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Conducting Research on Muslims in the Age of Dichotomies: Ethics, Politics and Responsibilities

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Abstract

Global politics has always existed in an environment brimming with intricacies and transformations. Wars, natural disasters and treaties have both directly and indirectly impacted the state of global politics in addition to societies and individuals. These interactions certainly influence the flow of history while concurrently dictating the relationships between societies. Identity and its constitutive elements have consistently occupied a determinant position in this context and continue to do so (Gellner 1987; Gurses and Ozturk 2020; Douglas 2003; Daniel 2017). And pre-eminent among these and, no doubt, one of the most primal codes of identity is religion (Lybarger 2018; Ozturk 2021; Cassese and Holman 2017). Contrary to arguments that the world is becoming secularised, and that secularisation is an inevitable phenomenon, religion has persistently once more that it is more durable relative to various other normative values, and it persistently emphasises its presence in individuals, societies and politics (Saeed 2017; Fox 2019; Haynes and Wilson 2019). This indicates that religion will maintain this degree of influence for a very long time. We have both witnessed numerous incidents in which religion was a central element and, it seems, will continue to observe myriad instances demonstrating religion's influence as an auxiliary actor.

Keywords: *Islam; research; authoritarianism; politics; ethics*

Introduction

In the context of global, socio-political developments, it becomes apparent that the fragmentation that occurred in the world after the end of the Cold War crystallised in the 2010s. Growing class inequality with the rapidly indurating neo-liberal capitalist economy, the rise of an economic and interests-based hierarchy between countries and the swift yet unconstrained spread of technology and information all resulted in multifaceted changes in the world. These changes also precipitated a degree of alienation between different segments of society. Authoritarian, populist and generally right-leaning political actors who benefitted from, and emboldened their bases with, this 'us vs them' discriminatory mentality came to dominate global politics and began to present theses challenging internationalism, pluralism and coexistence. Former US President Trump, Turkey's Erdoğan and Hungarian leader Orbán are the most notorious and active examples of this phenomenon. As a result of the changing global circumstances, growing economic disparities and, in particular, the rise of right-populist leaders and their devastation of the nature of liberal democracy have created 'others' in opposition to themselves (Ozturk 2019; Hansen et al 2018; Koesel 2014; Zuquete 2017). Within this process of creating an 'other', identities began to be used more frequently than before, and prominent among these identities is religion. One of the acknowledged terms for being an 'other' in the world – or, in other words, Christian-majority countries – is unfortunately to be defined as a

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Muslim. As such, Muslims have become an oft-discussed topic and have more frequently been isolated in various countries. This situation certainly fuels interest in Muslims in a paradoxical manner while simultaneously making it more difficult to conduct research with them.

In light of this cyclical situation, Islam and the Islamic faith began to be perceived more pejoratively, especially after the 1970s when religion appeared more visibly in the political space (Esposito 1998; Mandaville 2020). The onset and persistent nature of the animosity between the United States and Iran in the conditions of the Cold War era certainly had an important role in the manifestation of these circumstances. Moreover, as a result of a series of sociological, political, economic and historical factors, most of the incidents of terrorism that occur in the name of religion throughout the world are an outcome of the instrumental use of Islam. This situation, on the one hand, precipitated a surge in polarisation and disintegration, as mentioned above, and, on the other hand, it resulted in greater debate by social scientists over certain topics relating to Islam. But within these occurrences, clear challenges arise when researching Islam or its related topics.

Apart from these two factors, there has been a recent and pressing need to research Muslim individuals, communities, structures and organisations for a variety of reasons. Both their own relationships and those between individuals and communities have captured the interest of scholars in the fields of social science, international relations, sociology, historical anthropology and more. Despite this interest, the dearth of numerical data regarding the religion of Islam and Muslims forces social scientists to conduct field studies and establish direct relationships with Muslims, though it is clear that numerous sociological challenges emerge within this process.

In light of this, it is clear that the study of Islam and Muslims is both imperative and essential, but this situation becomes more exigent and convoluted as conditions change from day to day. This study aims to discuss the sort of challenges faced by social scientists researching Islam and Muslim populations and conducting research particularly in an ethnographic field, and to identify the fundamental causes of these challenges. In the context of this debate, we argue that there are problems under two main categories both ontologically and in the general characteristics in the time period of the 21st century that appear when social scientists strive to research Islam and Muslims. The problems originating from the nature of the time period pertain to matters of politics, security and accessibility, and, conversely, the ontological problems relate fundamentally to gender, inclusion or exclusion, language and culture. The subsequent sections of this study will discuss the details of these challenges and later seek to explain why, in spite of these hurdles, it is so necessary that we study Islam and Muslims.

Issues Originating from the Nature of the 21st Century

The world entered a new era with the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001. International terrorism had evolved and gained the capacity to conduct actions that could shake the foundations of the world at the heart of developed nations. The Al Qaeda terrorist organization, which we began to define in those days, gradually began to spread, especially in the Middle East. And the savagery of this organisation persists today in the form of the structure which calls itself the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This situation, on the one hand, demonstrates the importance of studying Islam and its related issues, but, on the other hand, various prevailing conditions reveal the extent to which studying Muslims becomes an arduous task.

