

## The Geopolitical Implications Of Globalization On Nationalism And Religion

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### Abstract

This paper aims to study the geopolitical implications of globalization on nationalism and modernity. Modernization process has become an object of analysis from the viewpoint of geopolitical benefits and advantages of certain state or non-state actors. On the other hand, this process has been associated with a series of socio-political issues, with deep implications for national and international security, following its rapid development. These problems have multiplied especially in the Muslim realms of the Third World, with important geopolitical effects. Furthermore, the “mixed blessing” of globalization as the main engine of this process, has been diffused unequally in the world, giving birth to fault lines between the rich and the poor, even deepening the gap between these groups inside developing countries. This situation raised the tensions between societies, especially for states under authoritarian regimes. It also brought about mass delusion and frustration amongst various social groups, which found shelter in religious ideologies, Islam making no exception.

On the other hand, the complex processes of modernity have had a significant impact of nationalism and national identity. Thus we are not surprised at all that the challenges facing political “westernized” elites in developing countries, emanating from forces claiming to represent exclusively the “authentic” tradition, are used as a powerful nationalist instrument with religious affinity and orientation, such as those developed in the Third World countries during the '70s. Within such a context of geopolitical collision between modernity and tradition, states with Muslim majority populations can't (and are not) immune from this process. On the opposite, as various crises and conflicts have demonstrated, Muslim minorities on non-Muslim states have vigorously professed their discontent against oppression and misrule. Their cause is more often than not articulated in Islamist and nationalist terms, thus adding a strong geopolitical tincture to Political Islam. As we will argue in this paper, the nexus between nationalist and Islamic discourse has been evident in a number of cases, such as Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Philippine, and so on.

**KEYWORDS:** geopolitics of terrorism, globalization, non-state actors, Islamic extremism, international security

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### Introduction

For the most part of the last two centuries, modernity forces –originating first from Europe and then from the United States– have embraced most of world's geographic space, nearly all states of the planet, bringing dramatic social, political, economic, technological and institutional changes. During the first historical stages these changes were delivered towards the developing world through European imperialism,

thus provoking the reaction and resistance of socio-economic forces. In first place the character of those forces was local, while after a few decades it became regional and geopolitical – as witnessed by a lot of historical events in Middle East and Muslim world in general (Fuller, 2002: 48-60).

The process of modernity might become a subject of analysis regarding geopolitical advantages for states or other non-state actors (like extremist Islamic movements or terrorist organizations of religious nature). It is our hypothesis that there have been many and incontestable such geopolitical advantages. Therefore, this paper will further impenetrate and elaborate into this direction. On the other hand, this process has been followed by a series of socio-political issues, with deep effects in national and international security, accompanying the process of rapid and convulsive development. The vast majority of people in the developing world live in urban heterogeneous conglomerates, instead of rural areas where they were settled for decades (Kagan, 1994). This is a process that has activated destructive forces for traditional orders, whose consequences lies not only in the socio-political sphere, but also in the more concrete realm of security and geopolitics, as long as it disintegrates the previous status quo in order to (and with the argument of) building a new order. Traditional values related to rural and country life, the enlargement of family nucleus and of the structures necessary to support it, social connections and the comfort or easiness of the traditional way of life, all crumble with this abrupt introduction in city life. This situation gives birth to a psychological stress for a large number of individuals, pushing them towards a more familiar context of values (Kagan, 1994; Fuller 2002: 67-83). On any case, even with precarious life conditions, urban centers in developing countries continue to attract millions of people from rural villages, which prefer urban poverty compared to traditional rural life with no chance for employment, consume, education, medical treatment, progress and/or other urban commodities. Such a social context has been historically home of delusions (whose main cause has been the incapacity and failure to adapt to a modernity context) that can be manipulated very easily, thus strengthening radical and extremist ideologies both, political and religious.

### **Globalization and Geopolitics: religious and nationalist aspects**

These problems have multiplied especially in the Muslim areas of the Third World, with important geopolitical effects. Big urban conglomerates –such as Cairo in Egypt, Istanbul in Turkey, Teheran in Iran, Dhaka in Bangladesh, Karachi in Pakistan or Jakarta in Indonesia– have more than 12 million inhabitants. It is exactly this type of problematic context of urban life that Islamic movements have exploited during the last few decades (Fuller, 2002: 70-2).

