Islamic Discourse in the Activist Trap: A Framework of Inquiry

Mazen Hashem
accis@earthlink.net

Abstract

Perceptions and ideas guide human action. Yet, action molds what is in the head too. The so-called Islamic revival talks about an "Islamic Thought" that steers its direction and forms its strategies. It is a distinguishable form of literature that mixes social criticism, moral admonition, and philosophical dictums, molded in an interpretation of Islamic textual sources (*Hadith* and Quran). The participants in this discourse are divergent, and so are its levels of sophistication. The purpose of this paper is twofold: First, to analyze the general tendencies of such a discourse, and second, to specify the mechanisms through which activism ideologizes the discourse and stands in the way of its maturity.

The terrain of this Islamic Thought can be mapped out by recognizing two dimensions: the approach of understanding sharia' and activism type. As for sharia' approaches, two modes of thinking occupy the Islamists: a *mathhab*-following mode, and a *salafi* mode. On the other hand, three forms of activism divide the field: (1) a movement with global claims and aspirations; (2) a movement with local aims and aspirations; and (3) an individualistic type of activism. These three forms intersect with the two modes of sharia' thinking to produce an ecology of praxis.

Finally, the paper argues that such activist ideology plays a significant role in forming a habitat of thinking regarding Islamic issues. Therefore, the Islamic intellectual discourse finds itself obliged to answer the mandates put forth by activist ideologies. Lacking autonomy, the Islamic intellectual discourse became caught between the research-center and the think-tank orientations, failing to produce an elaborate from of knowledge that can adequately measure-up to modern intellectual challenges.

Many nations and cultures had participated in the building of Muslim civilization, a civilization that embodied the internal logic of Islam and produced a unique set of manifestations across time and space. Neither such civilizational product corresponded completely to pristine Islamic principles, nor it had an aspect that did not, to some degree, accommodate Islamic ethos. Such a picture stands in stark contrast to the modern situation where *Muslim* action, corresponds to civilizational mandates that are not of their own. Consequently, the *Islamic* action in this contemporary epoch comes in the form of movements, not in the form of general ummatic action.

Islamic movements, promising to retrieve an honorable position to the *ummah*, captured the imagination of those who are unsatisfied with the current situation of Muslim reality and who are willing "to do something." Posing as the ultimate savior of Islamic civilization, movements achieved a monopoly over the Islamic discourse. What concerns this paper is that Islamic movements have successfully elevated their ideologies and created an ecology of thinking in Islamic matters. Any attempt to speak "Islamically," has to attend to the burning questions of such ideologies and to heed the parameters that they set. The end result of such a situation came in the emergence of two claims on "Islamic Thought": one is an intellectual discourse that cautiously proceeds, but that is perceived of little relevance to the needs of Muslims; the other is an ideology of Islamic social movements that appropriate some intellectual terms and claim to be the only authentic voice for the *ummah*. Thus, two classes of "Islamic Thought" exist in the theater of ideas: an intellectual discourse, sophisticated but not widely read, and a discourse of praxis that is overly political and largely reactionary (that is, it is constituted of a collection of reactions and fixes to the contemporary political and social challenges at the practical level).

Variations of Muslim Contemporary Ideologies

To capture the nature of the contemporary Islamic ideology we need to recognize two dimensions that define the Muslim activist space: the sharia' understanding approach and activism mode. It is the interaction of those two dimensions that defines the Muslim

activist space. Thus, I will use those two dimensions to construct a typology for analyzing the popular orientations of activists and their discourses.

