POLITICAL ISLAM: THE TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT OF ECONOMIC JIHAD

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INTRODUCTION

There is a complex relationship between the urban dispossessed and Islamists’ mobilization efforts within the Middle East. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, factors such as globalization, economic disparity, and the consequences of failed austerity measures have led to the increasing stratum of marginalized constituents seeking a remedy to their situation. The relationships between Islamists and the dispossessed are dynamic and contradictory, ultimately contributing to the scholarly debate over the appeal of modern Islamism. While some scholars believe Islamism is a byproduct of poverty and the concentration of the poor in sprawling slums, others tend to view political Islamic movements as a mouthpiece for middle-class individuals who feel marginalized by the dominant economic, political, and cultural processes of their secular governments. Ultimately, political Islam is a response to failed modernization efforts. This debate further lends to the understanding of the roles poverty and fundamentalism have in the processes of urban development within the Middle East.

This literature review explores the state of scholarly knowledge on political Islam and modernization efforts within the Middle East. The model presented here belongs both to the literature on Islamism and its connections to the urban dispossessed. This analysis establishes a link between the consequences of failed developmentalism and the advent of Islamist movements. The marketization of many Middle Eastern states, through Western-devised economic reforms, provoked important socio-economic changes leading to an increase in income disparities culminating in high levels of unemployment among a large number of public-sector workers, rural laborers, and educated members of the middle class (Bayat, 2002, p. 2).

Understanding the role of failed developmentalism within this context is vital in examining the structure and dynamics of emerging Islamic institutions and their social and
political impact in communities. Utilizing Cairo, Egypt as a case study, this work will conclude with an examination of Islamism within the city and its connection to modernization efforts. Cairo offers a unique example for examining development in the urban context within the Middle East as the city boasts some 19.5 million inhabitants, many of whom dwell in informal settlements. Islamic organizations have become integral in the everyday lives of many in Cairo as they depend on their services to meet basic needs such as education and healthcare. By exploring the current literary knowledge on political Islam and modernist approaches to development, this work aims to provide a better understanding of failed developmentalism within the Middle East and its correlation with political Islam. Exploring the essence of political Islam may provide a better understanding of the impact’s derivative of failed developmentalism.

The Politics of Islam

Political Islam refers to individuals and organizations advocating for the transformation of both the state and society in accordance to their interpretation of Islam. Determined to purify the religion, these Muslim conservative reformers seek a return to the fundamentals of Islam by a gradual transition to an Islamic state through education, persuasion, and grassroots social activism. Political Islam is a modern phenomenon with roots in the sociopolitical conditions of Muslim countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a product of Muslim people’s interaction, be it military, political, economic, cultural, or intellectual, with the West (Ayoob, 2004, p. 2). According to Ayoob (2004), there are three general assumptions about political Islam that have inspired many discussions and supposition following 9/11. These are, “One, that political Islam, like Islam itself, is monolithic; two, that political Islam is inherently violent; and, three, that the intermingling of religion and politics is unique to Islam” (Ayoob, 2004, p. 1). However, none of these assumptions are characteristic of all organizations beholden to political
Islam. Islamist politics are primarily determined by context and, more importantly, the activities of the various Islamist movements (Ayoob, 2004, p. 2). The Islamic Salvation Front is as Algeria-specific as Al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya is Lebanon-specific. The strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood differ from country to country as it has branches throughout the Middle East. Adherents of political Islam believe that Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world. Denoeux (2002) accentuates this point by defining Islamism as,

a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups, and organizations that pursue political objectives. It provides political responses to today’s societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition. (p. 61)

Political Islam has been characterized in a multitude of ways parallel to Ayoob and Denoeux’s account of the phenomenon, it has also been associated with terrorism.

