islam.

Reviving Islam in the West: Grassroots Initiatives and Intellectually Diverse Organizations

In the 1990s, a new generation of Muslims living in the West witnessed a unique revival of Muslim movements with a global outlook. The Iranian Revolution (1979), the return of Mujahideen from Afghanistan (post-1989) and Bosnia (post-1995) were arguably critical events in defining the outlook and revival of Islamic thought and praxis, in addition to the minority identity of Muslims living in a multicultural and Islamically diverse social context. Subsequently, the increasing migration of Muslims, including global community leaders and scholars of global Muslim movements often persecuted in their home countries created a strong environment for Islamic *da'wah* (propagation, calling) and – at least in the eyes of those leaders themselves – a beacon for Islamic unity and justice in the Muslim world.[8] Taking the United Kingdom as an example, the thriving of this Islamic vision is abundantly clear; the 1990s saw the spread of multiethnic mosques and Muslim community centres, the proliferation of Hizb-Ut Tahrir in university campuses, and the establishment of Salafi scholarly circles and Islamic centres (McNeil-Willson 2022: 220–235, Dawood 2020).

Within the context of an increasing government concern with 'terrorism' (i.e., a global Islamic vision),[9] the War on Terror era gave global hegemons a blank cheque to alienate, persecute and kill Muslims without due process or concern for their human rights. Enabled through anti-terror legislation and even by executive order, the modern state proliferated in using its coercive power to uproot Muslim communities by targeting community leaders, scholars ('ulama), NGOs and advocacy organizations.[10] This decapitation of the Muslim com-

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8   This is demonstrated in the relative albeit limited autonomy of Muslim leaders in the West, with many Mujahideen leaders, and Islamic Party activists seeking asylum.
9   Some examples of this include the UK government's deportation of accused 'jihadist' ideologues, banning of non-violent Muslim groups like Hizb-Ut-Tahrir, Austria's banning of the Muslim Brotherhood as a "Terror Organization", and Germany's crackdown on pro-Palestine groups, Muslim associations, and even academic conferences (Kopty 2024, McElroy 2021).
10   These persecutory policies and specific case studies are meticulously documented by various advocacy and legal support organizations, including CAGE International. For compilations of such policies since 9/11, see CAGE International, "Reports and Publications", "Monthly Policy Briefings," https://www.cage.ngo/we-research.

munity from community leaders and organizations curtailed Muslims' ability to participate in this global vision, greatly reduced the explicit membership of Islamic groups, and unsurprisingly, an increased threat of radicalization resulting from spiritual dispossession and foreign intervention in Muslim countries.[11] Although I do not have primary data on members of Muslim groups dispossessed from the War on Terror, later research (15-20 years post-9/11) strongly suggests a significant decrease in the membership of groups like Hizb Ut Tahrir, and the rebranding of Islamic groups like the Muslim Brotherhood (Wali 2024: 1–12, Vidino 2019, Stemmann 2010: 57–72). Together, this evidence suggests a decrease in the self-identifying membership of Islamic movements and their resources, including research institutes, NGOs and mosques. Importantly, sociological research on the post-9/11 generation of Muslims emphasizes the spiritual and intellectual disenfranchisement and sense of hopelessness in response to Western intervention in the Muslim world (Nassar-McMillan et al. 2011: 38–47). I posit that at least part of this feeling results from the decentralization and reduced capacity of Muslim organizations resulting from unlawful government intervention.

Muslim movements in the West take a number of unique configurations and have diverse goals. Focusing on three particularly strong responses in a post-movement era, I explore some of these initiatives as part of larger trends.

The first cluster movements share several characteristics, including a heavy grassroots focus, targeting Muslim youth, content focus on personal development and basic Islamic education. These movements, all sprouting in universities and local Muslim communities, are the Canada-based i3 Institute ('Interactive Ilm Institute', est. 2016), UK-based Roots Academy, NYM (Nation of Young Muslims, est. 1999), and UK-founded iERA (Islamic education and research academy). These four organizations with relatively recent origins are founded by Islamic scholars – many born and raised in the West – with decades of experience in community engagement, traditional Muslim education, and professional development.[12] These include popular figures and community leaders with multiple affiliations, such as Abdurraheem Green, Mohammed Osta, Omar Suleiman and Hamza Tzortzis. As stated in the missions of these groups, local chapters aim to develop the youth of diverse Muslim communities

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11   While I have not found anthropological studies that show the absence of Islamic institutions and leadership as a driving factor behind radicalization, the absence of Islamic education and association with the community at large, alienation and loneliness, and police targeting/persecution are all known drivers behind young Muslims taking matters in their own hands. See: Aysha (2020: 33–44) and Lindekilde et. al. (2019). The lack of data on this is due to the fact that the literature disproportionately focuses on "pull" and not "push" factors of radicalization (Vergani et. al. 2020).

