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BRIEF REPORT

Grasping Arab Islamist responses to the war on Gaza

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ABSTRACT

A year after Hamas's 7 October 2023 attacks and Israel's war on Gaza, it is clear that Islamists across the region are significant actors in the conflict and that the Arab Islamist field has been affected by the war. This raises several questions. How have Islamists responded to the war on Gaza? To what extent has the conflict triggered new dynamics? How can we explain spatial and temporal variations, and what might this say about (the study of) Islamism – and social movements more broadly? Introducing this Forum on 'Arab Islamist responses to the war on Gaza', we unpack these questions, drawing on classic debates on Islamism and social movements and the Forum's country-specific contributions to offer some initial observations. We show that, while support for Palestine is broad, not all Islamists responded alike and that, although the war has triggered notable changes, there are important continuities. We note that ideology is a poor predictor of behaviour, with significant variations within sub-categories and across national contexts, as ideology and interests intersect within political opportunity and threat structures. Transnational dynamics are refracted through domestic conditions and, though Iran is the enabler, relations between members of the Axis of Resistance are also important.

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Hamas's shocking 7 October 2023 attacks on Israel (including purported crimes against humanity; Khan, 2024) and Israel's ensuing war on Gaza (ruled by the International Court of Justice as plausible genocide; International Court of Justice, 2024) have resonated across, and beyond, the region. Palestine has returned to the top of the regional – and international – agenda and the conflict has been described as marking the end of the long post-2011 Arab uprisings decade. This has given rise to discussions about what the regional reactions to the war on Gaza tell us about

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regional politics today and whether we are witnessing the emergence of fundamentally new dynamics or rather a kind of 'forward to the past' movement (Valbjørn et al., 2024).

Such questions are also relevant for the Arab 'Islamist field'. Since 2011, discussions have raged on whether and how Islamists would shape and were shaped by the regional transformations the Arab uprisings had sparked. Having first predicted that Islamists would become key regional players, a decade later Arabs were said to have turned away from religious parties ('Arabs are losing faith in religious parties and leaders', *Economist*, 5 December 2019). Others argued that, though weakened, it was premature to declare Islamism obsolete (Lynch, 2022). Some speculated about a 'new dawn of political Islam' (Robbins, 2023). This debate about Islamism's fate – a feature of discussions about Islamism since the 1950s – continued after 7 October. Besides questioning whether Hamas will turn out as winner or loser (Cronin, 2024; Pape, 2024), a year into the war on Gaza it is clear that not only Palestinian but Islamists across the region are significant actors in the conflict and that the Arab Islamist field has been affected by the war.

This raises a number of questions. How have Islamists across the region responded to the war on Gaza? To what extent has the conflict triggered genuinely new dynamics? How can we explain spatial and temporal variations, and what might this say about (the study of) Islamism – or indeed social movements more broadly? In this Special Forum, we explore these questions by examining Arab Islamist groups across the region in different national contexts with different relationships with Israel and the US. We cover a wide variety of Islamist responses (mainly) during the first year of the war on Gaza, including both Shia and Sunni; sub-categories such as Ikhwani[1] and Salafi, wilayi[2] and those following Iraq's marja'iyyah; missionary/quietist, political and armed; nationally focused and transnational; those that are part of, outside of, or opposed to the Iran-led Axis of Resistance. More specifically, the Special Forum looks at three classic debates: the tension between rhetoric and behaviour; the role of ideology vs. strategic interests and contextual factors in determining behaviour; and the interplay between domestic and transnational dynamics. While the other Forum contributions focus on Islamists in specific national contexts – Lebanon (Daher), Yemen (Weissenberger), Syria (Drevon), Iraq (Rudolf), Jordan (Ryan) – in this Introduction, we unpack these three dimensions and bring the other articles into comparative dialogue.

Rhetorical and behavioural variations in Islamist responses

Palestine has figured prominently among most Arab Islamists, going back to the early days of modern Islamism. Nonetheless, scholars of Islamism broadly acknowledge that instead of lumping all Islamists together, one should pay attention both to differences among Islamists and to how similar kinds of Islamists can differ across national contexts (Ayoob & Lussier, 2020; Wagemakers, 2022).