Contemporary conceptualizations of terrorism are numerous and convoluted. Consequently, no single definition of terrorism can be pinpointed. Some even question the term’s validity as many modern definitions incorporate various meanings that can conceptually be applied to many forms of indiscriminate violence, including guerilla warfare and insurgencies. Subsequently, some scholars and governments throughout the world coin political Islamist movements as “terrorist” organizations. Regimes use this label to discredit an organization or movement to disenfranchise groups challenging the status quo. Lawless (2008) asserts that a fundamental issue faced by the international community in addressing terrorism is the challenge of agreeing upon a definite meaning for the term (Lawless, 2008, p. 147). Lawless (2008) also specifies that the lack of a comprehensive international legal system to address terrorism is a
result of the existence of “great uncertainty and controversy among jurists and other specialists on the role and effectiveness of law and legal systems in combating terrorists” (p. 147). While Lawless (2008) attributes the issue of terrorism to a lack of systematic legal approaches capable of defining and resolving the phenomenon, Schinkel (2009) views its inception and definition primarily as a political tool used at convenience.

The main issue of terrorism is political in nature. According to Schinkel (2009), “What counts as terrorism and what does not fall under its heading is subject to political pressure and consequence” (p. 178). The greatest political problem in the definition of terrorism lies in the decision of when to differentiate terrorist from freedom fighter (Schinkel, 2009, p. 179). Although political Islam is context specific, there is an inherent difference between an organization advancing religiosity in the realm of politics and a “terrorist.” The overwhelming majority of Islamist political activity is conducted through peaceful means within constitutional limits, even where governments are unsympathetic to the Islamists’ cause. According to Ayoob (2004), “Transnational extremist activities, including acts of terrorism, are the exception, not the rule, when it comes to political action undertaken in the name of Islam” (p. 12). As such, it is important to distinguish a political organization peacefully advocating for piety from a group employing violent tactics in order to resolve issues.

**Contributing Factors to Islamism**

Throughout latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, political Islam has become a powerful force throughout much of the Muslim world, especially in the Middle East. Ayoob’s (2004) analyses of Islamist movements have attributed its popularity to cultural, religious, and regional concerns, including the nature of Arab civilization, the principles of Islam, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Some have viewed the rise of political
Islam as a consequence of the failure of regime change and the transition from authoritarianism to democracy throughout the Middle East. According to Berman (2003), this perspective highlights the sometimes-critical role Islamists play in civil society, and their status as rising oppositions pressing regimes for political change (Berman, 2003, p. 257). Civil society has served as a space in which Islamist revolutionaries have launched a remarkable challenge to the status quo. Berman (2003) accentuates, the weaker, less elastic, and less competent a state’s institutions are, the greater the state’s loss of control and legitimacy, and the greater the potential for disorder and violence (Berman, 2003, p. 259). Following the decline of the statist model throughout much of the Middle East, due to various circumstances such as a rapid population increase, recessions, and a cut of subsidies, the rise of a frustrated stratum of educated, underemployed youth available for mobilization by opposition groups has become gradually prevalent (Berman, 2003, p.260). Islamists increasingly become more appealing to the general population as the state fails in providing essential resources to the everyday needs of the populace. Where the state fails, organizations advancing Islamic ideology step in and fill the void.

The consequences of globalization have placed pressure on many populations throughout the Arab world, ultimately manifesting as political dissent. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt primarily advocates to end the domination of the country by foreign powers, reducing the poverty of the Egyptian people, and the declining morality they identify in both the Egyptian state and the lives of Egyptians(Munson, 2001, p. 489). The strains of modernization, and especially occidentalization, lead to problems that some believe can be solved by turning to Islamic ideals rather than through normal, institutional means. According to Satter (1995), “What conservative religious movements sometimes succeed in doing is making
religious or cultural themes the stuff of politics and law” (p. 28). Satter (1995) attributes their success to a group’s strategy rather than their ideology. It is important to note a group’s relationship with the government and how this consequently affects their ideology, sometimes allying with the left. The intentional vagueness of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, regarding their vision and program allows the movement’s leaders great flexibility in political alliance-making. Satter (1995) explains that Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood has in a way institutionalized “extremism” in politics (Satter, 1995, p. 30). While active in social and welfare programs as well, Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood has made religion a disruptive force in Egyptian politics. The Brotherhood’s role in Jordan, on the other hand, is instructive and offers an alternative route of achieving its goals.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan is not seeking to destroy the current political system, but initiate reform from within. Consequently, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan has never seriously challenged the legitimacy or power of the Hashemites. This can be attributed to Jordan’s more open political system. According to Wiktorowicz (1999), it has never sought a fundamental or revolutionary change in political engagements that would impend the survival of the monarchy (Wiktorowicz, 1999, p. 4). The Muslim Brotherhood and the Hashemite monarchy have a long history of interaction that has created a predictable relationship in which the actors are well known to one another (Wiktorowicz, 1999, p.4). While the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan has opposed specific governmental policies, it has never opposed the regimes legitimacy and right to rule. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood’s success is in no small extent the result of its relatively hospitable relationship with the regime. Consequently, Wiktorowicz (1999) argues that the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood will never effect real Islamic change in Jordan because it has been “captured by the system” (p. 13). Arguably, the monarchy has heavy sway over the
Brotherhood. The Brotherhood’s experience in Jordan reveals that “movement-state interactions” are not always characterized by political conflict (Wiktorowicz, 1999, p. 13). Subsequently, the Brotherhood’s experience in Jordan indicates that Islamic movement-state relations cannot be unequivocally characterized in terms of confrontation or struggle. The participation in Islamist movements can ultimately be attributed to frustration with a regime and yearning for a sense of community.