The Fiqhi Dimension

Sharia' is the comprehensive moral and legal mandates of Islam. The *ulama* elaborated and applied the sharia' principles in a legalistic fashion, forming what is known as *fiqh*; thus, the term "*fiqh*" in this paper emphasizes the temporality of sharia' understanding. Historically, this non-monolithic corpus of theo-legal writings served as a template for organizing Muslim societies. This corpus gained respect and primacy in the Muslim consciousness, at times, above and over Islam's own pristine principles. The secret of the reign of *fiqh* lies in the fact that it was perceived as a shorthand for many things: it was perceived as the practical Islamic rules that defines what is moral, ethical, and Islamic; it is therefore the sure way toward Allah; in addition, it is a superior way of organizing society. *Fiqhi* rulings stood as a representation of everything Islamic and conducive to success—a double success, in this world and in the hereafter. With the advent of modernity, activists struggled in dealing with such literature. Overwhelmed with a sense of lost, the Islamic street today (or the Islamic mosque, so to speak), comes under the influence of two, seemingly, opposing orientations toward *fiqh*: the *mathhabi* and the *salafi*, both which are pursed to achieve the success in the nowhere and hereafter (*dunia* and *akhira*). Below I will elaborate on those two orientations that captured the *fiqhi* imagination of the Muslim *mosque* and defined the *Muslimness* of their adherents.

The *Mathhabi* Orientation

Historically, four famous schools of interpreting sharia' have risen, along with many other independent and semi-independent constellation of *fiqhi* opinions. The *mathhabi* orientation takes such corpus of theo-socio-legal opinions as the starting point of any Islamic thinking and the object of analysis. It is a legalistic mode of thinking that looks for precedence and that utilizes legal reasoning to provide answers for modern problems.

This orientation shifts the center of Islamic thinking from the pristine sources of Islam to the historical production and applications. To be sure, this orientation is well armed with centuries of *fatwas* and *ijtihad*, which, if analyzed with adequate historicity, they stand out as sophisticated pronouncements. On the other hand, when they are taken at face value, they certainly became problematic—and that is exactly what the *mathhabi* orientation does. The *mathhabi* orientation is, to a large extent, a defensive effort that seeks to assert the superiority of Muslim historical *fiqh*. This orientation is over-sensitive to any reflective understanding of Muslim legacy, for it is seen as a pretext for attack and devaluation of the Islamic treasures.

The *Salafi* Orientation

The *salafi* orientation came as a reaction to the *mathhabi* orientation. Not only the *mathhabi* orientation was seen by aspiring activists as lacking authenticity, but also its representatives, the *ulama*, were seen as dormant forces if not reactionary. A return to the original sources, the activists highlighted, lead to a better *fiqh* and to a lively interaction with Islam. Reconnecting *fiqh* with the original sources of Islam is what Muslims need in dealing with modernity, the early *salafis* asserted.

As Quran and *Sunnah* stand to be the ultimate sources of Islam, the eyes of this part of activists turned away from the old *fiqh* searching for something more dynamic. They found it in a *fiqh* that is much closer to *hadith*. The Quranic message was largely bypassed in this process. That is because *fiqh*, historically speaking, invoked *hadith* and developed rules of jurisprudence (*usul*). On one hand, *hadith* is closer to the applied level of human affairs and represents straightforward injunctions from the role model, prophet Muhammad, whom the masses can emulate. On the other hand, *usual* was supposed to embody the Quranic abstract principles; to some extent, it did. However, *usul* itself was later overcome by a formalistic orientation that obscured the abstract principle of Quran and *Sunnah*. The theory of Islamic law, *usul al-fiqh,* developed along two lines: a branch (that kept the original label, *usul al-fiqh*) dipped into formalistic logic, and a branch that tried to stay close to the generalities of the Quran and *Sunnah* developing what is called "goals of Sharia'" (*maqasid al-sharia'*).

Going back to modern *salafi* orientation, we can say that it did seek reform by returning to the sources and delegitimizing the conventional *ulama*, but it did not question the methodology of its reform—the *salafi* orientation fell again in the same trap of the *mathhabis*—the legacy trap. The *salafi* orientation brought *hadith* to the surface and put it as ready ammunition at the level of action. However, failing to furnish a clear methodology that deals with the historicity of *hadith*, the *salafi* orientation locked itself in narrow literalism. Furthermore, the *salafi* orientation, in its competition with the *mathhabis*, adopted a form of formalism on the top of literalism. Their final product came as fragmented *fiqhi* views to which the dead conventionalism of the *mathhabi ulama* looks like dwarfs. Conventionalism was replaced with extreme rigidity and borderline mental cruelty.