12   i3 Institute (n.d.), founded in 2016 by Shaykh Mohammed Osta; Roots Academy (n.d.) founded in 2021; iERA (n.d.) founded by Abdurraheem Green with the participation of senior figures in the US Muslim community, including Imam Omar Suleiman, also the founder of a non-denominational research group (Yaqeen Institute), and Nation of Young Muslims founded in 1999. See also: Baz (2016: 52–60).

in association with mosques and community centres (ibid.). Each of these orga-
nizations work under a decentralized structure, enabling and empowering local
leaders under a common intellectual framework. Interestingly, all groups—and
even others—resemble each other in their social structure and structuring the
movement around an Islamic vision.

The intellectual concerns and ultimate goals behind the organizations are
highly diverse, despite sharing a relatively broad vision. Some, such as iERA
and Roots, are more strongly focused on developing an intellectual framework
and confidence to practice and discuss Islam in the public sphere. Within the
context of living in Muslim societies, the chapters empowered by local lead-
ers take students through a comprehensive curriculum, including the basics of
Islam and even traditional sciences (theology, jurisprudence, and ethics). They
subsequently provide detailed readings and examinations of contemporary
ideologies and religions, including world religions, liberalism and capitalism,
and colonialism. In this regard, Islamic history of intellectual development,
epistemology, and the historical uprooting of Islamic society and values in the
colonial period is given special concern.[13] As mentioned by Bar, such acade-
mies are especially concerned with countering misconceptions and intellectual
pressures against Islam, including orientalism in universities, and atheism and
'moral relativism' associated with materialism (Baz 2016: 69–70).

Several moments are also comprehensive: NYM and i3, for instance, largely
focus on both intellectual modules and the establishment of physical commu-
nities and practices. The latter includes praying in congregation, organizing
youth retreats, and physical development and education.[14] Programs include
diverse and explicitly Islamic-framed excursions, such as 'sunnah sports' –
physical activities recommended in Prophetic teachings, including wrestling,
archery and horseback riding.[15] In this regard, similar to community frame-
works of non-Muslim communities, groups are very explicitly geared towards
providing skills and confidence for success as adults, including in the profes-
sional world and political activism. This is in addition to the aim of both in-
tellectual and community-oriented organizations of development participants
to "make a difference in their own lives, their Muslim community, and society
as a whole". (NYM.)

Although it is not possible to provide a substantive analysis of these move-
ments either intellectually or ethnographically, I mention these examples to
identify a larger trend of adaptation and resilience to the intellectual and legal
pressures lived by many Muslims in dispossessed societies. It is firstly significant

13   One example of this is i3's Reviving Roots Annual academic conference, in which
I had the pleasure of presenting. Among the many themes of Reviving Roots is its focus
on reviving traditional Islamic epistemology and articulating postcolonial visions for
Islamic unity. See: i3 Institute (2023) and Baz (2016: 133–146).
14   NYM ink, "Our Story"; Tom Facchine, Podcast with i3 Institute (Muslim Central
2023).
15   The project, titled "Camp Sunnah" aims to develop "leadership skills to better so-
ciety" and "talk about contemporary issues facing the Muslim world". NYM ink (n.d.).

that in response to external pressures, Islamic movements are highly reflexive and capable of adapting to new social contexts and addressing the local needs of the Muslim community. Importantly, these movements, despite significant adaptation to the context of minority communities, are not in any way disconnected from larger political and intellectual trends both in the country and the Muslim world. In this regard, it is important to note that the founders of these organizations, for instance, have for decades been in conversation with, and themselves even influenced by global Islamic movements (Tzortzis 2013, Baz 2016: 53–54).

