A follow up to a 2013 study shows positive shifts in Tunisian opinions on outsiders, political violence and relations with the West.

College Park, Md. - A new survey conducted by a team of researchers from the University of Maryland and collaborating institutions reveals significant shifts in how Tunisians view the role of religion in politics, religious tolerance, political violence, Western political models, and their own national identity. The survey, conducted during the spring and summer of 2015, shows an increase in support for social individualism, a decline in support for political Islam, a significant increase in preference for Western-style democratic government and an increase in religious tolerance. Additionally, respondents demonstrated a rise in national identity as well as national pride, and a considerable decline of trust in Muslim extremists known as Salafis.

The new survey, which re-interviewed 2,400 people from the nationally representative sample of 3,000 Tunisian adults first interviewed in 2013, explored the value orientations and political engagements of Tunisians in such areas of human concerns as family and gender relations, identity, politics, the economy, religion, religious fundamentalism, Islamic government, Western culture, and violence against American troops and citizens.

Dr. Mansoor Moaddel, Professor in the Department of Sociology and principal investigator on the project, orchestrated both rounds of surveys in collaboration with other researchers from University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan University, Longwood University, ELKA Consulting, and the Institute National du Travail et des Etudes Sociales in Tunisia.

Compared to other Middle Eastern and North African countries for which data are available, data from the 2013 survey showed that Tunisia was already the most religiously tolerant society (see http://mevs.org/files/tmp/Tunisia_FinalReport.pdf). The further increase in the level of religious tolerance shown by the new survey is a welcome development for the institutionalization of liberal democracy in the country, a finding consistent with the research on the role of religious tolerance in fostering democratic stability.
The survey also explored perceptions of the most significant events that transpired in the country and globally, as well as an experimental component designed to investigate the idea of trust. Among other key findings, Tunisians demonstrated higher trust in their president and prime minister, felt empowered, felt less insecure, and perceived the presence of less corruption in the government than they did in 2013.

Tunisians polled also showed more favorable attitudes toward American and French citizens, expressed in terms of their satisfaction with having Americans and French neighbors. There were significant corresponding drops in approval of attacks against American military in Iraq and Afghanistan or American citizens.

The trend toward a higher tolerance of outsiders and disapproval of violence against them and a much higher level of mistrust of the Salafis is evidence of a diminishing social basis for extremism in Tunisia. In a country where an increasing number of its people disavow violence and express more tolerant attitudes toward foreigners, including Americans and French, there is a higher likelihood that these people will cooperate with their government in combating terrorism and political violence.


ISIS at SSSR

One of the most significant developments of 2015 was the emergence of the Islamic State as a global terrorist network. Attacks in Paris, Beirut, and continuing civil war in Syria solidified their image as brutal extremists. The Islamic State phenomenon has also generated much debate among social scientists of religion. Are they religiously inspired, a sort of revolutionary Muslim counterculture as anthropologist Scott Atran has recently suggested, or more akin to a transnational criminal network, as some political scientists and security experts have argued? How are they similar and different to past forms of revolutionary violence and terrorism? What is their relationship to Islam and what accounts for their ability to draw thousands of foreign recruits? And given that their stated aim is to create a new caliphate, what does their actual governance entail?

As the co-chair for Islam/Muslims for the 2015 conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, I was asked to organize an event about the Islamic State. The resulting ISIS Roundtable brought together social scientists from several...
disciplines, and their presentations stimulated many questions from the audience.

In his presentation “Understanding Jihad: The Role of Religious Commitment in ISIS” Mark Gould, Professor of Sociology at Haverford, developed a model of the core religious commitment, moral obligation, that characterizes (Sunni) Islam, and differentiates Islam from Christianity. He also discussed the link between these religious commitments and some of the practices that they motivate and legitimate. Professor Gould argued that Muslims believe themselves, with the guidance of God’s revelation and the Prophet’s Sunnah, to be capable of acting in ways meriting of salvation. In Islam, this requirement to act in accordance with God’s decrees may be short-circuited when fulfilling the religious obligation of jihad, the duty to create and expand the social and political world where Shari’a is implemented. In jihad, a believer fulfills an obligation to God; at God’s discretion, he accomplishes his goal and/or dies a martyr. If he lives, the fulfillment of this obligation is credited to his account on the Day of Judgment; if he should die a martyr, endeavoring to fulfill this obligation, he goes directly to heaven. For some Muslims (those we may label Islamists), one motivation for and the capacity to legitimate jihadist actions is embedded in authentic Islamic religious obligations. For many more Muslims, these commitments enable them to understand, and in some instances to feel sympathy for, those who undertake jihadist activities. Professor Gould said that jihadist actions can never be explained without the examination of situational variables. He concluded that the logic of religious commitment in Islam motivates and legitimizes jihad for some Muslims and that its autonomous effects cannot be ignored if were are to understand contemporary Islamist movements.