Individuals and groups must have a consciousness of belonging to a society that consequently provides them with the means for a fair and substantial existence. If the members of a society possess this feeling of belonging, and they accept their place in said society as fair, then an integrated society is truly conceptualized based on solidarity between individuals and groups. Islam from its establishment has been a socio-political doctrine. It is culturally, politically and economically institutionalized. Through influential social Muslim groups participating in the struggles between the state and civil society, the very nature of Islam has adapted to the continuously changing social arrangements. According to Kamali (2001), religious groups throughout Muslim majority states have modernized their traditional views and provided new interpretations of Islam (Kamali, 2001, p. 475). This, in turn, has legitimized Islamists’ participation in modern politics and consequently provides a space in which marginalized individuals seek an outlet to voice their frustrations.

A Response to Failed Developmentalism

The authoritarian nature of many Middle Eastern states has historically resulted in limited political participation and a weak framework in which to develop effective civil-society organizations. The regimes’ statist models led to executive authority over economic, political, and social domains resulting in the state becoming the sole provider of livelihoods for many of
its citizens in exchange for their loyalty, a social contract. As a result, there has been little space for society to develop itself and interest groups to surface (Bayat, 2002, p. 1). Currently, many states are gradually retreating from the social responsibilities that characterized their early populist development, leaving the wellbeing of their populations stagnant. The decline of the etatist models and the advent of Western-backed economic aid has resulted in important socio-economic changes in many Middle Eastern states. According to Bayat (2002), “Free-market economies have made consumer commodities vastly more accessible and enriched the upper socio-economic strata while also increasing income disparities and causing critical changes in labor markets” (p.2). As a result, informal and marginalized communities, including the unemployed, casual workers, and the urban subsistence laborers, have expanded. Large numbers of public-sector employees, rural laborers, and segments of the middle class (i.e. government employees and college students) have consequently been pushed into the ranks of the urban poor in labor and housing markets (Bayat, 2002, p. 2). During the course of these political and economic developments, the forces of globalization were penetrating the region and concepts such as human rights and public participation increasingly appealed to various marginalized communities and subsequently facilitated the opening of new spaces for social mobilization. 

**Mobilization**

Throughout the course of the last century, cities within the Middle East have been subject to rapid urbanization, thus becoming sites of conflict and struggle as their rapidly growing populations strain infrastructure and services. States have failed to respond adequately and continue to reduce their deficits through austerity policies violating the social contract, triggering anger and discontent. As a result, the urban masses respond to the absence of effective institutionalized mechanisms of conflict resolution through grassroots activism, riots, and mass
protests. Aside from internationally sponsored safety nets, such as the Social Fund for Development in Egypt and Jordan, additional outlets were offered by the growth of welfare NGOs and social Islam (Bayat, 2002, p. 4). According to Alatas (2005), “Muslim responses to the problems of modernization have taken the form of the articulation of broad ideological orientations such as modernism, neo-modernism, and traditionalism (p. 214). Rahnema (2008) similarly argues that imperialism, authoritarianism, and the contemporary rise of Islamic politics are closely related. Specifically, Rahnema (2008) states the rise of political Islam is the product of failed modernization programs, failed developmentalism under the auspices of international capital and corrupt, undemocratic governments throughout the Islamic world (p. 484). Mousseau (2011) further lends to this argument by examining the effects of modernization efforts at a practical level: “In nations with weak markets, anyone not in a group and not surviving in the market is in a highly insecure condition” (p. 41). Hossain (2005) similarly suggests, since migrants from the countryside to the cities effectively exit their rural groups, and fare limited employment opportunities in the urban markets, many are forced to seek security in new groups, often starting with family ties (p. 6-7). In exchange for loyalty, new urban group leaders often provide help in housing, paying children’s school fees, access to health care, employment, and so on. For poorer neighborhoods they are sometimes crucial for securing access to city sewage lines and electric power grids (Mousseau, 2011, p. 41). Group leaders can be understood as political entrepreneurs as they market their groups by setting boundaries and identifying outside enemies their clients can easily blame for their misfortunes.