Similarly, local leaders are not formed in a vacuum: the religious leaders and activists are almost without exception all highly involved in global Islamic traditions, including long-standing institutions like al-Azhar and Madinah University.[16] It is then unsurprising that the successful ambassadors produced by the academies are often heavily involved with the sociopolitical makeup of the countries in which they live, including political organization, protests and boycotts, and lobbying. It is thus unsurprising that organization leaders are co-affiliated with Muslim advocacy groups and scholars with connections to global Islamic movements.[17] Importantly, I am not claiming that these organizations are to be considered to be co-opted adaptations of larger Islamic movements, be it the Muslim Brotherhood or Hizb Ut Tahrir. My argument is in fact the opposite: the disillusionment towards global groups in addition to their reduced efficacy has given rise to a strong, organic socio-intellectual movement that is deliberately constructive and non-partisan. It is precisely this concern to theorize, call and act within a *new* political imagination that encourages the articulation of unique narratives, and even more unique forms of cooperation centered around the achievement of a normative vision outside the goals of a given group.

Essential to understanding the post-movement intellectual rapprochement between groups is a trend towards goal-based thought and action. The political failure and stigma associated with Muslim figures and organizations, resulting in mass-exoduses has counterintuitively given rise to new and arguably stronger configurations of Muslim unity. In the West, I hope to give the example of Ummatics, one of many research institutes that have contributed and developed to a post-movement phase of Islamic intellectual thought post-Arab Spring. Ummatics, founded very recently in 2022, is an international institute for Islamic thought centred on the mission of achieving "a comprehensive unity of Muslim societies." (Ummatics 2023). Based in the United States and founded by Khattab Chair of Islamic Studies at the University of Toledo with

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16   Briefly studying the educational backgrounds of the movement leaders often reveals strong training in the Islamic tradition, including in Deobandi Dar-ul-Ulooms, Madinah University and al-Azhar, or institutions founded by their alumni.
17   In response to various events, for example, it is not uncommon to see various event leaders co-sign with advocacy organizations, international movements leaders and local Islamic learning centres. See, for example: Muslim Matters (2017), 5Pillars (2020).

the help of several Muslim scholars and academics. The institute, focusing on the promotion of intellectual and political unity among the Ummah, focuses on analyzing global crises and simultaneously setting the foundation for a post-nation state conception of Islamic government.

Importantly, one of Ummatics' unique features is that it is adamantly non-partisan and does not represent or support any of the post-caliphate Islamic movements. In the Institute's words:

> Generations of Muslim scholars, institutions, and popular movements ... have defended the Islamic Umma against foreign threats and internal decay and advanced the cause of Muslim unity and Islamic flourishing. We stand on their shoulders and seek to constructively critique and build on their contributions, placing them in conversation with each other and with the broader bodies of contemporary human knowledge. (ibid.)

The innovativeness of Ummatics lies in its unique role of facilitating dialogue and cooperation beyond movements, focusing on goal-oriented solutions to conceptual problems. In this regard, Ummatics research papers include publications on various Sunni schools (*madhāhib*) on the concept of Imamate and visions of post-capitalist and post-state Islamic futures (Ayub 2023, Wahb 2023, Vahedi 2023). The institute, in effect, takes Muslims back to the theoretical drawing board in identifying areas of agreement and proposing new Islamic solutions for the Ummah in a post-caliphate context.

Restructuring Movements in the Muslim World: Victories and Ummah-building

Post-War on Terror: Responding to Challenges and Strategies

Islamic movements in the Middle East have faced similar difficulties to those in the West, notwithstanding the radically different sociopolitical context. The failure of the Arab Spring, with Egypt as its most severe case, has been followed by a series of repressive counter-revolutions and the subsequent extrajudicial persecution of Muslim movements (Al-Azami 2021). In contrast, Muslim states within the sphere of Pax Americana have contributed and even led hostilities toward Mujahideen. Since American support for the Jihad in Afghanistan, the US and its allies have consolidated power following the USSR's collapse by readjusting its foreign policy focus towards Islam as the final obstacle to American hegemony. These shifts culminated in the War on Terror, which effectively stripped Muslims of fundamental human rights for working towards unification of Islam through a revival of the Shari'a and the Caliphate, enabled and enforced by brutal dictatorships in Muslim countries.[18] Mujahid movements, regardless of their group affiliation, have been systematically targeted, tortured

