What is Post-Islamism?

In 1996 I happened to write an essay entitled “The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society,” in which I set out to discuss the articulation of the remarkable social trends, political perspectives, and religious thought which post-Khomeini Iran had begun to witness—a trend which eventually came to underpin the “reform movement” of the late 1990s and early 2000. My tentative essay dealt at length with the societal trends for there was nothing at the state level that I could consider “post-Islamist.” Indeed as originally used, post-Islamism pertained only to the realities of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and not to other settings and societies. Yet the core spirit of the term referred to the metamorphosis of Islamism (in ideas, approaches, and practices) from within and without.

Since then, the term post-Islamism has been deployed by a number of prominent observers in Europe to refer primarily to a shift in the attitudes and strategies of Islamist militants in the Muslim world. While the term’s currency may be worldwide, in a particular way in which it has been employed seems to have caused more confusion than clarity. For some (e.g., Gilles Kepel), post-Islamism describes the departure of Islamists from the jihadi and Salafi doctrines, while for others (such as Olivier Roy) it is perceived in terms of the “privatization” of Islamization (as opposed to Islamization of the state), where emphasis is placed on changes in how and where Islamization is carried out, rather than its content. Often used descriptively, post-Islamism has been presented and primarily perceived—including in my own earlier work on Iran—as an empirical rather than an analytical category, representing a “particular era,” or an “historical end.”

Partly due to such narrow conceptualizations and partly for its misperception, “post-Islamism” has attracted some unwelcome reactions. Critics have correctly disputed the premature generalization about the end of Islamism (understood chiefly in terms of the establishment of an Islamic state) even though they have acknowledged a significant shift in the strategy and outlook of some militant Islamist groups. What seems to be changing, they argue, is not political Islam (i.e., doing politics in an Islamic frame) but only a particular, “revolutionary” version of it. Others have argued that post-Islamism signifies not a distinct reality, but simply one variant of Islamist politics.

In my understanding, post-Islamism represents both a condition and a project, a conscious attempt to conceptualize and strategize the rationale and modalities of Islamization and post-Islamization.

On 26 April 2005 Asef Bayat presented his inaugural lecture at Leiden University entitled, “Islam and Democracy: Perverse Charm of an Irrelevant Question,” presented here in extracted form. He posits that Islamist movements in Muslim societies are undergoing a post-Islamist turn characterized by rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past.

The full text of the lecture will be available through ISIM and Leiden University.

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