Activism Orientation

Muslims lived happily in their cozy societies, or that what contemporary activists like to think. In their daily life, the activists see that the armies of modernity have effectively disrupted their life. *Ulama* used to stand as the ultimate authority of Islam and the symbols of its primacy. However, the image of contemporary *ulama* has been tarnished by their relative complacency with political tyranny. They are seen now as another source of Muslim problems because they failed to lead the *ummah*—they are the "*ulama* of the sultan." The Muslim action tried to bypass the *ulama*. The response, as in any social system, was largely spontaneous and came in varied forms depending on the definition of the problem and the perceived solution. Muslim "action" started to operate in modern social conditions in which the *ulama* play, relatively speaking, an insignificant role. It is not that modern Muslim action totally abandoned the *ulama* (although it tried that for a while). Rather, the young contemporary Muslim action is more in tune with modern social movement tactics and methods. Nevertheless, Muslim action might maintain allegiances to *ulama* as a class (rarely one alim), carefully scrutinized as uncorrupted by the sultan. This type of modern activism can be divided into three orientations: an Islamic movement with a local orientation, an Islamic movement with a global orientation, and an individualistic type of Islamic activism.

The Local Orientation

This orientation took on its shoulder the social problems of Muslims and tried to give full answers.   Therefore, answers in this orientation came no more than attempts to recreate the old structures of historical Muslim communities and to revive some of their applications. To a certain degree, these movements can be seen as actively civic. However, what is distinctive about this type of movements is that they totally convince that micro-fixing of few social problems could create a happy contemporary Muslim society. In other words, this orientation defines the problem very narrowly. Moreover, this orientation approaches the defined problem rather naively. Whether it is poverty or education, this approach tends to deal with it using conventional measures. Neither these measures attend to the structural problems in the society, nor do they prioritize for the mobilization of reform efforts. It should be mentioned, however, that such movements showed at times significant versatility in adapting to adverse circumstances and effectively used available resources, producing recognizable output, from education to social welfare.

What is remarkable about this orientation, however, is that it is usually associated with a gross misunderstanding of modern social reality in which it operates. Failure then is guaranteed. Ironically, such orientation tends to take its failures as proofs to work harder within its same narrow cocoon. Worse than that, this orientation starts to interpret the Islamic text in a way that supports their failed choices. Localism to this orientation is the hallmark. Not only it insulates itself, but it also theorizes for isolation; and the more it gains confidence in the limited success within its boundaries, the more courage it gathers in extending such boundaries. And the extension of boundaries beyond assumed expertise deepens their initial deficiency in dealing with problems.

The Global Orientation

Around the turn of the 20th century most countries of Muslim majority were under colonial powers. This was a sudden and humiliating encounter with modernity. But why was it sudden? Muslim core countries remained, to a late date, under the protection of

their political systems, well insulated from the border social dynamics that were erupting in Europe and later in the United States. The Muslim response, naturally, came overly political[1]. Therefore, the contemporary Muslim consciousness feels that, as people, they were socially secured by politics before the colonial wave and that they became socially neglected because of politics afterward. Thus, the primacy of politics naturally preoccupies the response of the global activists.

The global orientation of Islamic movements can be seen, to a large degree, a reaction to the limitations and frustration of the local orientation. Similar to the original impulse of the *salafi* orientation, the global orientation was frustrated by the political stance of the representatives of Islam, the *ulama*. The *ulama* were seen as too complacent with their governments that are not Islamically committed. Only a bold Islamic movement that does not drop politics from its vision can effectively recover the glories of Islam and its societies, this approach asserted. However, those social movements have only a vague picture of what constitute an Islamic polity. Their "political" orientation came as an aversion from the *process* of political development (and from political theory, God forbid), and a bias toward haphazard action.

Common Elements *and* Ailments

The Fiqhi Mode

Despite that the two pairs of *fiqhi* and activism orientations are located at the opposite sides of a continuum, and although they have developed as reactions to each other, nevertheless, they share common elements that facilitate their failure.

Both the *mathhabi* and the *salafi* orientations oscillate between a literal understating of the Islamic texts and arbitrary interpretation according to personal impressions driven by pressures of the circumstances of the time. Both of them claim the universality of the text, but deprive the Muslim mind from the examination of social

---

[1] One might make the observation that Muslim countries that were *less* politically protected managed *better* in dealing with modernity due to its earlier or gradual exposure to the challenges.

reality; to them, social reality itself is pre-interpreted by the text. Also, both of them encourage utilizing the modalities of modernity, provided that they deliver conclusions that confirm the pronouncements of orthodoxy. Furthermore, both of them do not attend to the complexity of human action and the historical process. For them, change is a matter of binary reactions that can be traced along a one-dimensional surface.

