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Modern Islamic Thinking and Activism

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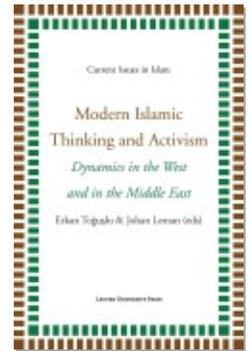
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CHAPTER II

Translocality and Hybridization in Current Modern Islamic Activism

Erkan Toğuşlu and Johan Leman

In this book, Muslim activism is examined along three dimensions and relations: intellectual thought, political activism and social work. Contemporary Muslim activism offers some elements and fault lines for the development of civil society, new political thought, liberalization and human rights. Each of these areas and dimensions appears among Muslim activists and presents a variety and multiplicity of engagements with traditional and modern types of Islamic notions. This dynamism provides a general acceptance of civil initiatives, a kind of pluralism in politics and Islamic thought, a shift to humanitarian discourse. However, these are some impetus to see the changes and shifts in Islamic activism which does not represent the Muslims in a general sense.

Islamic activism is dealing with the question of modernity. One of the questions about modernity is whether it is a single tradition, structural and institutional setting, attitude, an integrated social-practical norm which generates a kind of experience linked to a geographical area. What are the criteria for being called modern? Who defines the modern condition? If there are varieties of modernity, what differentiates them from each other? When we are talking about modernity, we are discussing a specific zone, a part of Europe. We are not interested in the history of the non-Western world. The assumption is that all political-social and economic change should follow the historical experience of the West.¹ Muslim societies engage with modernity in its various forms through humanitarian work, immigration, international students, media and transnational Muslim communities. The modernity question in the Muslim world is interrelated with

the Muslim subjectivity associated with several socio-cultural transformations, and opens new avenues to negotiate with some notions of human rights, democracy, civil society and gender relations.

Since the events of September 11 2001 and the Arab Spring, one of the arguments has been that Muslims need to reform Islam and secularize the state and politics to bring about democracy. This assumption is widely circulated in public debates to note that Islam should be reshaped by a normative secularity imposed from state power to develop a moderate-liberal Islam that can be open and tolerant to Western life and civilization (Esposito and Burgat 2003; An-Naim 1990). It is not simply a matter of state neutrality, but secularism reveals the disciplinary and civilizational aspects (Mahmood 2006: 330).

The concept of travelling and mobility introduced by Mandaville is explicitly connected with understanding how a transnational activism is formulated and re-activated in Muslim networks. We cannot avoid returning to the classical political thinkers and the tune of political thinking to see what happens when an idea moves across borders and beyond states.

Translocal Islamic activism: a new patriotism without nationality

A change in social-political morphology in Muslim societies and communities has extended the transnational ties and relations in different areas such as Islamic knowledge, Muslim consciousness, cultural reproduction, and organizational networks. Applying transnational studies to understand the transformation of Islamic activities broadens the definition of contemporary Islamic activism and Islamic identity (Toğuşlu, Leman and Sezgin 2014). For Mandaville, a political sociology of Islam is lacking in the literature (Mandaville 2001). Migration, entrepreneurs, diaspora communities, charity organizations offer global sociocultural transformations about transnational Islamic activism (Vertovec 2002; Bruneau 2010; Osella and Osella 2009). Mandaville suggests that international studies can use some connections with especially anthropological scopes (Mandaville 2001). Within the scope of transnational and translocal Islamic activities, one can address three issues: the specification and location of agency; the relationship between transnational processes and states; and the interaction between global, transnational, national, and local social fields (Glick Schiller 1997: 156).

Let us start first with the interaction between local, national and global social fields. Globalization has a strong impact on the transportation and the settlement of the religious replacement, not only in geographical terms, but in different spaces and cultures. Telecommunications, film, TV and the Internet have contributed to the creation of the translocal spaces and replacements of the religious. Globalization studies have called attention to recent reconfigurations of space and polity and the growth of global cities (Featherstone 1990; Sassen 1991). In contrast, scholars of transnational migration have been concerned with the actual social interactions that migrants maintain and construct across borders (Basch, Glick Schiller and Blanc 1993). Transnational migration provides some tools to differentiate the translocalization processes of the Islamic networks, organizations and ties (Mandaville 2001; Saint-Blancat 2002).