Looking at Arab Islamist responses to the war on Gaza, at a *rhetorical* level, the overall pattern is expressions of solidarity with the Palestinians and condemnation of Israel's behaviour. But there are noteworthy variances. Some Islamists limit themselves to condemning Israel's behaviour, others call for the eradication of Israel. Some distinguish between Jews and Zionists, others call for an all-out war against Jews (and Christians). Some have both endorsed the 7 October attacks and praised Hamas as a legitimate resistance force fighting for national liberation (e.g., Lebanon's Hizbullah and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood, Yemen's Houthis, Iraq's Shia Islamists). Others, mostly Salafis, have expressed qualified support, praising the Palestinians' violent struggle but remaining ambiguous or silent regarding Hamas. Egypt's Salafist Call and Yemeni Salafists have portrayed the conflict as a legitimate defensive jihad, without referring to Hamas. Al-Qaeda applauded the 7 October attacks, framing them as a global jihad against the 'Zionist-Crusader' alliance but, though some regional 'franchises' named Hamas' armed wing, the Qassam Brigades, none praised Hamas as such. Still others have denounced Hamas outright. Following anti-Shia doctrines prevalent among Salafis (Steinberg, 2009; Wagemakers, 2021), Islamic State (IS), which had previously rebuked Hamas as an 'apostate movement' failing to apply sharia, condemned the Palestinian movement for fighting 'under the banner of the Iranian axis' and called instead for attacking Jews not only in Israel/Palestine but worldwide (Bunzel, 2023). Yet others have remained silent (e.g., Salafis in Jordan).

Whether and how rhetoric is translated into *action* also varies. The virulent rhetoric of Yemen's AQAP (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) and Syria's IS have not led to actual action. Hizbullah, al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, the Houthis, and the 'Islamic Resistance in Iraq' are prominent examples of groups who attacked Israeli or US targets transnationally (Weissenburger; Drevon; Daher; Rudolf). However, even here, fiery rhetoric has not necessarily translated into action, for instance in Iraq (Rudolf). Others have stayed within their national borders and not been violent. In some places, they have been prominent in organising boycotts and protests, cooperating not only with different strands of Islamism but also with non-Islamists, as in Jordan and Morocco (Ryan; El Atti, 2023a). Elsewhere, there have been intra-Islamist divides, such as in

Yemen (Weissenburger). Still others, e.g., Jordan's Salafis, have refrained from any significant action (Ryan).

A break from or a return to the past?

Comparing the Islamist field today with the post-Arab uprisings era, it might be tempting to conclude that the war on Gaza not only marks the end of the long post-2011 decade but has also given rise to a fundamentally new era of Islamist politics. At least two differences stand out. The first concerns the prominence of Palestine on the Islamist agenda. In the decade after 2011, Palestine seemed to recede in favour of other issues more directly related to the uprisings, including how Islamists should navigate new domestic opportunities, increasing authoritarian repression, and a regional rivalry marked by sectarianisation and polarised views on Islamism. Abdo (2013) declared that the Sunni-Shia divide had supplanted Palestine as the central mobilising factor in Arab politics. The Abraham Accords of 2020–2021, normalising relations between Israel and Bahrain, the UAE, Morrocco and Sudan, seemed to confirm this, with Morocco's PJD and Bahrain's al-Menbar, both Islamist parties, supporting the Accords. Yet even then, they were the outliers among Arab Islamists and, today, Palestine figures prominently on Islamists' agendas across the region, and the PJD is leading protests together with leftist groups against Israel's war on Gaza and normalisation (El Atti, 2023b; Gunning et al., 2024).

Another difference concerns cross-sect relations among Islamists. The accelerating sectarianisation of regional politics after the Arab uprisings regularly placed Sunni and Shia Islamists in opposing camps. This was not only so in the sectarianised wars in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq but also in protests in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Lebanon, and, significantly, led Hamas to break with the Shia-led Axis of Resistance in response to the Syrian conflict. The picture looks very different today. Hamas has not only rejoined the Axis but their strongest regional supporters in the current conflict are Shia Islamists: Hizbullah, the Houthis, and members of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (Matthiesen, 2024).

