

Just Telling it Like it Is 2.0:
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**Conceptualizing Religion/Religious Identity in Political Science Research:
What Is in A Name and What Description Can Do**

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Introduction

Religion had been considered to be “peripheral” in the study of political science, as Bellin (2008) stated in her review of seven works published in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which seemed to challenge this consideration. Nevertheless, Bellin wrote, many of these then relatively new studies “succumb[ed] to epistemological debates about the logic and validity of causal inquiry” and overlooked “when and how religion matters” in political science scholarship. Since Bellin penned her review, approaches to religion—Islam in particular—as an independent and/or dependent variable have become more common, especially after the events of 9/11. For instance, a simple survey into the articles published in the journals of the International Studies Association (ISA) since the 9/11 attacks attests that there has been an increase in the use of the concepts “Islamism” and “Islamist.”

I suggest that descriptive work can improve the academic engagement with Islam by acknowledging the pitfalls of naming identities and ideologies that are affiliated with religions. As Gerring noted, the fact that “description has come to be defined in social science venues in a residual fashion (relative to causal inference)” has caused much to be lost (Gerring 2012, 743). Instead of labeling a broad range of political activism as Islamism and/or taking such labels for granted by proceeding with causal inquiry and inferences, scholars can communicate the nuances in different forms and actors of activism to the readers by descriptively specifying the who, the what, and the when of the activism that quote particular religions as their subject matters or motives—the histories, agencies, contexts, and contents that elaborate on what is in a name.

Outlining the problem

The question of religion, Islam in particular, in international studies has long been a contested one. The events of 9/11 and the subsequent “global war on terror” have redefined Islam as a potential threat to world peace and security. However, this redefinition has not merely emerged in response to the attacks of terrorist groups such as *Al-Qaeda* or, subsequently, the “Islamic State.” It is rather the product of a much longer history that dates back to colonialism and its infamous representations of the Other (see Said 1978). Instead of delving deeper into the critical theories of religion and secularism, as there is a wide array of valuable work that is beyond the scope of this memo, here I focus on the problematic academic engagement with religion—Islam in particular. From the discussion of terrorist attacks to cases concerning religious freedom and freedom of speech, there

is a lack of a nuanced understanding of where Islam stands. I suggest that descriptive approach can help overcoming this problematic engagement—not only within the discipline of political science but also to bridge the gap between the academy and general public.

Considering the media response to these events that may tend to frame Islam as a religion that harbors violence and intolerance, which can be highly effective in shaping public sentiment, it is important for academic research to provide a nuanced understanding of the involvement of Islam and of the use related concepts, such as Islamism, when referring to these events. For that reason, this research memo invites the readers and scholars of political science to reconsider the uses of the term Islamism and clarify the “*what* (e.g., *when, who, out of what, in what manner*)” (Gerring 2012, 722) instead of taking these for granted to explain the *how*. This also means distinguishing between different types of social and political activism as well as ideological perspectives that are grounded Islam, considering the concept's origin and the historical foundations that shaped its meaning and usage. This reconsideration can make important empirical and theoretical contributions to scholarship in political science.¹

I should note that “arbitrary use” in this context refers to the selection and use of the term Islamism based solely on individual discretion instead of following a consistent rule or methodology. The concept of Islamism is often used to describe ideological political activism grounded, supposedly, in Islam. This catchall label, as with “Salafism,” “Wahhabism,” and “Jihadism,” to name a few, has been deployed what mostly comprises causal research and analysis, to capture the advocacy of social and political change—ranging from democratic means, such as elections on the one hand, to revolutionary militancy that includes extremism and terrorism on the other. As Bayat has underlined, the term often describes “not the same but many different things in different national settings,” as in the case of Iran regarding the revolutionary movement of 1979 or as in the case of Turkey regarding democratically elected political parties, such as the Justice and Development Party (AK Parti or AKP) (Bayat 2005, 899). I point out the problems related to the uses of Islamism—arbitrarily—as a concept that is taken for granted in a large body of causal research, broadly referring to a range of social and political issues—from an incapacity to accommodate freedoms to violent terrorist attacks—and challenges the normative ideologification of Islam as a singular system of thought that potentially transforms into a rigid political structure when practiced in combination with secular means of governance and violence.