Political entrepreneurs in cities throughout the Middle East find success in advocating anti-modern values as migrants from rural areas see the urban environment as foreign and the urban elite, who have long adopted Western lifestyles, as the primary opposition to the poor and
their quest for state rents (Mousseau, 2011, p. 41). Islamist identity subsequently evolved from political entrepreneurs’ efforts to garner power through religiosity as other ideologies such as nationalism, socialism, and secularism had already been embraced by their opponents, privileged ‘modern’ groups entrenched in power. Imams, like group leaders, also competed for power, reinforcing religious identity. The increasing numbers of migrants arriving from rural areas created an incentive for many urban imams to preach what the urban poor wanted to hear, often espousing religious justification for their fears of ‘modern’ out-groups (Mousseau 2011, p.41). In recent decades, a wide network of charities have garnered an ample following among the urban poor. The most popular being Islamic ones, which often serve as gateways for employment, food banks, schools, and medical centers. As a result, these organizations hold sway over and respond to the needs of their followers (Mousseau, 2011, p. 41). While the majority of Islamist activity is nonviolent, advocates of extremism have surfaced throughout the past decades.

Mobilizing Extremism

The failure of modernization programs and planning that embraces modernist and developmentalist policies, carried out by inefficient and corrupt regimes throughout the past century, have led to growing economic and social problems and political unrest leaving vulnerable populations, most notably youths, especially susceptible to fundamentalism. This, in addition to the failure of other political forces such as the left and the nationalists to provide popular alternatives to radical Islamic fundamentalism, has been especially problematic (Rahnema, 2008, p. 490). Rahnema (2008) accentuates:

Radical Islamists not only gained strength in the context of failed developmentalisms, their aspirations and demands were strikingly similar to those of cultural nationalisms elsewhere. Though they were articulated in terms of an
ostensibly universal and transnational discourse of Islam, in reality there were
distinct national versions. Their adherents all believed that Islamic societies had
been corrupted by Western cultures and values as well as by foreign domination;
to solve this problem, they advocated a return to the imagined practices of the
Golden Age of Islam, eliminating existing political regimes and establishing and
Islamic state based on *shari’a* laws. (p. 492)

Rahnema (2008) speculates that radical Islamic movements consist of new salaried middle
classes, rural migrants, lower echelons of the traditional urban middle classes, and the proletariat
occupying the growing number of informal settlements. The basis of such movements stem from
the continuous deterioration of social, political and economic conditions that consequently draw
individuals to radical religious organizations. Rahnema (2008) goes on to state:

To attract supporters and sympathizers, its (Islamists) members establish and
operate schools and clinics, and turn mosques into multi-purpose social service
organizations. The fundamentalists’ populism and simplistic explanations for the
causes of problems in Muslim societies, along with their bold and violent tactics
against the dictatorial regimes of their countries and the interests of foreign
powers, have made them increasingly popular. (p. 495)

Rahnema’s (2008) assertions are in stark contrast to Bayat’s (2002) conclusion that the
relationship between radical Islam and the habitus of the dispossessed are more complex than
often presented. Bayat (2002) accentuates:

The claims about organic convergence between the two (rural migrants and urban
dispossessed) often reflect the fear felt by national and international elites
(politicians and the media) about the social consequences of urban marginality. In
reality, however, the dispossessed show no more natural propensity toward
extremism or Islamism than Islamists show strategic interest in the dispossessed
as a political player or moral target. (p. 588)

The preceding discussions indicate that the relationship between radical Islam and the urban
dispossessed are more complex than is often presented. Mousseau’s (2011) accentuates this by
stating, “Neither poverty nor urban status is associated with approval of Islamist terror, but
individuals who are both poor and urban are more likely than others to approve it” (p. 48).