Nevertheless, the novelty in regional Islamist responses should not be overstated. Dynamics from the post-2011 decade, such as divisions among Yemeni Islamists, or Salafist critiques of Hamas, are still visible and the war has reignited Jordan's past protest coalition. Hamas had already fully returned to the Axis by the late 2010s. The PJD's and al-Menbar's positions on the Abraham Accords were outliers, with most Arab Islamists denouncing the Accords (Yildirim, 2021). Taking a longer historical perspective, some of the current patterns hark back to before 2011. Palestine has traditionally figured prominently on Islamists' agendas (Kurzman & Naqvi, 2010) and cross-sect cooperation among Islamists has a long history. In the 1950s and 1960s, Shia

and Sunni Islamists often cooperated to counter secular and leftist forces. Many Sunni Islamists were inspired by the Iranian (Shia) Islamic revolution in 1979 and, during the 1980s, cooperation between armed Sunni and Shia Islamists was more prominent than conflict (Ataie et al., 2021; Lefèvre et al., 2024). At the time of the 2006 war, Hizbullah was not only popular among the broader Sunni Arab public but also among Sunni Islamists regionally (Valbjørn & Bank, 2012), and Hizbullah has long supported Hamas, including during the al-Aqsa Intifada, and the 2006 and 2008–9 wars on Gaza.

'It's not (just) ideology, stupid!'

As Arab Islamist responses have varied greatly, how do we explain this? Drawing on classic debates on Islamism and social movements more broadly, we offer some initial observations and answers.

Studies on Islamism and social movements show that ideology, while important, does not on its own determine behaviour (Gunning, 2012; Hroub, 2010; della Porta, 1995). Despite broadly subscribing to a shared ideology, there is considerable variation among ideological sub-groups. While Jordan's Brotherhood has protested non-violently, Lebanon's Brotherhood, al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, has carried out armed attacks against Israel (Ryan; Daher). Against Moroccan Salafis joining protests, Jordanian Salafis largely stayed away, underlining that ideology alone is a bad predictor of behaviour. Similarly, Syrian jihadi-Salafists ranged from denouncing Hamas, through offering qualified support for Palestinian resistance, to all-out support for Hamas (Drevon). In Yemen, Salafi al-Rashad echoed Ikhwani al-Islah, comparing the Houthis actions to Israel's, while jihadi-Salafi AQAP outdid the historically anti-Israeli and antisemitic rhetoric of the Houthis (Weissenburger) – thus placing AQAP closer to the (Shia) Houthis than their Sunni counterparts.

While Islamism studies, hitherto predominantly Sunni-centric, has focused largely on intra-Sunni differences (Valbjørn & Gunning, 2021), there are ideological variations among Shia Islamists and responses have varied, not just between but also amongst variants. Although almost all attacks were carried out by Shia Islamists, not all Shia Islamists carried out attacks. The more nationally-centred who do not follow Iran's *wilayat al-faqih* ideology, such as Iraq's Da'wa Party and the Sadrists, did not participate in armed attacks. Those who did were broadly *wilayi* (following *wilayat al-faqih*) – suggesting that ideology should not be ignored (see also Meijer, 2005). But there are important differences. Despite both being *wilayi*, Kata'ib Hizbullah (KH) took more risks than Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) (Rudolf). The Houthis, which, though having become more *wilayi*, still ideologically diverge, have gone further than the *wilayi* Iraqi groups (Weissenberger; Rudolf). The response of Hizbullah, another *wilayi* group, has , for a variety of reasons,

been in a different class to the others (Daher). A narrow focus on ideology is thus problematic.

A second important lesson from broader debates is that ideology is not necessarily acted upon, rendering discourse analysis on its own deficient (Skare, 2023). The most rhetorically radical, such as AQAP and IS, did not act, whereas rhetorically more measured groups, such as Hizbullah and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, did. Groups with very similar rhetoric, such as al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Jordan's Brotherhood, opted for different actions.

A third lesson is to see Islamism as part of a broader ideological spectrum (Burgat, 2019). Not only have Islamists been fundamentally shaped by other ideologies – e.g., Marxism, anti-colonialism, Third-Worldism – but multiple ideologies share support for Palestine and opposition to Israel/normalisation. In Jordan, Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon, Palestinian solidarity crossed ideological boundaries, most visibly in Jordan where non-Islamists joined Islamists in leading protests (Ryan).