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18   This includes Turkey's participation in the NATO invasion of Afghanistan, Egypt's consistent blockade of Gaza at the behest of US-Israeli pressure, and Gulf regimes'

and killed under counter-terror legislation despite their extremely small size and level of resources relative to that of any state.[19] As explained best in terrorism studies literature[20] – which detail political objectives absent the superficial political correctness of press secretaries – the state is concerned with maintaining its military hegemony (coercive power) and the dominance of the capitalist system (economic power), targeting Mujahideen due to the potency of its ideology in challenging and dismantling the entirety of the nation-state system. These true material objectives are far removed from humanitarian concerns or tropes of women's rights that Western powers have utilized since the colonial era. Such non-state actors, despite objectively being far less violent than their nation-state counterparts, and entirely unbalanced in material resources, have been systematically targeted on an unfathomable scale, with an estimated price tag of eight trillion dollars and tens of thousands of its soldiers and private contractors (Costs of War 2021). The movements targeted, on the other hand, include the Qassam Brigades in Gaza, revolutionary groups in Syria, the Afghan Taliban, and various local Islamic movements in Somalia, Western Africa, and Yemen.

In the context of these developments, Muslim movements have been heavily suppressed on both political and military levels, leading to widespread failure in realizing political goals. The Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami, for instance, have largely been banned from participation in elections, including, respectively, in Egypt and Bangladesh (Alam 2023), while groups like Hizb-Ut-Tahrir are proscribed in several Muslim countries. The picture is far bleaker when considering the targeting of armed Islamic movements. Al-Qaeda, which many have described as the boogeyman of the 21st century[21] largely sticks out as the largest and most threatening terrorist group, justifying the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan for two decades, the post-war occupation of Iraq, and foreign intervention in the form of drone strikes, training missions and military aid to nation-state powers working under the security and economic hegemony of the United States and its allies. In all cases, foreign intervention has resulted in unprecedented destruction in the form of fatalities, the levelling of entire cities and towns, the deterioration of human health and destruction

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creating an entire military and intelligence apparatus under the guidance of the United States military. On the colonial origins of the anti-terror policy, see: Alzubairi (2019).

19   Various observers estimate the current membership of active, al-Qaeda affiliated fighters, for instance, at an upper bound of 13,000, comprising almost entirely of the Somalia al-Shabaab, not including fighters in Afghanistan and smaller movements (Byman 2022: 1–40). Even the most inclusive definition of Mujahideen, including the Qassam Brigades and HTS in Syria, the manpower and budget do not remotely approach the military power of the average Muslim nation-state.

20   This is best demonstrated in analyses of US Military Schools, such as the West Point Combatting Terrorism Centre, and centres like the Hudson Institute, Rand Corporation, and the Middle East Forum.

21   As early as 2005, Robert Sheer proposed the possibility of al-Qaeda being a "Bush Boogeyman" (Scheer 2005). See also: Islam (2021).

of the environment through chemical and nuclear warfare. The devastation wrought by relentless global powers in the dismantling of armed resistance to its hegemony has resulted in the contravention of the most basic international legal norms differentiating between civilians and combatants (Duffy 2015, Li 2019). Despite superficially promoting universal human rights, such powers have made targeting civilians and civilian institutions, including children, the rationale behind military intervention, not only collateral damage. This is currently best demonstrated in the relentless genocide Israel is perpetrating against the Palestinian people in Gaza. As noted by countless scholars, the deliberate targeting and elimination of children, civilian infrastructure and humanitarian aid is part and parcel of Israel's military doctrine, viewing the elimination of civilians as necessary for the elimination of Hamas (Ihmoud 2023: 1–8). It is essential to understand that associating the civilian population with the armed resistance of so-called terrorist groups is in fact highly accurate—the attempted elimination of resistance will only prove to the larger population the legitimacy of and drive support for resistance. It is in this context that we must understand the American failure in Afghanistan, for instance, which despite killing numerically large numbers of Mujahideen, ultimately increased local support for the Taliban and the deterioration of decaying and corrupt republic institutions, culminating in the grassroots revolution and capture of Kabul in 2021.