Mara Revkin, a PhD candidate in Political Science from Yale University, presented on “Crime and Punishment in the Islamic State.” Revkin conducted fieldwork in southeastern Turkey and has constructed a dataset on the activities of ISIS courts and other institutions – including public services, healthcare, education, and tax collection – in 20 different ISIS controlled provinces in Iraq and Syria. She argued that the ISIS legal system is helping to build a state in four main ways: 1) formation of a social contract between the ISIS government and civilians in Iraq and Syria; 2) the enforcement of internal control and discipline among ISIS’s own combatants and officials, which serves to promote military effectiveness and discourage treason, corruption, and other kinds of misconduct that would threaten organizational cohesion; 3) justifying and regulating various forms of resource extraction including taxation and the exploitation of oil, minerals, and antiquities, to ensure a consistent stream of revenue into ISIS’s public treasury; and 4) establishing a legal basis for territorial sovereignty and
expansion. She concluded that civilian attitudes toward ISIS governance in Iraq and Syria depend on their reference point. According to Revkin, ISIS only needs to perform slightly better than the available alternatives – none of which are good – in order to be perceived as the lesser evil.

Colin Beck, associate professor of sociology at Pomona College, was unable to attend the panel due to illness. Beck was to present a paper called, “The Islamic State: Radicals, Revolutionaries, or Terrorists?” in which he argues that most observers and commentators are comparing ISIS to the wrong kind of phenomena. For Beck, the Islamic State is terrorist, revolutionary, and radical all at the same time. Noting that terrorists do not just seek to harm their victims, but also seek to influence others (their ultimate targets) through their actions, Beck maintains that IS clearly fits the definition of a terrorist as it attacks religious minorities, Shi’a, foreign hostages, and so on. According to Beck, IS has also clearly created a revolutionary situation (in Iraq) and entered into another (in Syria), and we should consider the group revolutionary. Finally, defining radicalism as “contention that is outside the common routines of politics present within a society, oriented towards substantial change in social, cultural, economic, and/or political structures, and undertaken by any actor using extra-institutional means” (Beck 2015: 18), Beck argues that the Islamic State is also radical. With these descriptors in mind, Beck notes that many have drawn the obvious parallel between IS and other Islamist groups that use violence and control territory. Al-Shabab, the Taliban, Boko Haram. But Beck argues that the overlap of radicalism, revolution, and terrorism points to a different set of comparisons. Mid-20th century national-separatist groups were also revolutionaries who used terrorism to advance their radicalism. Such groups include the PKK in Turkey and Iraq, ETA in Spain and France, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, the IRA in Northern Ireland, among many others. These comparisons are important they don’t risk confusing the ideology of the group for the group itself, which is always a danger when we think of IS as a Muslim phenomenon. Second, they tell us to be cautious of being drawn to the spectacle of beheadings and social media recruitment, which are notable but sideshows to the more general processes of mobilization and contention that occur in the IS case. And, finally, they tell us that we already have much of what we need to know to understand IS. After all, the 20th century nationalists gave us the core of revolution and terrorism studies.

Omer Shaukat, a researcher at the Afro-Middle East Centre and at the University of Johannesburg, gave a presentation on “Ideology in/and the Islamic State: Distraction or explanation?” Drawing on recent interviews with returning ISIS jihadis as well as his own analysis of the propaganda released by the Islamic
State group, Shaukat argued that the organization’s ideological appeal is not a crucial determining factor in increasing its ranks, at least when it comes to foreign recruitment. However, he also suggested that given IS’s attempts to inculcate and further the ideological element within its members and the population under its control, IS’s specific ideology can be a significant factor in contributing to the evolution of Islamism in the post-Islamic State phase.

Finally, Abdullahi Gallab, associate professor of African and African-American Studies at Arizona State, presented “ISIS and Its Likes: Toward a Theory of Counterpublic.” Gallab argued that all aspects of the Islamic State are different from the world’s other states that make up the 193 countries of United Nations, the 57 members of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), or/and the 22 members of the Arab League, all of whose borders, sovereignty, and ability to enter in relations with each other are individually and collectively recognized. Within this ensemble of nation-states and the postcolonial other ones, the “state is best understood as a structure of intelligibility.” Hence, these states are “presumed to have the right to exercise . . . authority over the population within their borders, whether the people are citizens, subjects, or even foreigners.” Observing that the Islamic State is neither one of these states or countries, nor does it aspire to be so, Gallab called for an examination for socio-political developments that band together the conditions essential to the emergence, the effects and the consequences of the Islamic State phenomenon.

All of these presentations raise crucial and fascinating issues for the sociology of religion, and the panel participants hope they will spark ongoing discussions. For more information on the presentations, you are encouraged to contact the presenters individually.

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