That pro-Palestinian responses crossed both Islamist/non-Islamist and sectarian boundaries shows that responses were not just about Islamist or sect-coded ideology. In Jordan, it was more important for Islamists to ally with others on Palestine (and strengthening parties in Jordan) than to rally around Islam in domestic politics (Ryan). Sectarian identities/interests played a role in some contexts and for some actors. Salafis, for whom anti-Shiism often remains a central tenet, have typically denounced Hamas for being allied to Shia Iran, suggesting that sect-coded ideology is a factor (Drevon). But other factors can trump this dynamic – e.g., in Lebanon, although Shia and non-Shia continue to diverge over whether they trust Hizbullah (responses shaped by Lebanon's political sectarian system and recent history), the percentage of Sunnis, Christians and Druze in a survey conducted in spring 2024 who thought Hizbullah was 'good for the Arab world' had doubled since 7 October (Roche & Robbins, 2024) and (Sunni) al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya has rejoined (Shia) Hizbullah in armed resistance (Daher) – although the escalation of Israel's war on Lebanon since September 2024 may affect these dynamics again.

Ideology, strategic interests and context

The Islamism and social movement literatures highlight how ideology and strategic interests intersect, both shaped by, and acting on, the prevailing political opportunity and threat structure (POTS) (Gunning, 2007, 2012; McAdam et al., 1996; Wickham, 2004). Here, it is helpful to distinguish between what Scarbrough (1984) termed core beliefs (assumptions about the world, goals, values) and action principles.

For Syrian IS, doubling down on its core beliefs came to matter even more because of the last decade's competition between the different jihadi-Salafi

groups within Syria's evolving POTS. Conversely, Ahrar al-Sham (AS) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) changed some of their core beliefs – e.g., about the relative importance of Syria vs. the umma, governance vs. armed conflict – because of competition with AQ and IS, leading to a change in action principles and, thus, rhetoric on Palestine and Hamas, showing that strategic interests and context trumped Salafi ideological opposition to non-implementation of sharia and collaboration with Shia (Drevon). In Jordan, where a longstanding dividing line within the Brotherhood ran between prioritising Palestinian solidarity vs. domestic politics, the post-7 October POTS enabled pro-Palestinian Ikhwanis to express their core beliefs more unapologetically, push the Brotherhood further in that direction in internal elections, and change the movement's action principles to push across previous boundaries (of where to protest, with whom, how) (Ryan). In Iraq, AAH's goals and values have become more tied up with Iraqi politics than KH's because, although both participate electorally, the former has a larger support base and is not a vanguard group, like the latter (Mansour, 2021). This partly explains AAH's greater focus on building a resistance state and not embarrassing the PM, while KH takes more risks (e.g., attacking a US base in Jordan) and can be more openly loyal to Iran (Rudolf). In Egypt, the repressive POTS has severely restricted the historically outspokenly pro-Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood.

Islamism and social movement studies further highlight the importance of fidelity to past discourse as a possibly important factor shaping behaviour, by shoring up support among supporters and maintaining credibility (Clubb, 2016; Scham & Abu-Irshaid, 2009). But, again, this is shaped by the POTS and whether this makes discursive fidelity strategically important. 'Death to Israel' has been part of the Houthis' core slogans from the start but, for two decades, they did not act on this. Only in the current POTS – with the Saudi-led war against the Houthis having slowed down, thus showing up shortcomings in the Houthis' governance, leading to a sharp increase in protests prior to 7 October – was it in the Houthis' strategic interest to attack Israel (Weissenburger).

Domestic vs. transnational dynamics

One theme in Islamism studies is that, while transnational dynamics matter, national context is often determining (Mandaville, 2020; Wagemakers, 2022). All Forum contributions show that domestic dynamics centrally shaped groups' responses, thus challenging the notion that Axis members were just Iranian proxies – an argument popular among many Western think-tanks and policy-makers.

In Jordan, with its long tradition of both protests, there were no armed attacks but reinvigorated protests. While the regime expressed solidarity with

the Palestinian cause, they suppressed support for Hamas, limiting protesters' options (Ryan). This differed from Houthi-held Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon where the government (or in Lebanon, a significant part thereof) and the attacking groups broadly agreed on the role of resistance (Weissenburger; Daher; Rudolf). Even in US-allied Iraq, the American attacks there led the PM to threaten speeding up the coalition's withdrawal from Iraq. In all three countries, there is a history of armed resistance – against Israel, the US-led order, or both – thus setting the attacks in a longer continuous tradition. In Syria, meanwhile, AS and HTS had no interest in attacking Israeli/US targets since they have benefited from Israeli/US attacks on IS, Iran, the Syrian regime, and Hizbullah (Drevon).