Furthermore, as argued by Clement Henry (2006: 112-36), the “mixed blessing” of modernity, and the globalization as the engine of this process, has diffused disproportionately throughout the world, generating virulent social tensions, followed by the birth of new radical movements and by the strengthening of religious and ideological extremism. By now, a very limited number of elites in Third World countries have more in common with the elites of other parts of the world, than with the poorer and illiterate citizens inside their societies. The deepening of inequalities in wealth, privileges and power, contributed to growing domestic tensions, taking gradually a political shape,

especially in states with relatively authoritarian political rule. Generally the elites in these countries frequently find themselves in defensive positions aiming to keep the status quo (Jackson, 2007: 220-2). This means that they deny any possibility for change, increasing at one time the degree of authoritarianism within the country, polarizing further the society and offering fertile grounds for extremist ideological and religious movements to flourish. The power of these elites is structured around a pseudo-democratic type of government. Under these conditions it is almost unavoidable for signs of delusions and massive irritation to appear in various social strata that can all be accommodated within the idea of equality offered by religious ideologies, such as Islam. Thus, as Fuller argues (2002: 77-80): “*Islamic movements in the Muslim world address directly these issues when they articulate for social justice, as a main goal, within a traditional context of values, as well as the need to generate non-public and non-state structures of social support*”. For as long as the actual agreements of political elites are identified with the United States of the West, oppositionist movements will keep on sustaining anti-western attitudes. These attitudes are frequently transformed in extremist movements, using terrorist violence legitimized on religious grounds. Their objective is profoundly a geopolitical one, as long as they demand not only domestic changes, but also changes in the very nature of foreign policy orientation.

On the other hand, the complex processes of modernity and globalization have had an important influence on the concept of nationalism and in the formation of national identities. The majority of Third World countries achieved their independence towards the mid-twentieth century. But nearly all the regimes that came into power in the Third World countries developed a new pattern of secular nationalism, commonly of a slight socialist shade. This was the case especially in the Muslim states of North Africa and Middle East (Hinnebusch, 2006: 151-71). Former colonialist regimes had generally encouraged secular values, with the aim to decrease throughout the Muslim world the institutional and financial strength of Islam, because it was seen as a powerful center of resistance to colonial rule and authority. The first generation of independent leaders often collaborated with religious forces during the national liberation wars, but preserving on any case their secular ideology. Their vision was dominated by the Western model of state-building, such as the Shah in Iran or Anwar Sadat (following Gamal Abdel Nasser) in Egypt (Lewis, 1997: 133-57 & 218-44). But in the vast majority of cases independence failed to solve a great deal of key national problems – it even created new problems.

When independency euphoria faded away, authoritarianism, corruption and the fights for power within the new regimes, produces waves of popular reaction and discontent. It is exactly for these problems that Islamists have traditionally accused the politics of the new post-independency generation of Middle East political leaders. The new leadership in almost all the Muslim countries failed to fulfill the national expectations and economic needs, as shown by the cases of Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and so on. They were also accused for disrespect towards Islam and for inability and lack of will in confronting Israel (Lewis, 2004: 85). During the first period after independence the new elites based their authoritarian regimes at secular nationalism and looked to the transforming and coercive power of the state in order to fulfill their agenda. This gradually identified state with nation, imitating the European state model, but with the exception of frequently using the military to protect the power elite, not democratically elected and with no democratic intentions in governing the state. This

clash of interests, observed especially in Middle Eastern states, left Islamists out of power, thus orienting them towards identification with the broad population, against the power elite. This gradually transformed them into a powerful anti-state and anti-elite instrument.

This context had clear geopolitical manifestations, as shown by the uprising in a series of Arab countries during the last years, widely known as the “Arab Spring”. Soon, the change towards democratic and prosperous regimes, that a lot of people in the West expected to see from these revolts, left its place to disillusion and doubt, because of the increasing power of extremist Islamic movements, willing to use political Islam for their geopolitical ambitions and goals (Friedman, 2012; Peterson, 2011; Sullivan, 2011). In this sense, in almost all the Muslim world political Islam was quickly transforming itself into a clash of social classes (even though Islamists hesitate to use such class concepts).

But this is not a new and exclusive phenomenon of the Muslim world. It has been seen also in India, Brazil and/or in other parts of the world. Any challenge that ruling political elites have had from forces claiming to represent the “authentic” and true tradition is closely connected to nationalism and religion (Fuller, 2002; Sullivan, 2011). This was a powerful element of the Third World countries in domestic and international politics during and after the ‘70s, as indicated by the cases of Hinduism in India, ultra-Orthodox Judaism in Israel, militant Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Sikh nationalism in Punjab (India), “liberatory theology” in Latin America or political Islam in the Muslim world.

The ‘90s have evidenced the close relation of politics with religion, not only for the Muslim world, but also of Orthodox Church in Russia and Serbia, or in the case of Greek nationalism and the strong implications of religion in it (Juergensmeyer, 1993: 1-8). In this sense, it wouldn’t be wrong to assert that after the Cold War, religious-based nationalism is often superposed to secular nationalism –as witnessed by the cases of Greece, Russia and Serbia (regarding the Orthodox religion), or Syria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and a lot of other countries of the greater Middle East (regarding Muslim religion) – or that nationalism culminates its efficiency when religion coincides with national identity.