As governments continuously fail to provide basic resources such as water, health care,
and education, the urban masses increasingly look elsewhere for support and opportunity.
According to Ly (2007), violent groups sometimes invest significant resources in social work,
notably in the form of charities and NGOs as a means to advertise their cause in order to raise
popular support (p.177). The motivation of terrorists to invest in charities comes from their
willingness to contribute public goods in an effort to advertise their cause. Ly (2007) suggests
that violent groups often care about popular support and make significant efforts to increase it (p.
180).

Understanding the role of political Islam within Islamic charity, or zakat in Arabic, is
vital in examining the structure and dynamics of emerging Islamic institutions and their social
and political impact in communities. According to Burr and Collins (2006), “Zakat may be used
to support those who administer it and can be given in the path of Allah,” or in other words, “to
finance a jihad effort” (p. 13). Burr and Collins (2006) go on to define jihad as an “unremitting
and constant struggle to be waged against enemies, both secular and religious” (p. 5). Utilizing
zakat, Muslim fundamentalists wage an economic jihad against poverty and the influx of
Western ideology. Bayet (2007) claims, “Poverty and precarious life, together with anomie and
lawlessness, condition the dispossessed to embrace ideologies and movements that offer communities salvation and support while preaching radical politics” (p. 589). This is in stark contrast to Clark’s (2004) supposition, “Rather than supporting, uplifting, or mobilizing the poor, Islamic charitable institutions with *zakat* monies often play an important role in strengthening the social networks that bind middle-class professionals” (p. 155). As Islamism increasingly appeals to the urban masses, Cairo, Egypt serves as an exceptional case study in which to examine further the politics of Islam.

**Cairo, Egypt**

*Islamic Organizations*

As political Islam has become a mainstay throughout much of the Middle East over the last thirty years, Islamic organizations have become integral to associational life in Cairo, Egypt. Islamic medical clinics, schools, banks, day-care centers, supermarkets and clubs form a vibrant component of all areas of social action and enjoy the support of large numbers of citizens. While these social-welfare associations are the least well-known features of Islamic activism, they are becoming essential to the provision of services for the poor and even middle-class communities in Egypt (Clark, 1995, p. 1). The existence of Islamic clinics is representative of Islamic grassroots social-welfare activities as a response to failed developmentalism.

According to Clark (1995), “The Islamic clinics’ success lies in the state’s failure” (p. 6). Public run hospitals are often inadequate and overcrowded. They suffer from old and used equipment, poor hygiene conditions, a shortage of medicine, and a lack of technical and particularly, nursing staff (Clark, 1995, p. 5). This bad reputation of government ran facilities has driven some patients to seek semi-private and private alternatives. Clark (1995) further suggests
the success and spread of Islamic clinics can be attributed to the good, cheap and accessible health care they provide for patients (p. 4). Clark (1995) also maintains:

The clinics remain socio-economic reactions to the dire situation in which most Egyptians find themselves. By maintaining an indispensable component of the social welfare system in Egypt, political Islam and its associated groups not only gain legitimacy in, but also affirm the legitimacy of the social system. In this sense, Islamism can be considered a vehicle for power sharing. (p. 14)

Through the provision of social services, political Islam acts as a secondary conduit for the socio-economic support and development the government fails to provide. This breach in the social-contract opens a space for political Islam to gain legitimacy among the populace by offering an alternative to the Egyptian state. While Islamism in Egypt provides a foundation for development and social welfare, it has also been associated with militancy within Egyptian politics.