The 21st century thus becomes a period that we can define as the concurrent emergence of authoritarianism and populism (Haynes 2019). This authoritarian and populist wave crashed over



several different regions: Trumpism, Putinism and Erdoganism, though geographically different, serve the same purpose in creating an 'other' (Haynes 2019; Ozturk 2021). This 'other' manifests as a form of exclusion or negative propaganda, examples of which enveloped Muslims after the September 11 attacks. Three fundamental problems emerge in studies of Muslims in this regard: Security, accessibility and cogency.

Security is fundamentally an issue of data, as we will discuss later, but the security of the researcher is one of the most central problems. It is worth mentioning two issues in this context. Unfortunately, the regions in which Muslim majorities live are fraught with security concerns, particularly due to the atmosphere created by the US occupation of Iraq and the Arab Spring. These problems do not solely relate to terrorism and its impacts. Moreover, authoritarianism and other forms of governance that lack accountability have contributed to both security problems and instability in the region, and this has created problems on a host of issues for researchers, such as conducting field research or remaining in the research area for extended periods of time. But it is worth noting that, while this situation makes it critical that we research Islam and Muslims, it also gradually makes these processes more complicated and paradoxical. While researchers are unable to enter spaces due to security concerns, those who do venture into dangerous areas face some risks.

This paradoxical security problem in turn produces the second predicament: the accessibility of actors in both the field and subject of study (Ozturk 2020). Security concerns both make the region inaccessible and make it challenging to find interviewees from whom to obtain and assess information during the field research. For many Western researchers especially, it is apparent that there is a certain difference in language, culture and worldview, but the destabilisation of the regions where Muslims live with the changing and evolving influence of the world complicate the process of traveling to these regions and conducting research. Though this may be essential in terms of approaching the issue in terms of research methods, it is among the greatest problems faced by researchers today.

Another one of the problems that emerges in relation to the nature of the 21st century is that of the cogency of the region. More precisely, the cogency of the information coming from the region or being given in the region to the researcher. While it is relatively difficult to travel to Muslim-majority regions, it becomes gradually more challenging to gather information at these locations for several reasons and, thus, the process of verifying the accuracy of information that researchers gather in these regions is made more complicated. The most fundamental reason for this is a matter of security for the scholars conducting research in the region or issues of accessibility and the inability to gather conflicting resources. This results with external researchers resorting to manipulation and, sometimes, the partiality of the concluded information. The 'snow-ball' techniques often conducted by foreign researchers in this regard produce information that is biased or somewhat 'directed' and, as a result, portray only one aspect of the studied phenomena.

Researchers must find means by which to overcome these problems, which originate from the nature of the 21st century as well as its social and political climate, and various solutions to these issues are possible. It is very important that researchers understand, before utilising these methods, that it is critical that social science research be conducted on Muslims positioned as the 'other' by hegemonic and common-knowledge resources. Because this research will both help them and those categorically perpetuating the treatment of the 'other' to come to understand different issues and learn about the sources of some problems. It is important that social scientists overcome these challenges, according to the impacts and principles of the research, and there are several ways to do this.

It is worth considering the practices of ethics and security that Western scholars in particular have implemented in recent years and that function well despite a slew of bureaucratic challenges. If relatively dangerous research is intended to be conducted in relation to Muslims, it becomes crucial that a detailed feasibility study, in the context of which a relationship must be formed with regional authorities, should first be conducted. The fundamental reason for this is the deviation from false or directed information. Second, when researchers seek to study a region with a dense Muslim population and where there are relative security problems, researchers may make requests for security-related assistance from their own institutions, but it is important to note that this situation is not as severe as it may be believed. One final point pertaining to the resolution of the cogency problem is that this will improve the scientific quality and importance of studies that will be published. Researchers must reach conclusions that can both complement or negate those of other scholars, and they must share depictions of these views from different perspectives such that the information can be attained that is both necessary and accurate.

Other General Questions

One of the other problems encountered while researching Islam and Muslims is the matter of being an 'insider' or 'outside', an issue that relates to the national origins of the researcher. Researchers can take positions in two manners, as 'insiders' or 'outsiders', and this influences their access to sources of information. Researchers who are generally insiders are able to access information relatively more quickly, and those who are outsiders are unable to access information with great ease. This situation pertains to the general conditions mentioned above. And though the researchers who are insiders can access information more quickly, this timeframe can be lengthened due to the polarisation between groups of Muslims.

The Roots of Contention

In conducting research on Muslim majority societies, most if not all are ex-colonies, whether one is addressing a society/country in Africa or Asia. The literature in the pre-colonial and colonial times delineated the public observance of religion from modernity and advancement according to a unilateral schema of development. The literature especially focused on women wearing Islamic garb as a sign of backwardness and the need for such societies to be saved and 'civilized'. The women were utilized to exemplify the reasons that justify colonization. As Judy Mabro quotes *Veiled Half Truths: Western Travellers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women*:

"A woman went incognito beneath the all-enveloping *izjzar*. Her yellow boots, as she walked splay-footed in baggy trousers, enhanced her appearance of a monstrous duck. Beneath the cloak, perhaps, a gold-edged veil fell below her eyes, or she wore the flower-painted shroud which may still be seen in Arabia and old Jerusalem" (Mabro,57)

The women's dress said everything about the society that they came from. The pre-colonial imaginary set the stage for occupation.