Transnational ties and organizations change and transform the relations between people and spaces “by creating social fields” and connecting one to certain places, country, homeland and hostland. In this regard, the transnational movements and organizations are frequently mentioned as observing the religious-humanitarian shift which necessitates a new map defining Islamic activities. The spread of civil society and initiatives does not target just specific religious-ethnic communities. The emergence of new humanitarian discourse in NGOs run by Muslims is pluralized by different people and religious-humanitarian groups.

Muslim activists create new localities, using the term of Appadurai (1996). New translocalities² emerge in these activities undertaken by Muslim organizations. They navigate between different cities. They are connecting with each other as nodes via e-mail and virtual offices. Media emerge in different ways to rehearse connections and raise consciousness and memory. In these areas, being translocal describes the effects of being between two or more than two geographical situations, locations and feelings. Muslim actors cannot be described in a given borderland (Grinell 2010). The classical division of borders, where the identity is created, changed and transformed, is unstable and insignificant for social movements defining in a given transborder challenge about belonging to a certain ethnic-religious or political community. Being in a translocal situation changes the way of life, constructing of identity of Islamic movements and activities.

The rise of consciousness marked by multiple appurtenances and belongings is strengthened by transnational Islamic ties and networks which offer new places to improve the translocality of Muslim identities. The coexistence (pacific-active) of several ties and networks of Muslim communities maintains the hybrid

elements of Muslim subjectivities which are fragmented and reproduced in new circumstances. The multi-locality and connection with other people from other places who share the same roots and routes maintain the new Muslim subjectivities according to their practices and knowledge. The new subjectivities are formed in the global arena through educational institutions, charity and politics. Mandaville calls this process the re-imagination of the *umma* (Mandaville 2001); it requires formal and informal networks to share a collective imaginary, solidarity and coherence. The memories and a common link shared by Muslims are fragile and fragmented. In this transnational arena, this collective memory can be observed and reshaped by Islamic activities which construct a community identity on a daily basis. A socio-religious reproduction is realized within the transnational framework in terms of knowledge, politics and social work. Facets of Muslim identity are selected, syncretized and elaborated while Muslims engage with civil society, politics and religion.

The numbers of transnational entrepreneurs and corporations (including professionals, NGOs) have increased rapidly. They work globally and interest local charity initiatives. The nexus between social and economic actors determines the influence of transnational and global to see how transnationalism and globalization influence this pluralization within the faith based social movements. This local-global interest is a key to understanding the socio-economic transformation of Muslim actors in the globalization process.

This new dialectic of global and local questions cannot be analysed in a national context. The obvious and conventional forms of such activity are international NGOs (Dijkzeul 2008). Their number has been rapidly increasing. The NGOs create alternative spaces to claim rights and seek to change political debates; they work in the areas of environment, human rights, development and economic goals. These areas in which NGOs have been involving themselves are transboundary in character. Some NGOs are interested more in political activities, and actively participate in political engagement within a local-national and global context. In this vein, diasporic Muslim communities, such as Palestinians-Somalians etc., are not only the objects of social help; these refugees become a kind of political aim and patronage in these NGOs. However, some critics points out the essentialist, semi-nationalist and subversively religious dominant character of these organizations and movements in migrant situations in the US and Europe (Katharyne Mitchell 1997, cited by Vertovec 1999: 454).

This new patronage can be analysed in terms of “new patriotism” to portray the new transnational presence in the social and political realm, oscillating between

settlement in a new homeland and diasporic nationalism linked with their homelands (Appadurai 1996: 158-177). Vertovec labelled this kind of political activism a “politics of homeland” expanded in multiple ways (Vertovec 1999: 455). The translocal and transnational Islamic charity organizations are the sites of this new patriotism without nationality.

Translocal Islamic aid without borders

The role of NGOs in humanitarian relief activities has increased in recent years. These humanitarian relief organizations are located in majority or minority Muslim societies. The style and characteristics of these NGOs vary from one to another. The objectives, methods and the settlement of the NGOs are the key impetus for noting such variation among these transnational NGOs. They embody different trajectories, discourses and conflicts. Being secular and religious, humanitarian and Islamic are key elements for understanding the character of these NGOs (Clark 2003).