Sample scholarship on the uses of Islamism and related concepts

In order to validate concerns over the arbitrary use of the concept of Islamism (and Islamist as a derivation), the next step is to empirically illustrate that this has indeed been the case. A survey into the articles published in the journals of the International Studies Association (ISA) since the 9/11 attacks—until August 2018, when this assessment was conducted—attests that there has been an increase in the use of the concepts Islamism and Islamist.² It should be noted that this is a brief, preliminary assessment. ISA journals were selected as the sample for this preliminary assessment

¹ Nevertheless, this should be considered a broad introduction to the discussion over the arbitrary uses of this concept as there is a large number of texts with a broad range of uses that cannot all be captured within this memo. In this sense, the uses of the term by self-described “Muslim” actors—and the critiques of such uses—have been excluded.

² This increase is seen especially after 2004, given that following the attacks of September 2001, the time spent on research and article submission, until the acceptance and publication of scholarly articles can be 1-2 years.

due to the interdisciplinary and broad range of topics featured—from international relations to foreign policy—within the discipline of political science. This sample suffices for this preliminary critical assessment of the use of Islamism and can be expanded in future research. This is hopefully a starting point for a broader investigation into the issue, that will expand to other journals, longer timeframes, books, chapters, and eventually official governmental and media sources of information.

The sample used here amounted to a population of 2,645 articles. Manual search and download were preferred as this way the discussion based on the selected articles below can better illustrate what this arbitrary use comprises and why it is problematic could be identified. In essence, a form of content analysis for the two terms was carried out.³ The original articles referred to as examples in this section were selected by using a simple method: keyword search within the journals of the ISA on the Oxford Academic website. Although some of these articles indeed point out the complex scope of Islamism as an ideology, the use of Islamism and related concepts in the selected examples demonstrate an urgency to scrutinize the overall use of these concepts in an arbitrary fashion.

For example, Hurd’s critical approach to “political Islam” stands out for carefully outlining the problems that emerge in scholarship considering “not all forms of **what** secularist authority designates as political Islam pose this kind of threat” (Hurd 2007, 348). On the other hand, Hassner offers a limited understanding of Islamism by taking it for granted as the rejection of “Western influence” (Hassner 2011, 28). Along these lines, in their article on the role of religion in foreign policy, Warner and Walker refer to the AKP as an “Islamic party” and draw on scholarship that describes Turkey’s foreign policy strategy as leaning “towards the West” initially, which, after the AKP took power, seems to have “turned to the Middle East” (Warner and Walker 2011, 114). This presumes a dichotomous configuration of world politics in which the West is defined in terms of secular ideals whereas the Middle East in terms of its so-called Islamic tendencies.⁴ Moreover, they assume that the “Islamic” character of the party is correlated to its turn to the Middle East without specifying the particulars of the concept “Islamic” (whether it pertains to the pillars of the religion or Muslims etc.).

The scope and content of these articles are diverse in terms of their utilization of Islamism as a descriptive concept of political activism. On the one hand, Jourde’s work focuses on authoritarian African regimes in Guinea and Mauritania and how they dealt with domestic issues concerning Islamists, such as “Mauritian Islamists,” in an aligned manner with “hegemonic international

³ The sample include journal articles, special sections (including symposia and critiques), editorials/notes, review essays (original work), forums, tributes, published interviews, responses and reactions, and issue introductions. Book reviews, review articles, retracted articles, or special reports/critiques of articles (e.g., referee reports), journal introductions, short communications, and announcements were not included. The findings are listed in the tables and graphs in the Appendix. The concepts of Islamism and Islamist were used at an average rate of 29.83% of the time in the sample. Broken down, *International Studies Quarterly (ISQ)* used both concepts at an average rate of 20.26% of the time, *International Studies Review (ISR)* averaged at 37.55%, *International Studies Perspectives (ISP)* averaged at 17.79%, *Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA)* averaged at 40.48%, *International Political Sociology (IPS)* averaged at 41.22%, and *Journal of Global Security Studies (JoGSS)* averaged at 60.71%. Whilst this assessment is preliminary, the results nevertheless point to a need to investigate the extent to which these concepts have been used in other scholarly sources given the number of times they were used.

⁴ Here it is important to note that the accuracy of their suggestion is irrelevant to my primary concern regarding the use of Islamism.