The Muslim countries are not immune by this process of geopolitical clash between modernity and tradition, mainly in Third World and developing countries. On the opposite, as resulted by the multiple crises and conflicts, Muslim minorities in non-Muslim states have violently expressed their discontent against oppression and misrule. Their cause is articulated at the same time on Islamist and nationalist terms, giving political Islam an intense geopolitical dimension. The connection between nationalist and Islamist discourse has been clear in the cases of Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Philippine, and so on (Fuller, 2002: 67-81; Sachs, 2001). Muslim minorities have exploited this connection in order to fulfill their objective for autonomy or independence. On the other hand, having imposed draconian rules upon their non-Muslim minorities, Muslim states face the same threats because all these ethnic groups or religious communities present similar request towards the Muslim states. Some of the most prominent cases are the Berbers in Morocco, the non-Muslim populations in South Sudan, the Kurds in Iraq, Turkey and Iran, the Azeris in Iran, and the Baluqs or Sindhis in Pakistan, etc (Kagan, 1994). It derives that while in their discourse Islamists seem eager protect the separatist rights of Muslim minorities in other states, they don’t accept and/or respect those rights for other minorities within Muslim majority states.

When a specific minority (or majority) group within a society chooses to use religion in an ethnic or regional level in the political arena, then the geopolitical consequences become inevitable. Any open society has its own identity politics, including the United States and a number of member-states of the European Union. Identity politics can function in two ways: it can serve as a social bridge that connects two or more groups within a society, thus contributing in the unification of a society under a common identity denominator. Or, as happens in most cases, identity politics can serve in a schismatic way, especially in multiethnic states of developing or underdeveloped countries, where the system is kept united by authoritarian regimes. It is a fact though that the last two decades have witnessed a growing number of multiethnic societies, mainly due to large migratory waves from Third World countries towards developed ones. But as Fuller (2002: 71-2) argues, “only those multicultural societies built voluntarily will be successful, while the states that transform themselves into jail for its minorities are bound to suffer disorder and fierce rebellions. Muslim identity shows up more when tyrants are not Muslims”.

Nowadays even European nation-states are experiencing great changes not only of a demographic nature, but also of a social and economic one (following the economic difficulties of the last years) (Grigoriadis, 2011: 101-9). These changes represent the transformation of geopolitical balances and the increase of Muslim demographical, social and economic weight inside the European continent. On the other side, a series of difficulties is surfacing almost everywhere when it comes to assimilating the new emigratory waves of the last two decades (as with Turks in Germany, Arabs in France or Albanians in Italy and Greece). But Islamists are among those working more actively within the Muslim communities in the Western countries, offering communitarian help and guaranteeing the values, identities and Islamic structure of those communities. European Islamism – understood as a Muslim moderated doctrine, not as political Islam – has strengthened the communitarian cohesion, thus perpetuating the differences with European culture. If western societies confront the challenges of adapting to new immigrants, on the other hand, a large number of Muslim countries face the opposite problem of multiculturalism inside their societies. This happens because unassimilated minorities, especially non-Muslim communities, are now lesser and lesser ready to hide or give up their identity, demanding full legal and social rights (Huntington, 1993: 22-49). The Muslim world is full of such problems and Islamists are a key component of political life with their radical support for the rights and interests of Muslim community.

From a legal point of view, Islamists<sup>1</sup> are frequently found in difficult positions, because the Islamic law is very clear in prohibiting ethnic distinctions among Muslims. While only a few Islamists – mainly belonging to the Wahhabi movement – stand for the non-observance of the rights of other non-Muslim minorities, the vast majority of them are clearly focused in strengthening the Muslim doctrine and the rights of this religious community (Ayoob, 2004: 1-14; Roy, 1994: 48-60). So, for example, Islamists in Indonesia, Malaysia and Egypt, aren't against minorities, but more interested in the

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<sup>1</sup> At this point we must clarify that the term “Islamist” is used to characterize the part of muslim community inclined to connect Islam with political power and to the state more generally. Therefore we should make the distinction between political Islam (and Islamists as deliverers of religious messages into political life) and Muslim believers belonging to a much bigger community that sees the role of religion completely isolated from political power and/or struggle.

wellbeing and prosperity of the Muslim community and for the stability of a Muslim state. Thus we can assert that Islamists (as political vectors of religious messages) are deeply engaged in the issues of interpreting multiculturalism in the Muslim world and doesn't offer a unified viewpoint on the topic.