The increasing number of NGOs in the international arena pushes scholars to study transnational Islamic humanitarian organizations the activities of which cross borders and challenge the nation state. They work closely with local people, having a good reputation in the local context. The neo-liberal economies provide certain good opportunities to these increasing NGOs to establish powerful relations across countries, peoples and organizations. In this way, the humanitarian NGOs spark the interest of scholars (Dijkzeul 2008).

The examples discussed in this book indicate several typologies of NGOs run by Muslims. Singer distinguishes three groups of Islamic NGOs according to their works: *da'wa* (preaching-missionary) oriented; *jihad* (military) oriented and *ighata* (relief) oriented. However, this distinction remains very residual and does not carefully discern the practical and ethnographic scope of these NGOs. In the broader sense, all of these activities, including humanitarian ones, can be regarded and considered as *jihad*-oriented, but not in terms of the military. This religious motivation acknowledges a collective-individual spiritual struggle against their self, for this reason it is not considered as a military *jihad*. They donate money from their incomes in pursuit of their religious belief and spiritual reason. Moreover, the organizational level can hide deep motivations and understanding as regards charitable activities, so that the charity is very flexible. It is shaped by political, economic and spiritual circumstances. All of these

activities are classified under the faith-based initiatives that refer to new ways of collaboration between states, governments and civil organizations. Briefly, we note that some organizations are political (ideological reasons, focusing only specific geographies); others are very developmentalist (business and micro finance); finally the third case is socio-humanitarian (the scope is very large and diffuse).

One of the features of Islamic activism is related to the flow of migrants, objects, symbols, ideas and images that are important elements in more closely examining transnational Islamic activities. We need to look at the ways in which the texts, discourses and symbols are reproduced and circulated among Muslims. The focus on these elements in the translocal and transnational process helps us to locate Muslim activists in globalization. As globalization studies the extent of a political-economic-cultural structure, one of the aims of the book is to analyse the interaction between states, governments and agents depending on Islamic activism (Glick Schiller 1997:156). In the case of transnationalism, the interaction is “between two or more social subjects from two or more state-nations when at least one of these subjects is not an agent of a government or intergovernmental organization” (Mato 1997: 171). This distinction allows us to see Islamic agency, local subjectivities and identifications as a result of involvement in Islamic activism. One of the central terms used in transnational processes is a borderland. Being at borders does not necessarily mean an escape from disciplining regimes of the state and authority. “The very existence of border cultures or border crossings has sometimes been equated with the demise of nation-states” (Glick Schiller 1997: 159). The movement of people and ideas across borders depends also on power relations and the positioning of the actors in the transnational process. Translocal peoples live differently in these regimes of authority crossing borders and this interaction with regimes of authority influences also the identity of Islamic aid and NGOs.

Traditional, modern and reformist Islamic identity

At the level of political Islam, there are indeed some political activists and thinkers who reject the idea of an Islamic state; even these are minority groups in majority Muslim population countries. They are not so close to ideas such as the separation of religion and politics, acceptance of democratic rules, constitutional government. But, they do not totally reject these ideas, and some of them find

