

Global Islam: Between images and reality



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Globalization has made the world of Islam more heterogeneous than homogeneous. It continues to shape Islam identities and moralities, imagined or real, at both global and local levels. What is conceptually homogenous is Islam itself, but what it means differs.

Globalization in its broadest sense is not new, and early Islam nominatively preached trans-racial, trans-ethnic solidarity of the community of the believers, although information technology today has made them even more aware of the world.

Islam emerged as a local path of Prophet Muhammad and his followers, but with the power of the Koran and Arabic, Islam has ever since become increasingly global, crossing non-Arabic Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and the Americas. From early times, Muslims have been politically divided into the Shiite and the Sunni, the Khawarij, the Murji'a, the Mur'tazila, and so forth, although the efforts to unify them have never ceased.

Of course, Muslims read the Koran, commanding them to be united in the rope of God, not to be divided into sects, but there is neither linear nor teleological history of

Islam, as if all Muslims are progressing from the chaos to the orderly.

Elements of the old and the new, the normative and the practical, the just and the unjust, have interacted in ways that vary from people to people and from time to time. There is no one direction of Islam today, as was the case in the past.

The lack of one global leadership of Islam has been felt as a challenge to the unity by some of the believers reviving the caliphate when this same deficiency is cherished by most other Muslims scattered in and working through their nation-states, ethnicities, social or political organizations.

The phrase "the Muslim world" itself is problematic if it means there is real, effective, face-to-face unity among most Muslims in the world today.

Of course, in Islamic sermons and publications, prayers are recited for Muslims in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and other conflict areas where Muslims suffer from war.

But when people talk about global or transnational Islam, or Islamic revivalism, they refer to the fundamentalist, "Islamist", "jihadist", very little to the progressive, sometimes liberal orientations and expressions that exist.

Being socially and modernly constructed, the labels are felt necessary in people's attempt at simplifying complex realities, but the perception of Islamic fundamentalism as the main player in global discourse and politics has not become weaker.

Thus, people today are not used to pointing to the Turkish Fethullah Gulan Movement, the Indonesian Muhammadiyah or the Nahdlatul Ulama, progressive Muslim networks, which have become increasingly no less global than hard-liners such as al-Qaeda, Jamaah Islamiyah, or the more diverse Muslim Brotherhood.

At the same time, much ignorance and instant information about Islam and Mus-

lim societies: with so much information and variables available in TV programs, films, novels and the Internet, Muslims and non-Muslims alike do not necessarily have the knowledge to comprehend the complexity. Thus it may be easier to find a claim that Islam is an intolerant religion among the Islamophobic societies or to read another that claims it is a tolerant, peaceful religion among the devout preachers and committed leaders.

With other religious and secular leaders, Muslim leaders from Indonesia, Iran, Egypt, Turkey and other countries have been promoting global tolerance, balance of power and peace, searching for a common ground, although still limited to the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, albeit still exclusive of other faiths.

Within the global religious markets, Muslim leaders and scholars, often along with non-Muslim counterparts, have thus been more preoccupied with correcting the images or what they call misperceptions about Islam and Muslims, but they generally are not interested in acknowledging the degree of diversity and complexity of Islam and Muslims. There is an obsession with image-correction.

The conspiracy or global *makar* theory, neo-imperialism, clash of civilizations and cosmic war have remained crucial parts of global public discourse.

But it is more difficult to find individuals and people who seek to understand both the complexity of Islam and the complexity of other religions and faiths, including secularism and liberalism.

Global Islam is the world of diversification, democratization and polarization of religious information and authority; no group represents or has the authority to orient all the Muslims across the globe, toward a real, unified community of believers.

The homogenization of the world of Islam has always been prayed for and pre-

ferred by many leaders, driven by both scriptures and real disunity, but problems and issues have endlessly polarized Muslims everywhere, not always as Muslims but as members of particular ethnic, national or political groups. Their immediate concerns are far more urgent for them to be addressed in their localities.

As minorities, some Muslims have just started to debate how to be French Muslims, American Muslims, Australian Muslims and so forth, and as majorities, many Muslims continue to negotiate their place in an increasingly pluralistic society. Even within the nation-states and provinces, Muslims are divided into various factions, political or non-political.

At the national and local levels, it is not so obvious for global citizens to recognize that many Muslim networks and organizations locally have contributed to addressing not so much Islamic problems but shared problems, such as governmental corruption, poverty, illiteracy, injustice, health, environment and violence.

Such local efforts in dealing with immediate problems with or without collaboration among Muslims, or between Muslims and non-Muslims, strengthen the diversification of Islam, rather than unifying it into a single global management.

There is no global or local, social or political engineering that would be effective enough to homogenize the world of local Muslim societies everywhere. Muslims have long been active participants in localizing their "universal" worldview, thereby pluralizing the world. Perhaps it is God alone who knows best the mystery of human unity and diversity.

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