Explaining this social reality becomes ever more difficult given the context of the groups themselves. Presumably following the banning and targeting of Islamic groups, outward memberships and associations have significantly decreased and, in many cases, entirely eliminated. This is easily observable across diverse movements. Following the ban in the United Kingdom, most of Hizb-Ut-Tahrir's former vocal supporters rebranded themselves as independent thinkers.[22] Similarly, the abolition of the MB in Egypt was followed by a rebranding of its institutions and most vocal scholars despite the continued existence of those institutions, including mosques, endowments, and schools. After disallowing the JI from participation in the 2023 Bangladeshi election, a large number of former party candidates rebranded themselves and stood as independents (Irani 2018). Similarly, one of al-Qaeda's post-9/11 strategies has been to encourage publicly revoking allegiance to the group with the purpose of receiving regional support and legitimacy. This is best demonstrated in Abu Muhammad al-Joulani's experiment with the Al-Nusra Front, which at least according to al-Qaeda central sources consisted of a secret agreement of apparently revoking affiliation for the purpose of uniting ideologically diverse groups (Al-Tamimi: 10 December 2017). In observing these maneuvers, there are two significant points to observe: (a) firstly, that the post-9/11 crackdown on Muslim groups has largely decreased their open membership, largely contributing to the disillusionment of some former supporters to the groups' core

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22   Consider how the Twitter profiles of its former public members, such as Abdul Wahid (former Party Chairman) and Taji Mustafa, are now listed as unaffiliated with any organization. See: https://twitter.com/AbdulWahid_X, https://twitter.com/tajimustafa.

doctrines (as discussed above); and (b) that many movement leaders and members are highly reflexive and dynamic in their approach to maintaining their public mission in response to stigmatization and persecution.

Restructuring and Resurgence Following the Arab Spring

Several important events have shifted the strategy and structure of Islamic movements. Firstly, the failure of the US and its allies in several foreign interventions – including in Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq-Syria – has aided in the increasing perception (and reality) of multipolarity and subsequently high morale among Islamic movements. This includes, for instance, Hamas' dependence on Iranian support, Al-Shabaab's successful capture of Mogadishu in 2006,[23] and most significantly, the iconic victory of Afghan Taliban and the re-establishment of an Islamic Emirate after twenty years. Secondly, the Arab Spring has itself contributed to the rejuvenation of Islamic discourse and praxis, raising the chance of hope for a political future after decades of ruthless dictatorship. In the last 10-15 years, this has culminated in the Syrian revolution against Bashar al-Assad and the short-lived strength of the Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia. This post-post War on Terror praxis, I argue, has given rise to a series of important milestones in the political and military success of non-state Muslim movements. These successes were achieved in defiance of severe legal, economic and military pressures. In this subsection, I explore how these movements thrived and succeeded on the spiritual, political and military levels through diverse and reflexive methods of restructuring, localization, and sociopolitical pragmatism.

The first pattern of post-movement change is a reconfiguration of structures and even ideological goals around pragmatic, goal-based praxis. The most glaring example of this is in post-revolution Syria. After the breakout of the war, various groups formed a faction known as the 'Syrian Islamic Liberation Front' representing a large number of Sunni Islamic groups, and informally allied with diverse groups ranging from the then-AQ affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra to the secular-nationalist Free Syria Army (al-Tamimi: 15 December 2017). Following the sweeping victories of various allied groups, the rise of IS in 2014 and its control of half of Syria's territory – taken from both resistance groups and the Assad regime – eventually resulted in military failure. IS' concern with resistance groups, whom they deemed 'apostates' as they did the Assad regime, opened swathes of territory to the Kurdish SDF ('Syrian Democratic Forces') allied with the Assad regime, eventually resulting in a stalemate and major losses for Sunni, anti-Assad groups (Martin and Kozak 2016). The dual challenge of disunity among the Sunni groups and the stigma attached to al-Nusra Front's al-Qaeda association posed a significant strategic obstacle to both unity and regional support. In what was largely considered to be a symbolic gesture, al-Nusra Front led by Abu Mohammed al-Joulani declared its

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23   Al-Shabaab is Al-Qaeda's regional affiliate in Somalia.

retraction from its pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda's Emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri (d. 2022). For Joulani, this move had two aims, both of which were achieved: (a) the unification of diverse resistance groups under a single banner, and (b) the international legitimacy to sign agreements and receive foreign aid (Cole 2022: 299–337).[24] It was only after the funnelling out of al-Qaeda's own appointees and barring from forming anti-Assad groups (i.e., Hurras al-Din) that al-Joulani's newly minted group Hay'at Tahrir al-Shām experienced significant setbacks – including desertions – resulting from Joulani's severity towards fellow Sunni resistance groups and intolerance of criticism (Jihadica 2020, International Crisis Group 2023).