For a lot of people, especially in the Muslim world and/or the developing countries, globalization isn't but a new variety of western hegemony, especially of the American ideology – an economic, political and cultural package with doubtful benefits. This viewpoint represents the ideological mantle that is associated with globalization. It has become a strong component of political Islam discourse. At the same time, it has obtained clear geopolitical dimension, because it geographically and politically links the West with the less developed world of Muslim states (with the exception of a few states that managed to become developed ones). Thus, the losers from this multidimensional process of globalization have found shelter within pseudo-ideologies or so-called “alternatives” of religious ideology (as with Islam), not only regarding the organization of the state, but also of its foreign policy (Fuller, 2002: 77-80; Roy 1994: 60-75).

The Muslim world and political Islam as *par excellence* representatives of the Third World states, has served as a guardian of cultural traditions emanating from religion, culture and Islamic tradition. So, one of the most important discourses of Islamists and other type of nationalists in the Muslim world, was about the dangers emanating from globalism. Another political argument of Islamists was related to the economic principles of the Muslim religious doctrine that should guide all the Muslim states. This adds another geo-economic dimension to the geopolitics of political Islam. But this approach isn't an exclusive argument of Islamists alone. At this point we find very interesting the argument of John Gray (1998: 192) about societies of Eastern Asia that can perfectly adapt for political Islam as well: “in Asian culture market institutions are not teleologically seen as goals *per se*, but as instruments to produce wealth and social cohesion. [...] ‘Asiatic freedom’ from economical teleology enables market institutions to reform based on the influence their functioning has on the values and stabilities of a society”. The Islamist reasoning on economy and globalization reflects the same ideas, independently from the fact that Muslim states have had a lot of problems in applying their version of modernization compared to the success stories of some East Asian states. Finally, Islamists share the discontent about the fact that economic and social justice is difficult in a social darwinistic order of Western capitalism.

The importance of state has been decisive in every historical period of international relations after 1648. This is even more so in the actual stage of geopolitical balances in the Muslim countries in general and specifically in the Middle East. The question rising ahead of us is whether the state serves its citizens or vice versa. In the West this question has a clear in favor of the idea that the state definitely should serve its citizens, but things are not as clear when it comes to the role of state in the Muslim world. So, for example, historically the Turkish state has opposed the doctrine of political Islam, maybe more firmly than the vast majority of other states from the Muslim world. In the preamble of Turkish constitution is written that: “The Turkish state is eternal”. As one of the most consolidated democracies of the Muslim world, lately the concept of state supremacy in Turkey (especially during the Erdogan's government), was put under question (Akcalli, 2011: 40-58). The Turkey's Islamists realized that the existing status has been an obstacle for their participation in the political arena. As long as Islamists are

not part of power, they will continue to support the argument of the importance people should have vis-à-vis state. But this viewpoint changes soon enough after they come into power.

One of the key premises of globalization is the erosion of state sovereignty. In the vast majority of Third World states the threat comes from two levels. First, state sovereignty weakens by globalizing processes, such as: international organizations, the spread of new world norms, economic and political interdependency, transportation and communication networks, technological processes that diminish control of information, etc. On the other hand, state sovereignty weakens due to the increase of regionalism, nationalism, criminal organizations and activity, as well as by the diminished state control on local level (Sorensen, 2007: 357-78). The danger of weak states in the Muslim world is today more present in Indonesia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia states, Caucasus states, Sudan, Iraq, Egypt and Algeria, just to mention a few of them. This increases the likelihood not only for the empowerment of religious ideologies, such as political Islam, but also of the challenges and threats they represent for the state and its geopolitical regional dimensions. Such a situation of weak state authority and control has created the premises for the growth of religious extremism and terrorist violence.

This phenomenon is closely related with the “failed state” security theory, where diminishing authority, disrespect for legal norms and the lack of control over central state institutions give birth to domestic anarchy and criminality. But if Islam can offer a necessary bridge or the moral power in order to prevent the collapse of a specific political order, will largely depend on how Islamists will apply it. As Kaplan Argues, in the great majority of African states, Islam has greater chances to succeed in this direction, compared to other ideologies (Kaplan, 1994). This testifies that in weak states it is much easier to use terrorism as a strategic instrument and asset and that in such contexts terrorist violence for religious purposes has more chances to succeed as geopolitical factor.

## **Conclusion**

Islamic movements can be seen as conservatives and progressive, because such terms bear a deep ideological connotation. In conditions of weak states with economic, political social and cultural problems, they can produce geopolitical effects in the states foreign policy. In such state and social environments especially extremist ideologies are more prone to use terrorist violence in order to promote their political and/or geopolitical interests. This shows how alive is the power of religion as a source of political and social change, not only for the Muslim countries (especially those of the Middle East), but also for other religions.

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