Whether or not Islamic militants represent a social movement in Egypt is still up for debate, but their clear connection with Egyptian politics cannot be disputed. Ansari (1984) suggests that extremism is a byproduct of the social conditions within Egypt (p. 123). “These conditions come about as a consequence of the breakdown of traditional solidarities and communal ties under the impact of urbanization or rural migration into the cities” (Ansari, 1984, p. 123). Ansari (1984) links the emergence of fundamentalism in Egypt with the repression of the Nasir regime. “The failure in Egypt is attributed to the inability of the Nasir regime to solve the problem of political participation or to improve the social and economic conditions of the masses” (Ansari, 1984, p. 124). Similar to Clark (1995), Ansari (1984) asserts the militants represent predominantly a special segment within the lower middle classes holding low-income
jobs (p. 133). Ansari (1984) goes on to state, “What makes this segment special is its political awareness, relatively high literacy rate, and higher mobility patterns” (p. 134). What differentiates the militants from the moderate fundamentalists is their extreme view on the discrepancy between Islamic ideals and contemporary life. Ansari (1984) concludes:

> The Islamic militants are the product of circumstances closely associated with rapid urbanization and rural migration into cities. While they are experiencing the breaking up of traditional solidarities, their integration with the urban classes in a stable form of relationship remains a possibility. (p. 141)

Rapid growth and urbanization coupled with the evolving political economy of Cairo’s urban form resulting from modernization efforts also serve as key catalysts in the development of political Islam within Egypt.

**Imposing Formality**

Since the late 1960s, Cairo’s urban development has been characterized by the rapid expansion of densely populated informal settlements, known as ‘ashwa’iyyat (“haphazard” in Arabic) (Tarbush, 2012, p. 171). Tarbush (2012) maintains that ‘ashwa’iyyat “shows that the phenomenon of informality in Cairo, far from being an indication of underdevelopment, has been a rational response by Cairenes to population growth and housing shortages (p. 172). This is in stark contrast to Cairo 2050, a series of mega-projects, designed collaboratively by a large international team of consultants, intended to modernize Cairo and counter informal urbanization. The idea behind the plan is that Cairo cannot continue on its current “flawed” development path if it is to become a modern global city (Tarbush, 2012, p. 173). Tarbush (2012) contends this by stating: “The informality and associated high population density have been a solution -albeit a suboptimal one- to Cairo’s urban challenges, and that they are not a hindrance
to further development” (p. 177). The basis for Cairo’s 2050 plan stems from the belief that chaos, disorderliness, criminality and dangerous Islamism are seen to exist in informal areas because these areas are autonomous and separate from the state. In reality, “The state cannot always be so neatly located outside informality” (Tarbush, 2012, p. 181). Informal areas are closely connected to the state both in origins and reproduction. State policies are responsible for the creation of the conditions for informal development (Tarbush, 2012, p. 181). Tarbush (2012) criticizes Cairo 2050’s modernization approach by stating:

Modernization theories like this (Cairo 2050) embody an ahistorical approach to development and are guilty of universalism and homogenization. If history is linear, first-world development is the desired end-state for the third world. This logic is underpinned by universalism—the idea that there is one development trajectory, namely westernization and homogenizations—as societies of the third world are grouped together and collectively prescribed a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution to their problems. (p. 182).

As a result, modernity is prone to failure when it is not contextualized. Western models of modernity have been exported to Cairo for decades, despite the fact that modernity-based government programs have been repeatedly unsuccessful (Tarbush, 2012, p. 182).

The urban poor, the by-product of the modernization process, benefited little from previous economic growth. Instead, many were victims who were forced into a life of informality and marginalization. Bayat (2007) further accentuates the link between Islamic grassroots social-welfare activities and failed modernization efforts by stating:

The urban poor are concentrated in the slums where militant Islamists have also sought shelter. The poor are inclined to seek assistance from local non-state
agents, including mosques and religious donations. Religious associations and NGOs have become centers that, in the absence of the state, provide many types of welfare support – material, cultural and communal – helping the dispossessed to survive in the harsh urban structure. (p. 583)

The economic modernization processes coordinated by the Egyptian government are resulting in the creation of informal settlements and thus political Islam as the subsequent benefits of economic growth are for a few only. The State is focused on promoting economic growth rather than supporting local efforts to address the adverse impacts of growth. “The positive factors of the informal sector for the development process, e.g. job creation, community development and training, are not officially recognized” (Araby, 2002, p. 398). Thus, they are not introduced as an element in any ambitious modernization plan. Consequently, Islamist organizations and NGOs are now emerging as perhaps the most promising force to remedy the government’s inability to manage growth.

Is Political Islam Planning?