some points of reconciliation between Islamic principles, Islamic law and democracy, and human rights (Mayer 1999; Nasr 2005). The new faces of Muslim scholars emphasize some specific questions of coexistence, pluralism, interfaith dialogue and environment crises (Safi 2003; Toguslu 2008). They turn away from strict and traditionalist approaches that are very exclusive. Some use modern historical and epistemological discourses to give new interpretations (Filali-Ansary 2003; Arkoun 2005; An-Naim 1990); others use Islamic traditional sources to renew them (Gülen 2005; Ramadan 2004). Their influence on and contributions to Muslims differ. Their language attempts to renew traditional Islamic notions. This modernizing form of Islamic thought nourishes the new modes of Islamic activities and creates new opportunities to change the traditional framework of Islamist movements. The many different views on engaging in politics, developing social work to which Islam relates, enable us also to evaluate the evolution of Muslim intellectuals' and scholars' discourses. Whether Islam can provide some tools for social cohesion, coexist with democratic systems and develop a particular 'secular' model for Muslims becomes a crucial question, especially after the 9/11 events. The answers differ according to particular views, practices and contexts of Muslim societies. The recent history of revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa reveals this variation and differentiation among Muslim activists, thinkers, organizations and NGOs. In this variation, the role of Muslim intellectuals and scholars is relatively important in suggesting the new orientations including radical-modern and traditional ways. In the early 19th century, Muslim thinkers such as Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) were known as important reformists. This generation of reformers attempted to reconstruct the traditional settings. Armando Salvatore analyses how the reformist discourse emerges in the public sphere by highlighting different political, social and public reasons (2009). This reformist movement gave rise to other political movements and thinkers. Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) who was influenced by both these thinkers, reacts against Western political and cultural domination, using modern rational Islamic references. In his formulation of renewing Islam, he develops an Islamic activism which is also against the traditional *ulama* role. In the course of history, another Islamist thinker Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), who led the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s, was theorizing on the radical turn of Islamism among the Muslim Brotherhood. This idea is strongly held by Islamists who politicized Islam.

Al-Mawdudi (1903-1979) also significantly contributed to the shape and content of political Islam by his writings and activism. He took part in the

foundation of the *Jamaat-Islami* movement. He was the pioneer of pan-Islamism and defended the *umma* as opposed to the nation state model. He became an advocate of the political ideologies of Islamism (Kepel 2002; 2004).

Al-Banna, Qutb, and al-Mawdudi had great influence, inspiring the leaders of political Islam and in particular the Islamic revolution in Iran. The intellectual source of the Iranian revolution was provided by Ali Shariati (1933-1977). He was strongly influenced by leftist thinkers when he studied philosophy in France. His ideas ground on reconciliation between Marxist leftist philosophy and Islam, which emphasizes the liberation idea that is very familiar with the idea of western thinkers on colonialism. Shariati mixed Islamist political ideology with Marxist connotations and references to encounters with the static Shiite *ulama* in Iran. We discussed some key thinkers, whose efforts were primarily directed towards the creation of an Islamic society and state, opposing the authority of the classical *ulama* and traditional Islamic settings. In the 19th century the authority of classical *ulama* was weakened and destabilized by the new practices and forms of knowledge. Muhammad Qasim Zaman talks about the struggle between the *ulama* and the modern Islamist thinkers (Zaman 2009). In the postcolonial era, the traditional *ulama* gave way to the increasing power of Muslim nationalists and Islamists. The ambiguity between *ulama* and modern Muslim scholars is expressed in various debates around the question of gender, politics and secularism. The component of the Islamic political activism included apparently the capture of state-oriented political power. The Islamic state apparatus, for them, provided the application of the *Sharia*.

The legacy of this political thought has mainly served as a repertory of action for political purposes in Muslim politics; however, a practical and discursive change has occurred in Muslim views, which fosters more inclusive and non-politically oriented Islamic thinking. Many Muslim scholars (*ulama*) are also concerned with the new issues, especially related social-economic ones, using Islamic traditional resources to answer questions. While the first Muslim thinkers and scholars use political Islamic logic, the new pioneers of Muslim scholars develop their thinking on the question of renewing Islamic settings and traditional Islamic knowledge without islamizing the state; they follow principles and methods to modernize-reform-revitalize Islam. Reformative action takes ground on the level of the rejection of the classical Islamic *ulama* tendency and pure secular discourse (Esposito 1998: see chapter Revival and Reform; Kurzman 1998). They use new Islamic public reasoning for their arguments. The enemy is not outside, but the backwardness of Muslims should be found inside because most Muslims