Most importantly, both the *mathhabi* and the *salafi* orientations see social change as mainly quantative.   Therefore, when they attempt to forcibly expand the text to attend to modern challenges, they think that this will somehow circumscribe reality. Instead of trying to explore the underpinnings that the text furnishes, they tear the fabric of the text by the further pulling of its edges. Similarly, both show little interest in learning from human experience, since, in their minds, the revealed text has covered every human problem. Finally, both of them monopolize the legitimacy of speaking on behalf of Islam and develop their own reference characters that are customarily called "Islamic Thinkers."

The Activism Mode

The mode of activism oscillates between two poles of a spatial continuum, and to some degree, they have developed as a reaction to each other. However, their discourses share common elements. Both the local and the global modes operate under the influence of the immediate; therefore, they act first and think second to justify action. As they operate under the huge constraints of social reality, immediate goals of the movement are elevated to the level of the ultimate goals. Moreover, since they consider the movement as the manifestation of Islam itself, they start to prioritize the Islamic principles according to their movement needs—the temporal tactics become eternal strategies supported by arbitrary interpretation of the text.

The ideology of activism often vacillates between total rejections or total acceptance of the foreign. The *other* is either an enemy or a comrade; in each case, there is no place for critique. Reaching "there" (the ultimate Islamic solution) is usually a paramount goal of the movement. However, if the struggle to reach this ultimate political goal is prolonged, and if many resources are devoted to such an aim, the movement and

its personalities become acclimated to the mechanisms of "reaching." In this way, reaching a political outcome takes precedence over the original aims acclaimed at the outset. This is especially a typical outcome when the movement enters a war of attrition with a system that is much larger than it. On one hand, its social base and floating character allows its survival, but on the other, the movement falls in the grip of sheer pragmatism coupled with massive retreat from original goals.

Both of local and global Islamic movements erect deficient structures and spend most of the energy fixing them. Through time these structures gain symbolic importance. Neither their total replacement becomes feasible nor could it gain the file and rank approval. Most damaging is that both the local and the global orientations of activism usually stray from the broader concerns of the *ummah*, concentrating instead on narrow projects that have little to do with the priorities of those they claim to serve.

The Intersection of Orientations

No serious analysis can claim that the reality of Islamic social movements nicely fits the above binary categories; the previous analysis does not designate exact places for the extremely diverse Muslim action. Rather, it defines poles that are relevant to Muslim contemporary social movements and there development. Foreign categories such as "liberal," "conservative," "fundamentalist" can help little in advancing our understanding of Muslim reality. The categories that I have used are historically rooted—they address the soul as well as the mind of the Muslim activist. The intersection of those two dimensions (sharia' understanding and activism mode) can provide us with a useful typology for understanding Muslim responses. While single movements might not nicely fit such a typology, it defines forces of attraction to which activists gravitate. Below is a chart that defines the outcomes of the different combinations of discourse-action properties.

Conclusion

What are the consequences of "Islamic Thought" being trapped in an ecology of activism? The answer is obvious: the lack of the development of a more analytical Islamic thought. But let us reflect on this truism. One could argue that this condition is known to many cultures and systems of thought. However, what is peculiar about the Islamic case is the nature of polarization itself. In other systems of thought a person could live comfortable near one end of the spectrum or the other; in the Islamic case this is not possible because the sharia' enjoys historical legitimacy. This situation is different from the familiar division between conservative and liberal pronouncement of religion in the European cultures. The practical consequence is that Muslim intellectualism is obliged to give answers to the imagined problems that activism define. That is, the intellectual response is expected to use the same vocabulary and logic of activism, although the problems that activism complains of have no answers expect in a more philosophical discourse.