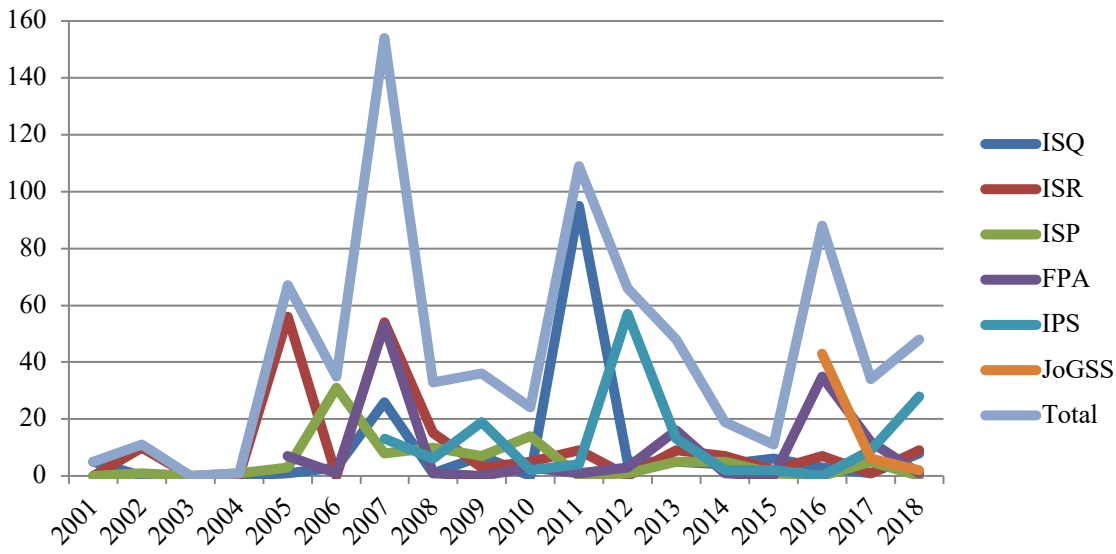
discourses” within the post-Cold War context, in which “radical Islamism” was treated as a replacement for the Communist threat (Jourde 2007, 481). On the other hand, Blad and Koçer use Islamism within the context of Turkey and interchangeably with “political Islamism” referring to the mobilization of religion by political parties in Turkey (Blad and Koçer 2012). More importantly, they also use “Islamist” to refer to a particular form of political efficacy associated with these parties. Similarly, Kennedy and Dickenson use Islamism (and Islamist) to highlight the religious leanings of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) (Kennedy and Dickenson 2013).

In addition to uses of Islamism and Islamist, there are other terms used by authors from time to time that **refer** to the political activism grounded in Islam. Here it is important to note the distinction between references and descriptions. For example, in their analysis of “the variation in terrorism within and across political regimes,” Findley and Young refer to “Islamicists” interchangeably with Islamic extremists—who are supporters of the regime in Iran (Findley and Young 2011, 366). Akaev and Pantin use “radical Islamites” referring to those with the political agenda of reviving “the Global Caliphate” (Akaev and Pantin 2014, 871). They claim that the post-Arab spring Middle East has been in chaos as the number of terrorists, including “radical Islamites,” who are acting “under the banner of radical Islam,” continue rising. Similarly, in their research note on terrorist profiles, Perliger, Koehler-Derrick, and Pedahzur use “violent Islamist” to refer to a particular “category of modern terrorists” alongside “Islamist terrorism” that is used to describe the actions of those within such category (Perliger, Koehler-Derrick, and Pedahzur 2016, 223). This suggests a potential distinction between violent and non-violent “Islamists,” yet the distinction has not been addressed. Although this could be due to the limitations in terms of scope, it is a legitimate concern regarding the use of the terms Islamist and Islamism for the purposes of this research memo.

Concluding remarks

These examples indeed support Gerring’s statement on how causality and description are “intimately related” and, therefore, depend on each other to be fully understood (Gerring 2012, 722). They also show that there is a need to adopt a nuanced understanding and use of the concept of Islamism in political science scholarship in order to accommodate the complexity of contextual and historical characterizations of Islam and Muslims as political ideology and actors, respectively. Nevertheless, I do not suggest replacing the concept of Islamism with another. The merit in this discussion is not the suggestion of a new concept that will replace Islamism. Instead, it is to illustrate why arbitrary uses of the concept are problematic—for labeling Islam as a potential threat when involved in politics, in an unparalleled way in comparison to other Abrahamic religions despite the already existing salience of such religions in politics, and for the inconsistency such uses cause in international studies scholarship for failing to consider the contested nature of the concept in question. This ultimately results in an incomplete and biased depiction of Islam.

Yearly Islamism and Islamist use 2001-2018



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