do not have a clear and correct understanding of Islam. Intellectual, political and cultural change is needed for a revival of Muslims, according to these new Muslim scholars (see chapters in this book). Bayat remarks that Islamist movements have become post-Islamist where there emerged a new intellectual positioning and reflection (Bayat 2005). They are concerned with rationality, modern knowledge and contemporary social issues. Being aware of the current issues in Islam let them rethink and reformulate the message of Islam in the spirit of the traditional sources (Voll and Esposito 2001). Zaman draws a distinction between modernists and Islamists in their attitudes to the Islamic tradition (Zaman 2007:9). He gave the examples of Moroccan Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, the Egyptian Hasan Hanafi and the Syrian Muhammad Shahrur to discuss how the modernist discourse keeps alive the Arab-Islamic heritage. They attempt to discover the resources to respond to the socio-political malaise of the modern Arab world. By employing modern elements and sources in their writings they have been in a situation of contextualizing Islam. Contextuality approaches may differ one from another. Textuality and hermeneutics are also other methodological approaches used by new Muslim scholars. Some of the Muslim scholars such as Egyptian writer and intellectual Taha Husayn (1889-1973), a reformist intellectual Amin al-Khuli (d.1967), Nasr Abu Zayd accepted the Qur'an as a 'text' and applied it to historical-literal categories to make clear what the Qur'an says. These writers and intellectuals stress the role of the interpreter (Taji-Farouki 2004). It can be seen as a kind of secular view on the Qur'an by assuming that only the literary method and historiography of the text covers the meaning of the revelation. As a result of this approach, the text of the Qur'an is not considered ultimately a sacred text. This approach questions the status of the Qur'an as being an ultimate book in science, history and modern social-political problems.

The Quran in this sense can be understood as an object of aesthetic, literature, history rather than accepted as an ultimate unique source which guides Muslims. Quranic verses should be studied in the lens of socio-political human conditions. The writing of some contemporary Muslim thinkers exemplifies this hermeneutic look at the Quran. This claim finds echoes and functions with secular normativity (Mahmood 2006; Asad 2003). There is a convergence between the secular Muslim reformation idea and the liberal secular normativity that requires a particular scriptural hermeneutic understanding of religious texts. This normative secularity forces one to produce a particular kind of religion and truth which is compatible with rationality and free will (Mahmood 2006: 344). According to Mahmood, this hermeneutical project

“...is aimed at creating the conditions for the emergence of a normative religious subject who understands religion – its scriptures and its ritual forms – as a congeries of symbols to be flexibly interpreted in a manner consonant with the imperatives of secular liberal political rule. This insistence on a particularly singular relationship between subject and text is essential to what might be called *secularity*...” (Mahmood 2006: 344).

In this sense, the rituals and practices are always literalist-salafi expressions which pose a threat to the liberal western understanding of democracy (Parekh 2006). In spite of these various ways of approaching the traditional resources including modernist, reformist and traditionalist approaches, the challenging question remains: what are the boundaries of the Islamic knowledge?

In Muslim-minority countries, public intellectuals and authorities have sought to develop appropriately domesticated versions of Islam in accordance with local norms and values (see Leman 2000 for e.g. Belgium) – the vicissitudes of which John R. Bowen explored elsewhere for France (2009). The examples dealt with extensively in Bowen’s study are the existence and situational manifestation of multiple levels of belonging in the Muslim community, and the idea that Muslim authority is created across boundaries. Literate young Muslims construct their religious affiliations and understanding of Islam in trans-local spaces which explore a number of issues in the study of transnational public space, such as the use of Islamic texts and discourses. In this case, the authority of discourse and Islamic text is based on highly politicized arenas such as the question of the headscarf. We can give the example of *Union des organisations islamiques de France* (UOIF) that regroups many Muslim associations in France, a Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the TV channel Al-Jazira. This is a transnational space in which Muslims involve themselves and try to tackle their daily questions to reformulate Islamic issues (Bowen 2004). The new patterns influence a shift not only about discourses on Islam; at the same time the daily practices lead to a new configuration of Islamic practices.

Notes

- 1 Post-colonial theories which emphasize the question of the non-Western historical experience of rationality and modernity come to mind. For post-colonial thinkers, liberal modern thoughts do not pay attention to the idea of polity and community which can be found also in the history of different cultures. In this vein, have Islamist and Muslim politics a distinctive kind of polity, or is it simply a translation of modernity projects into Islamic terms?
- 2 The term translocality, in the words of the anthropologist Appadurai (1996) specifies a geographical creation of migrant workers who have their settlement in two countries. This settlement changes their habits, everyday life experience and tradition.

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