Thus, historically the contentious juxtaposition was established, so much so that current research is predeterminedly coloured with the separation and distinction built on preconceived images of Islam and Muslims. Muslims also have distorted ideas/images and are suspicious of research because they are already aware of their faith being a point of contention. For example, a researcher who is trying to measure the degree of religiosity in a certain Muslim majority country will stumble across inaccuracy because: 1) the sensitivity of the topic (knowing its history, as discussed above), 2) the



degree to which religiosity is either favoured or prohibited by the contemporary political regime and what that entails in terms of the subject and the researcher's personal safety.

Therefore, in the post Arab Spring moment when a country like Egypt is going through political catharsis between politically active Muslims. i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood and secular elites, one cannot ask questions that would indicate how religious the interviewee is and build any assumptions on the data gathered because the responses will be affected by the biases mentioned above.

Secondly, another issue that affects the research is what I refer to as the *incomplete researcher*. On one hand you have country/region specialists who spent most of their lives honing their expertise, however they may not be native speakers of the language, or they might miss cultural nuances in the culture studied. Those researchers who are not natives (outsiders) are more readily given access to information/interviews...etc. On the other hand, natives (insiders) are fortified with language fluency and cultural knowledge but are not usually given access to the same information/ surveys...etc. In addition to the mentioned tools, the native's safety is at risk if they are conducting research especially about religion. Therefore, the *incomplete researcher* always has an incomplete picture because their tools and what they are offered in terms of information does not provide the "whole" picture.

Thirdly it has become increasingly difficult to research Islam and Muslims because of the epistemological and ideational constraints enforced as the academic "norm". The academic "norm" here is the underlying assumption that the laicete approach in separating Church and State exists or is the unilateral path that all societies should strive for as per the liberal understanding of political development.

One sees a growing trend in the literature towards the "securitization" of all things Islamic/Muslim in the aftermath of 9/11. In Tepe and Demirkaya's (2011, 203-204) article they highlight a few trends: 1) the difficulty of fitting religious issues into legal-institutional, behavioralist, empiricist frameworks; 2) the complexity of religion as a subject matter; 3) the issue attention cycle in the discipline; and 4) the secular background and worldview of political scientists.

Moreover, when it comes to Islam, Tepe and Demirkaya (2011, 204) emphasize how:

"The burgeoning accounts of Islamic groups and movements seems to be generating an approach that de-territorializes Islam, relying increasingly on large-n studies. Missing in these works are thorough analyses of domestic actors and institutions in a range of countries where Islam plays a critical role, as well as detailed studies of some countries (e.g., Yemen, Iran, or Saudi Arabia). Perhaps more striking is the trend [...] that places Islam within an increasingly pervasive "securitization" paradigm."

The trend of "homogenizing" the study of Islam and politics has become increasingly polarized with the increase of attacks by groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS. Thus, the study of Islam and Muslims has been reduced to a fast paced reaction to policy related questions that are particularly dictated by U.S. national security interests. As described by Tepe and Deirkaya: "Privileging method-driven approaches, conflict-centered questions, and research frameworks grounded in international relations over others" – Tepe and Demirkaya (2011, 224) conclude – "run the risk of forging homogenizing analytical currents that prove to be fruitless".

The research trends discussed, largely affect the work done on Islam and its followers due to the 'securitization' of the faith in International Relations which has shaped the nature of articles and books which are being published and consequently the research on the topic.

The effect of 9/11 on research was not only the “securitization” of Islam and Muslims, but also a wave of neo-conservative manipulation in academe. In an edited book *Academic Freedom After September 11*, Joel Beinin clearly notes:

“Scholars who study and teach Middle East and the Muslim world have been singled out as disloyal purveyors of information and analysis detrimental to the national interest. Right wing pundits have accused the entire Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), the largest organization of scholars who study the Middle East, of bearing some measure of responsibility for what befell the United States on September 11 because its members failed to warn the American public about the dangers of radical Islam”. (Doumani, 238-239)

The multiple layers of difficulty illustrated above are only a partial list of the limitations that researchers face as they chose to specialize and publish about Islam and its followers, let alone how some societies restrict and devalue the researcher’s work based on gender.

This special edition was conceived as a result of a roundtable discussion at the International Studies Association where the discussants highlighted the difficulties, they face in researching Muslim majority societies. Therefore, the decision was to reflect on those difficulties and highlight how researchers focused on this topic need to be wary of some of the obstacles they might face. As an academic community also, it draws attention to the challenges of the topic under study that cannot be compared to conducting research on a topic that is less tainted by its past colonial experience and that is still in a position of negotiating its very future amidst regional and hegemonic power struggles.

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