Practically, a divide has been erected between intellectual Muslims and Muslim leaders (often called "Thinkers"). To be sure, some leaders have valuable experiences that have some intellectual content, and one cannot devalue the insights of the day-to-day struggle in the realities of Muslim affairs. What troubling, however, is the sense of irrelevance that is ascribed to Muslim intellectualism, and the sense of inefficacy in which Muslim intellectuals live.

On the brighter side, the centrality of sharia' and its Muslim universal acceptance, works as a preventive mechanism from complete splintering. Obviously, there are many diverse Muslim groups; however, not only do they share the *abstract* base of *tawhid*, but they also share the *practical* base of *sharia'*. This quality, unique to Islam, marks the trajectory of Islamic reform in two important ways: it prevent intellectualism from becoming esoteric philosophy that has nothing to do with reality, and it create mechanisms for bottom-up consensus building. That is why those who wait for violent ruptures in the Islamic system of thought do not see it, claiming, thus, that Islamic thinking is stagnant; obviously, they are looking for the wrong signs. Documenting the impressive reformative efforts is beyond this paper. Despite that its bearers are politically dispowered, the keen observer can only be

amazed by the continuous growth of reformative Islamic thinking in its distinctive mode of continuous reconstruction that is void of revengeful revolutions.

A Typology of Islamic Activist Discourse

		Fiqhi Approach		
		Mathhabi	*Salafi*	*Eclectic*
	Focus	Perennial legacy	Textual mandate	Textual flexibility
Local Movement	Motivation	Teaching & Preaching	Disciplinarian admonishing	Accommodative advisement
Global Movement	Political Recognition	Sharia' headquarter	Nationalistic priorities	Practical projects
Local Individualistic	Patching	Legacy ornamenting	Quality monitoring	Focused remedies
Global Individualistic	Refining and Reshaping	Legacy updating	Textual challenge	Bridging

Type of Activism (left vertical axis label)

A Typology of Islamic Activist Discourse—Metaphor & Variations

			Fiqhi Approach		
			Mathhabi	*Salafi*	*Eclectic*
		Focus	Perennial turath	Textual mandate	Textual flexibility
Type of Activism	*Local Movement*	Motivation Social effectiveness	Teaching & preaching *Ilm*	Disciplinarian admonishing *Nahi an-alMunkar*	Accommodative advisement *Wisdom*
	Global Movement	Political Recognition Political Efficacy Polity = Big Jamaat	Sharia headquarter *Dawah* *Sultanic Imam*	Nationalistic priorities *Jihad* *Amirul Mumineen*	Practical projects *Contemporality*
	Local Individualistic	Patching Filtering-out; prevention	Legacy ornamenting *Memory*	Quality monitoring *Amr bil-Maaroof*	Focused remedies *Feasibility*
	Global Individualistic	Refining and Reshaping	Legacy updating *Ijtihad*	Textual challenge *Debate*	Bridging *Civility*

Jamaa is the boundary of the world

Well-connected to modern sys of life

- Words in italics inside the dark box represent the metaphor of the orientation
- Note that these are ideal type orientations to which activists gravitate. Do not try to forcefully fit people in them.
- The above model has a third dimension. Each of the above 12 ideal types could range from the constructive on one end to the narrow or the decadent on the second end of a continuum. These two poles are defined below.

		Constructive Pole ⬅==========➡ *Narrow/Decadent Pole*	
1.	Teaching and Preaching:	from soul purification	to infantiling khutba
2.	Disciplinarian admonishing:	from effective mobilization	to insulting khutba
3.	Accommodative advisement:	from embracing the community	to self-admiration society
4.	Sharia' headquarter:	from securing a moral character	to fatwa office
5.	Nationalistic priorities:	from adopting the Islamic local cause	to shouting grandiose slogans
6.	Practical projects:	from credit union and Islamic media	to ineffective misplaced organizations
7.	Legacy ornamenting:	from highlighting historical richness	to glossy reproduction
8.	Quality monetring:	from astute revisionism	to obsessive-compulsive nasiha
9.	Focused remedies:	from Islamic schools	to pamphleteering
10.	Legacy updating:	from rephrasing in modern language	to rehashing the irrelevant
11.	Textual challenge:	from intense discussion	to textual snipering
12.	Bridging:	from honest cooperation/coalitioning	to diplomatic talk (mainstream org)