Throughout the Middle East, and more specifically Egypt, there is a growing yearning among an underrepresented and marginalized segment of the population to transform their environment into one that is familiar and adequate for survival. Given the outlined historical factors such as colonialism, failed developmentalism, and rapid urbanization, there remains a societal issue related to the inclusion and representation of the urban dispossessed. Political Islam represents an outlet for their frustration and a solution to their predisposed issues associated with their marginalization. As the Middle East continues to transform into a haphazard replica of the West, issues such as poverty, inequality, and political repression will surely ensue.
Recognizing the role political Islam has in the success of informal communities offers an opportunity to mitigate the issues associated with failed developmentalism and ‘modernization’ efforts. “Cities in the developing world do not share the common history of the industrial economic development model which originated in Europe and the United States, thereby further limiting the applicability of such western-based approaches to development” (Stewart, 1999, p. 128). Stewart (1999) emphasizes this further by stating:

Economic restructuring has been the defining economic characteristic of urban change in the developed world since the 1970s. Cities in the developing world, however, have been more greatly impacted by ideological shifts, often from socialist to capitalism, and now to post-cold war ‘global capitalism’. Therefore, changes in factors such as production processes, land use and transportation networks, which have dominated the transformation of urban morphology and city hierarchies in the United States, are less influential in the developing world context. (p. 144)

Egypt, therefore, is in a state of transition creating sweeping changes in the economy, including the elimination of many consumer subsidies, privatization of state-owned industries, currency devaluation and large reduction in public spending manifesting as large unemployment rates and poverty. By many accounts, including that of the Egyptian government’s, this is considered “modernization.” But alternative traditions of development planning, such as political Islam, have always existed outside the state and sometimes in opposition to it (Sandercock, 1994, p. 2).

Sandercock (1994) discusses and critiques the traditional historiographies of planning by exposing its noir side and argues the importance of introducing broader historiographical and theoretical debates into the field of planning history. Sandercock (1994) states:
It is assumed that planning is a “good thing”—a progressive practice—and that its opponents are reactionary, irrational, or just plain greedy. It is seen as natural and right that planning should be “solution-driven” rather than attentive to the social construction of what are defined as “urban problems”. (p. 5)

Like Sandercock 1994), Beauregard (1989) examines the historical roots of state planning, highlighting its modernist elements. Beauregard (1989) argues that the deconstruction of modernist planning represents a clash between new (postmodern) and old (modern) forms of urban political economies and of social thought. Beauregard (1989) defines modernist planning as:

A project derived from beliefs about knowledge and society and is inextricably linked to the rise of capitalism, the formation of the middle class, the emergence of a scientific mode of legitimation, the concept of an orderly and spatially integrated city that meets the needs of society, and the fostering of the interventionist state. (p. 386)

Beauregard (1989) goes on to state, “Modernist planning has been dominated by procedural theories; that is, generic, paradigmatic theories meant to be applicable regardless of context, thus leaving space and time unattended” (p. 390). Modernist mainstream planning historians have also seen their subject as the profession and their object as describing and celebrating its emergence and achievements (Sandercock, 1994, p. 7). Sandercock (1994) states:

This approach has at least two significant limitations. If the subject of planning is the profession, then only those who qualify as “professionals” are seen as relevant historical agents. The result is a narrative about the ideas and actions of white middle-class men… And if the object of planning history is the emergence of the
profession and its achievements, then there is the privileging of a heroic story
(Planning as Progress) at the expense of any kind of critical insight into or
scrutiny of the actual practices of planning. (p. 7)

The modernist approach to planning primarily consists of economic development, not reform, and it sacrifices regulation and the welfare state to the lure of new investment and jobs (Beauregard, 1989, p. 387). “The lessening of state controls and the deepening obeisance to capital investment have exacerbated the negative consequences of rapid economic growth and have even intensified the ‘seesaw’ effect of uneven development” (Beauregard, 1989, p. 389).

Unfortunately, these issues are not acknowledged by the Egyptian government nor their Cairo 2050 plan. Evaluating political Islam’s role as a post-modernist approach to planning may provide a better understanding of informal settlements and the individuals residing within them.