Before Israel's dramatic escalation of its war on Lebanon in September 2024, Lebanon seemed to be the only country at direct risk of an all-out Israeli offensive and Hizbullah's behaviour cannot be understood without understanding the domestic alliances within the context of political sectarianism, regional alliances, and the 2019 financial crash and revolution; the legacy of the longstanding war with Israel, from the 1978 and 1982 invasions, through the occupation of the South till 2000, the 2006 war, and attacks in Syria; and Hizbullah's evolution since 2006, most notably through the Syrian war (Daher).

The transnational is not a separate sphere, sitting 'above' domestic politics, but is entangled in it. Besides supporting the Palestinian cause, being part of the Axis of Resistance augmented groups' standing domestically. This was so in Yemen, amplified by the country's isolation following the long regional war against it (Weissenburger). It was the case in Iraq, though, because of domestic opposition to Iranian influence, the focus was on deriving kudos from affiliation with *Hizbullah* rather than Iran, while pro-Iran groups such as KH emphasised their independence from Iran by criticising Iran for trying to rein it in (Rudolf). In Lebanon, it was more about supporting Hamas and the Palestinian cause as central parts of the Axis than about being part of an Iranian-led alliance (Daher). Thus, identification with Hamas and Hizbullah appear to have been almost more important than loyalty to Iran – even though without Iran's enabling role, each group would have been far weaker.

In Jordan, *distancing* oneself from the Axis – in addition to supporting the Palestinian cause – was key to domestic standing (Ryan). But opposition to the Axis regionally could be about both geopolitics and sectarianism. For some (AS, HTS, Jordan's Ikhwanis), opposition to Iran was geopolitical, being on the other side of a conflict. For others (IS, Jordan's Salafis), it was about rejecting Shiism and seeing any alliance with Shia as heretical (Drevon; Ryan).

Transnational dynamics are shaped by geopolitics. Yemen's Houthis do not have the same strategic importance as Hizbullah for Iran, while their distance from Israel means that they can take larger risks (Weissenburger). However, geopolitical location can be trumped by

politics. Jordan and Lebanon are both adjacent to Israel yet their relationship with Israel and domestic politics are very different, resulting in diverging POTS.

Finally, the war on Gaza war has impacted domestic inter/intra-Islamist divides. In Jordan, it has reinvigorated the Brotherhood's 'hawks' and brought Ikhwanis closer to non-Islamists (Ryan). In Lebanon, the war has led to rapprochement between the al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hizbullah, a (partial and possibly time-limited) return to the past (Daher). In Yemen, the Houthis are now accused by their Sunni Islamist opponents of being in conspiracy with Israel rather than primarily being seen as Shia and pro-Iranian (Weissenburger).

Conclusion

This Forum's insights are important not just for understanding Arab Islamist responses to the war on Gaza but also for the study of Islamist groups and social movements more widely.

There might be broad support for Palestine but the Forum shows that not all Islamists are alike, even when it comes to Palestine, so Islamists cannot be treated as a homogeneous bloc. While the war has triggered important changes, the contributions remind us that one should additionally be attentive to continuity in apparent changes and changes in seeming continuity.

The Forum confirms that ideology is a poor predictor of behaviour of social movements, including Islamists. There are differences between ideological sub-categories and across national contexts but also within each. That does not mean that ideology should be ignored. It matters but it is embedded within, and responding to, specific POTS and shapes, and is shaped, by strategic calculations. Equally important is to disaggregate what is meant by ideology, e.g., core beliefs vs. action principles.

The contributions also illuminate how transnational dynamics are refracted through domestic conditions. They affect groups' domestic standings and, conversely, domestic competition affects them. They should thus not be seen as operating 'above' but as entangled in the domestic.

Finally, although Iran has strengthened the members of the Axis of Resistance, each has its own agency and interests, with domestic concerns often trumping Iran's interests, and the relationship *between* them is also important. The notion of 'proxy' is thus deeply inadequate.

Notes

1. Arabic adjective for Muslim Brotherhood.
2. Arabic adjective for followers of Khomeini's *wilayat al-faqih*.

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