What is significant for this study is the existence of a short-lived unity at the start of the war despite significant disagreement over worldview and a hypothetical post-Assad alternative. This was followed by another alliance under a secret al-Qaeda allegiance, demonstrating remarkable reflexivity of highly diverse local resistance groups and al-Qaeda's/al-Nusra Front's central leadership. Al-Nusra Front significantly includes the Jaysh al-Ahrar faction, formerly associated with the Ahrar al-Sham and with strong ideological ties to the Muslim Brotherhood (Conduit 2019: 213–220). As several analysts note, there existed among all factions a tendency for ideological negotiation due to the prioritization of immediate interests. Importantly, however, the framing of these alliances as mere strategic alliances limits the effect of genuine ideological negotiation taking place within the larger geopolitical context. The Hay'ah's leadership, for instance, has long portrayed their alliance not as a strategic quid pro quo but as an attempt to reform and standardize intellectual heterogeneity within a workable framework of Islamic normative values. This includes the creation of Shari'a courts, the juristic Islamic obligation of defensive jihad, and abstaining from excommunicating and infighting fellow Sunni Muslims (Cook et al. 2020: 1–20) – all of which are themselves ideological ends to themselves in addition to (and sometimes in spite of) perceived military objectives. Another example of this ideological rapprochement within movements is in Mali in the context of significant infighting between the decentralized al-Qaeda allied JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin) and the Islamic State following the independent gains of both groups against French and Russian-backed state regimes in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The context of infighting and especially IS' excommunication of the former has led to local leaders and regional tribes attempt to negotiate between the two movements. This has led even to the creative initiative of forming a new group focused on maintaining normative Islamic government and stopping infighting between Shari'a-minded Muslims (al-'Arab 2023).

The second pattern of post-movement change is localization, most clearly demonstrable in the loose set of organizations known as 'al-Qaeda'. Al-Qaeda

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24   Cole (2022) argues that Joulani's 'rebranding' into HTS did not actually constitute withdrawal of the pledge of allegiance. The subsequent independence of Joulani's actions, however, drew accusations of treachery from al-Qaeda's own central leadership.

(literally, 'the base'), was hardly more than a military base considered part of the Maktabat al-Khidamat ('Services Bureau') of the Afghan Arabs against the Soviet Union (Hegghammer 2020). Today, as Li notes, this deliberately vague term was spanned into cryptic reference to a supposed global leadership, or set of loose organizations which baffles the most experienced counterterrorism officials and researchers (Li 2023). Loosely conceived, al-Qaeda shortly after its inception developed into a global movement for resistance against American hegemony. Despite organizing a number of attacks designed to gain international attention, and supposedly maintaining centralized leadership networks in the early 2000s, the elimination of any public manifestation of the movement – and targeting of its leaders – reduced it to a small set of detached leaders forced into hiding or in prison. Since then, the initial post-9/11 defeat of Al-Qaeda has been followed by a slow but steady global resurgence. This included the Shabaab in Somalia, which successfully captured its capital Mogadishu in 2013 until an African-Union-led foreign invasion ousted them from power, and the regional (though short-lived) success of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, Chechnya, and Iraq-Syria under Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (d. 2006). It peaked in popularity with the adoption of highly popular and eloquent, traditionally trained Islamic scholars supporting the movement as part of an Ummatic call for Muslim resistance to imperialism, demonstrated best in the rich life of Anwar al-Awlaki (Meleagrou-Hitchens 2020).

Explaining the success of al-Qaeda despite its apparent political failure requires understanding its post-9/11 adaptation. A widely observed phenomenon is that the movement, unlike the Islamic State, for instance, has almost entirely substituted its global military strategy for a localized insurgency. This phenomenon is described by theorists as moving from the 'far enemy' to the 'near enemy' as evident in the thought of al-Qaeda's thinkers, and has also been termed localization and decentralization (Moghadam 2013: 466–497). It is accurate that these scholars have identified a general attitude shift followed by an internal critique of al-Qaeda's global strategy – notably by Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (d. 2011) (2018: vols. 1–5) who suggested in his voluminous *Call to International Islamic Resistance* a reorientation of jihad towards decentralized and localized action. These narratives are at the same time severely handicapped in their propensity to capture the social, Islamic, cultural and economic dimensions of diverse, multiple fronts of conflict. As Faisal Devji observes, the Jihad in Afghanistan and elsewhere cannot at all be understood within the prism of a global militant network operating within local contacts – in fact, as Darryl Li identifies, this very suggestion reifies the stereotype of the 'foreign fighter' assumed to have little connection to the local society (Li 2019: 10). As Devji observes, the fact that Islamic resistance movements are almost entirely dependent on local communities suggests that they cannot be financially or personally identified as external to the population, unlike that of the modern state which homogenizes, recruits and sacrifices its subjects (Devji 2019: 1–25). In this regard, the fact that mujahideen movements are highly dedicated to providing local community services and are heavily involved with aid work and non-governmental

