

Editor's Introduction

One of the most significant questions in the twenty-first century for academics, politicians, and Western societies more broadly is: How will Islamism impact on our future? This question, like the concept of Islamism itself, is massively complex and extremely mutable, changing, adapting, and transforming in various ideological, geographic, and cultural contexts. These five articles present a small sliver of the work being carried out in the UK on the challenges that Islamism poses for European liberal democracies, especially Britain, and these pieces ultimately propose some learned and hypothesized strategies to bring about a successful and peaceful engagement with this phenomenon.

The problem of academically engaging with Islamism centers in large part on its very nature. What is Islamism? Broadly speaking it has been used in this symposium as a form of political activism that is defined and bounded by Islamic faith. This definition is, as most scholars would point out, a catchall, as Islam has a huge variety of denominational and ideological positions. Some intra-Islamic distinctions

have been apparent almost from the beginning of its emergence as a global religion, while other splits and deviations represent more recent developments—reactions to modernity, the colonial experience,

and the emergence of the modern state. Islam's geographic reach and impact is truly global, from Indonesia to Ireland, from Dubai to Detroit. This diversity has led to multiple uses of the term Islamism and Islamist. In some sections of the literature, Islamism has been used to define peaceful democratic, constitutional, and moderate political activism based on Muslim ideology and organized through religious institutions, content to politically dialogue with and function in otherwise secular states. In other parts of the literature, Islamism has come to signify radical and violent *takfiri* Jihadist activism, almost millenarian in intent, whom other Muslims consider “*takfir*” or deviant from the true path of Islam. These *takfiri* jihadists espouse an ideology of violent confrontation with *kafir*, or non-believers, and Muslims who they believe oppose their actions and don't support their aims. Islamism, ranging in recent years from Afghanistan to Algeria, from Lahore to London, has created strange bedfellows and intra-Islamic sectarian tension. The

establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 led to Shi'i support for Sunni insurgencies, which, on the ground, translated into Iranian support for the predominantly Sunni Palestinian population through organizations such as Hezbollah. Islamists of multiple ethno-national origins and representing a variety of denominations have come together under universalist Islamic banners to oppose *kafir* oppression through jihad, especially apparent in Arab participation in the Afghan War against the Soviet invasion, and the presence of a multi-national *Mujahedin* force fighting on behalf of Muslims in Bosnia during the late 1990s. Yet despite the effervescence of a universal *Umma*, or global Muslim community, today the streets of Baghdad and Basra are covered in blood spilled during intra-Islamic sectarian conflict.

“Engaging with Islamism in Britain and Europe” runs a similar gamut, from Ismail's analysis of identity and cultural practice that challenges secular, republican, and colonially inspired ideals of membership in national groups and citizenship, to Lambert's and O'Duffy's analyses of the palpable security concerns over how best to understand and confront jihadists, to Awan's analysis of the dislocation and search for identity among second-generation British Asians. My own piece asks whether the threats posed by radicalized violent Islamists are the same from one European state to the next. The context of our analyses is heated, and the political stakes are high. Debates over the banning of the veil in France often become conflated, at the popular level, with consternation over traditional cultural practices among British Asians in the North of England. In the media these kinds of issues are further conflated with concerns over immigrant integration and broader concerns about national identity in a changing Europe. The danger exists that such polarizing and un-nuanced views of Islamic activism will blind us to the difference between popular demands for essential democratic reform in North Africa and the Middle East, and radical al-Qaeda objectives to universally implement particularly strong forms of *Sharia* and establish a new *Caliphate* in the historical territory of *Al-Andalus*.

In the final analysis, is this Huntington's clash of civilizations? Is it a function of non-integrated ethnic groups seeking identities in a changing Europe? Are the problems of European engagement with Islamism imperial “left-overs” in a post-colonial world? How have transformations in technology and patterns of migration affected this engagement?

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Do Western, especially U.S. and UK, foreign policy interventions in the name of human security matter for the potential radicalization of Islamists? There are more questions here than answers. One crucial aspect that emerges from all five of these articles is that the issues surrounding engagement with Islamism differ dramatically for Europe than for the United States, as a function of geographic proximity and history. The United States, throughout its history, has had to deal with issues of immigration. In the contemporary European Union the free movement of peoples within the EU, and high levels of immigration from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East pose fundamentally new sets of problems for states and identities which, for

almost two centuries, were relatively insulated from internal religiously-based cultural challenges and isolated from the rough edge of their imperial endeavors. Ultimately, if past engagements with perceived threats to “civilization” and “ways of life” have taught us anything, be they defined as politics, security, or culture, it is that knowledge is power. The more we question and engage with the idea of what Islamism is in the modern world and what it means for Europe and the rest of the world, the more precise and potentially successful the strategies will be that can be used in this process of exchange and engagement.

SYMPOSIUM AUTHORS' BIOS

Jonathan Githens-Mazer is a lecturer in politics at the University of Exeter, Cornwall Campus and co-director of the Exeter Centre for Ethno-Political Studies (EXCEPS). His first book, *Myths and Memories of the Easter Rising: Cultural and Political Nationalism in Ireland* (Irish Academic Press, 2006), examined the importance of the 1916 Easter Rising in the “radicalization” of popular Irish nationalism. He was recently awarded an Economic and Social Research Council (UK) grant to lead a team investigating the effects of colonial violence and incomplete democratization on radicalization among North African immigrant communities in Britain, France, and Spain.

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Robert Lambert, having worked in street level counter-terrorism/counter-violent extremism policing in London continuously since 1980, embarked on a new career in academic research at the end of 2007. Following his experience as a practitioner his chief research theme examines community based approaches to counter-terrorism and counter-violent extremism policing. Lambert can be reached at: R.A.Lambert@exeter.ac.uk.

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