Development in Cairo, Egypt largely follows a modernist approach exacerbating the increase in poverty, particularly in rapidly growing areas. Araby (2002) illustrates this point by stating, “Despite Egypt’s success in following the International Monetary Fund model of economic reform – the Economic Reform policy of the 1980s and Privatization act of the 1990s – attracting foreign investment is still very limited” (p. 398). Araby (2002) goes on to state:

Following Western (European and American) goals and concepts imported by the local elites, educated and trained abroad and transferred by foreign experts in all sectors, many of the projects seem to be very ambitious in the Egyptian context. The standards selected are in many cases far too high, they consume most funds and the resulting benefits are for a few only. (p. 398)

Beauregard (1991) poses the question: “If the city is to be built by experts and their vision reigns, how is it that city building is democratic in the popular meaning of that term?” (p. 191). In
essence, modernist planners have lost touch with the prevailing political-economic forces that are restructuring cities and regions in a global context (Beauregard, 1991, p. 192). Political Islam has thus served as a disruptive force attempting to remedy decades of failed modernist strategy. Beauregard (1991) goes on to state:

The struggle is among an ostensibly transhistorical and transcultural reason carried by capitalism, a liberal democracy ultimately inhospitable to divergent cultural traditions, and a localized society negotiating its identity and survival within a hostile, indigenous as well as inimical “imported” environment. (p. 190)

Modernism’s presence engenders political resistance (Beauregard, 1991, p. 190). Consequently, modernist approaches to development aided the rise of political Islam and its contribution to the organic development of informal settlements, ultimately paving the way for Islamism’s role as a legitimate planning force in a post-modernist context.

Political Islam has major spatial planning implications for all aspects and levels of urban policy. Neglecting political Islam’s potential, results in an incomplete planning agenda, undermining equality and diversity objectives. Incorporating plan making processes designed to include informal settlements in future projects is essential. Recognizing political Islam as an example of a post-modern approach to planning is vital in supporting state planning efforts concerned with the humanity of cities in mind. Beauregard (1991) claims,

Theorists can support this (state planning efforts concerned with the humanity of cities) by giving greater attention to broad existing epistemologies and advancing new techniques and knowledge bases for thinking about practicing planning. Such theories must address more directly the conflicts within society and its social and cultural heterogeneity. (p. 393).
Informality and the lack of modernity should not be construed as problems, but as features of the city that emerged logically from the local context (Tarbush, 2012, p. 172). Political Islam can thus be seen as an informal channel of planning. Egypt’s continued modernist approach to development means that it fails to consider the needs of the majority of Cairo’s residents, has little regard for their preferences and does not seek their approval. Informality has not been a diversion from a superior modernization path but is a logical alternative route for urbanization to have taken given the local context (Tarbush, 2012, p. 183). The views and interests of the majority, rather than existing models from abroad, should form the basis for future plans. Until the Egyptian government recognizes this, political Islam will continue to play a vital role in the development of Cairo’s informal settlements.

Conclusion

Factors such as globalization, failed developmentalism, and repressive regimes, all play a role in the origins and functions of political Islam. Previous literature has emphasized the congruent trend of political Islam as being rooted in fundamentalism, and in some cases, leading to the conceptualization of terrorist organizations. This has contributed to political Islam’s lack of legitimacy in general. What has not been a primary focus, is the important roles organizations advancing political Islam have in civil societies by creating charities, running schools, and a plethora of other services benefiting marginalized populations. While its interaction with the regime primarily determines an organization's legitimacy, its following is primarily determined by the role it plays in civil society. Through the establishment of social services, Islamist’s organizations garner support for their cause, and ultimately limited political backing. Through the use of resources, Islamists hold sway over their following. Although some Islamists advocate violence as a form of protest, their underlying concerns are of no lesser value compared to that of
organizations who do not employ violence. Recognizing the role of planning in political Islam has the potential to mitigate the issues associated with modernization efforts. According to Rahnema (2008):

With the ensuing defeat and humiliation of the Muslim world by the West, Muslim religious leaders, apart from the traditional establishment clerics who continued their opportunistic or quietist politics, followed two broad strategies. One was to reform and modernize, the other was to rehabilitate Islam and return to the fundamentals. The creation of nation-states and national identities in these societies was accompanied by both reform efforts and the gradual emergence of political Islamic movements challenging the status quo. (p. 485)
References