organizations (at times comprising such organizations) requires understanding these movements within the context of their local communities.

In examining the success of local al-Qaeda affiliates, it is significant to observe a local adaptation of groups in (a) developing localized, semi-autonomous and self-governing structures; and (b) sustaining an anti-state insurgency through reliance on the populations' financial aid, taxes, and logistical support. The role of these insurgencies in either combatting foreign-led external invasions (e.g., Somalia, Afghanistan, Gaza and Chechnya), or overthrowing highly repressive state regimes (the Sahel, Yemen, Syria, etc.) means that these movements are largely the product of the struggle of local communities for self-government and the removal of foreign occupation.

The third pattern of post-movement change – and arguably the most significant development concerning the future of post-movement Islam – is the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), following the Afghan Taliban's lightening offensive and conquering of Kabul in mid-2021. The IEA's establishment and full consolidation of power in Afghanistan and even its international embassies and international diplomacy constitutes a highly critical development (Zelin 2022). Within the modus operandi of nearly all (post-)Islamic groups, the IEA constitutes the only Islamic country in the world – in that the legal system and values are explicitly articulated by the government in adherence to the Islamic Shari'a, as opposed to the constitution of a secular state or monarchy.[25] In other words, groups and individuals who have long critiqued secular nation-states as outposts for neocolonialism now have – as flawed as it may be – a stable foundation and economic stronghold from which to give Da'wah, live an Islamic lifestyle and promote Islamic change abroad. This vision constitutes the culmination of the vision of the non-partisan scholar Mujahid 'Abdullah 'Azzam who articulated a similar theory over forty years ago (Hegghammer 2020: 313). Unsurprisingly, the Islamic Emirate has gained the overwhelming support of several Islamic movements and of diverse Sunni Ulama, praising the Emirate as the only Islamic state, and most importantly, the future model of government Muslims should aspire to implement around the world. (Samadi 2023, Tolo News 2023).

While the potential prospects of inter-movement alliances with the evolving of the IEA into a state are not immediately clear, the Emirate's history and current situation give us an insight into future possibilities in a post-movement world. Firstly, the evolving of the Taliban into the status quo government of Afghanistan means they take on a new role of negotiating, tolerating and influencing the diverse ethnic, cultural and Islamic makeup of the country. With

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25   The legal and political system of the Islamic Emirate is described in various sources, including the Chief Justice's formulation of the government, forwarded by the Amir al-Mu'minin Hibatullah Akhundzadah himself (al-Haqqānī 2022). While this subject itself is deserving of an independent study, this is signalled towards in the Emirate's inclusion of the *Mecelle* (the 1869 Ottoman Hanafī legal code) as its primary legal document studied and implemented by judges, and attested to in previous semi-constitutional formulations of the Emirate's legal system. See: Islam (2023).

the Jamaat-e-Islami associated Hizb-e-Islami, Salafi and Ahl-e-Hadith movements, and especially Shi'i Islamic movements and populations now operating within the educational and governmental framework of the Emirate, it is highly likely that this will lead to the creation of new hybrids between the government and these intellectually diverse movements. This may occur through the gradual filling of movement members into the civilian state apparatus, or conversely, through the government's influence on formerly autonomous education institutions belonging to the movements.

Secondly, the IEA's consolidation raises the prospects for international Islamic cooperation. The legitimized international diplomacy of the Emirate, which held 400 meetings with various international actors in a single year, suggests the possibility of future collaboration between Islamic movements and institutions on an international level. The continued support of Islamic NGOs and charities will likely take place in the form of establishing hospitals, schools, orphanages and even universities, increasing the potential for collaboration and intellectual exchange between Afghan society and the international movements that support these organizations. Thirdly, the flow of highly skilled, multilingual muhajireen (migrants) with relatively significant capital savings into the Emirate offers the possibility of an Afghan-led technological and economic development, especially if these flows are organized into major projects.[26] The most significant observation concerning the Emirate on a theoretical level is that regardless of the innovative ways future collaboration develops, the IEA's consolidation of power and assumption of status quo rule arguably makes it the most significant source of inter-group cooperation.

Conclusion: The Bright Future of Global Islam

In this paper, I provided a very brief study of the evolution of post-Arab Spring Islamic movements around the world. Despite significant disagreements such movements hold on theological (*'aqidah*) and political (*manhaj*) levels, I have shown how they successfully collaborated and even integrated with members of other institutions and movements. The success and reflexivity of movements following the Arab Spring are the result of two major forces: negative forces in the form of policing, bans and extrajudicial killings, and positive forces in the form of sharing similar goals and a broadly shared political vision. Since the Arab Spring, while the traditional movements themselves have struggled to gain membership, these have largely been substituted by independent, unaffiliated movements that have espoused two central characteristics: (a) an appeal to public opinion and grassroots work in local communities; and (b) willingness to work with groups outside their movement. Contrary to the original intent

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26   There are many anecdotal examples of this very recent phenomenon, and I anticipate anthropological studies will study such migration as part of the Muslim 'hijrah' (sacred migration) phenomenon increasing in popularity in the West. See, for example: Fadil et. al. (2021).

of state powers and right-wing policymakers, the proscription and censorship of Islamic movements have in fact led to a resilience to government persecution, and a far more potent synthesis in the form of pragmatic, goal-oriented action and creative collaboration between movements. As shown in the case studies, these developments question the relevance of studying and understanding the health and nature of Islamic activism and resistance within the strictures of certain movements, given the proliferation of 'independent' thinkers and new synthesis of ideas previously compartmentalized to a political party or framework. As a result of this trajectory, this study argues for the need to theorize contemporary Islamic movements beyond historical categories that have fossilized in Western academia, and often do not capture the dynamic, fluidity and comprehensiveness of Islamic struggle.

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Džan Islam

Reforma i preporod: transformacija islamskih pokreta u 21. veku

Apstrakt:

Ovaj rad proučava razvoj misli i prakse islamskih pokreta koji imaju za cilj da ožive politički sistem vođen islamskim pravom. Islamski pokreti nakon kalifate – predmet ove studije – prošli su nedavne reforme u razmišljanju, pristupu, pa čak i brendiranju od Arapskog proleća. Bez obzira na njihovu pravnu i teološku raznolikost pokreta, pokazujem da oni dele zajedničke karakteristike reformi: (a) pozivanje na javno mnjenje i rad na bazi, kao i (b) spremnost za rad sa grupama van njihovog pokreta. Ove reforme oblikovane su u tandemu i kao reakcija na Rat protiv terorizma, Arapsko proleće i pobedu Talibana u Avganistanu. U radu pokazujem da su ove promene dovele do dinamičke reforme u najnovijoj generaciji islamskih pokreta, što je dovelo do suštinskih revizija njihovog pristupa (manhadža) postizanju islamskih promena. Uprkos pooštravanju zabrane i cenzure, tvrdim da je plod ovih reformi bio oživljavanje u vidu veoma efikasne i kreativne saradnje između pokreta. Proučeni primeri uključuju saradnju između Muslimanske braće (MB) i Hizb ut Tahrira na Zapadu, kao i između bivših članova Al Kaide i MB u Siriji. Procenjujem da su ove strategije – nakon perioda političkog neuspeha i unutrašnjeg skepticizma – ubrzale oživljavanje koje čini budućnost islamskih pokreta veoma snažnom uprkos tome što su dovele do razvodnjavanja identiteta svake grupe i mogućeg opadanja članstva. Kao rezultat ove putanje, ovaj rad pokazuje da je potrebno da se teoretizuju savremeni islamski pokreti izvan istorijskih kategorija koje su se fosilizirale u zapadnim akademskim krugovima i koje često ne obuhvataju dinamičnost, fluidnost i sveobuhvatnost islamske borbe. Ovaj rad koristi mešovitu metodologiju uključujući arhivsku analizu i intelektualnu genealogiju.

Ključne reči: Islam posle kalifata, pokreti muslimanskog preporoda, dekolonijalna misao, džihad, šerijat.