Summary

Dynamism In Islamic Activism.
Reference Points For Democratization And Human Rights

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Background

Since the 1970s there has been an increase in the significance of Islam as a political factor: so-called Islamic activism. Various manifestations of this phenomenon have led to considerable tensions and violent conflicts, not only within the Muslim world itself, but also in (relationships with) the West and the Netherlands. The interrelatedness of what occurs outside and inside national borders means that what takes place elsewhere may also have consequences for the internal relationship between segments of the population. A climate of distrust and fear has arisen between Muslims and non-Muslims, and also within the Muslim community itself at times. Communication about 'Islam' now only takes place through intemperate images and inflated words, such as a 'clash of civilizations' or an 'irreconcilability of Islam with democracy and human rights.'

Research question

This report investigates the characteristics and dynamics of Islamic activism. It poses the question of whether, and in what respect, the manifestations of this activism since the 1970s offer reference points for democratization and the improvement of human rights. It also investigates which policy perspective on the part of the Netherlands and Europe can reduce the tensions surrounding Islamic activism in the longer term and can support processes of democratization and the improvement of human rights.

Goal

With this report, the Council intends to formulate a policy perspective that will contribute to reducing the tensions with and within the Muslim world with regard to issues of Islamic activism. The Council considers it essential that this perspective be based on knowledge of the actual developments and characteristics of this activism. At the same time, the Council does not intend this report to be a description and analysis of *all* facets of this activism, including the well-known negative manifestations. The emphasis is on positive reference points for policy directed towards democratization and human rights in Muslim countries.

This report is directed towards the Dutch government. By their nature, the international developments discussed in this paper demand efforts of international policy. For this reason, the report primarily explores the policy possibilities available to the EU. It is precisely within this larger context that the Netherlands can exert influence. The starting points for the EU's external policy also have implications for relations with Islamic activism in the Netherlands.

Approach

The relationship between Islamic activism and democracy and human rights is examined along three dimensions, namely:

- Islamic-political thought,
- Islamic-political movements, and
- Islamic law.

Reference points

The report finds that Islamic activism does indeed offer reference points for democratization and human rights. Each of the three investigated dimensions shows, in this respect, great diversity and dynamism. Even though these are only tentative reference points and much uncertainty still exists, it is inaccurate to assume that 'Islam' in a general sense is at odds with the acceptance of democracy and human rights.

On the level of *Islamic-political thought* there are indeed many thinkers who reject important principles for the polity of the state, such as the separation of church and state, democracy, constitutional government, and human rights, as incompatible with Islamic principles and the supremacy of Islamic law. Yet, alongside these opinions, which shape much of the image of Islam, there are increasingly more thinkers who strive for these same principles precisely on Islamic grounds. They turn away from dogmatic approaches that claim that the precepts of the sacred sources should be followed to the letter. Rather, they are more concerned with the spirit and expressive power of these sources in relation to current circumstances. Thinkers holding such views can now be found in many Muslim countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, and Egypt, for example. This modernizing mode of thought can even be found in Iran, a country that has now had a quarter century of experience with Islamic theocracy.

The recent history of *Islamic-political movements* in the Muslim world also reveals a large degree of diversity and dynamism. Such movements do not form a homogenous, unalterably radical, and always violent threat. Transnational terrorism that concentrates on jihadist actions is, of course, threatening. Alongside this, however, there are a number of Islamic

movements with very diverse aspirations, including groups seeking reforms within the existing political systems. Moreover, Islamic-political movements in many Muslim countries have abandoned their initially radical attitude in favor of a pragmatic political standpoint. The movements most strongly oriented towards the *political arena*, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have shifted the most in the direction of accepting democratic principles and norms. In doing so, they distance themselves from absolute truths and become familiar with the positive workings of democratic principles and human rights.

In the last few decades many Muslim countries have been exposed to the pressure of introducing elements of *Islamic law*. The views on what Sharia contains, however, are quite divergent, ranging from very general guidelines to concrete codes of behavior. Thus there are large differences not only in the laws based on Sharia, but also in how these laws should be put into practice. The Islamization of law since the 1970s has had limited scope in most countries; exceptions are countries like Iran, Pakistan, and Sudan. Additionally, the first wave of Islamization has not been not followed by a second; rather, there has been a decline in the influence of strict interpretations of Sharia on national law in the last fifteen years. Even when Sharia plays a formal role, it seems that this gradual modernization of the law is not excluded. Thus the reform of marriage laws has gone forward in most countries despite activism. In reaction to *universal* human rights, ideas about *Islamic* human rights have been developed in the Islamic world. In addition to sharing similarities, these two concepts also demonstrate important fundamental differences. Nevertheless, here, too, there appears unmistakably a tendency towards gradual rapprochement.

Policy Perspective

The member states of the EU cannot permit themselves to stand aloof. An inwardly focused Union which renounces external ambitions only creates an illusion of security that does not remove the existing vulnerability. Furthermore, aloofness means that Europe fails to make use of its chances, which indeed exist, for supporting promising developments in the Muslim world. For this reason, the WRR argues for an active and, wherever possible, constructive attitude on the part of EU member states. This policy encompasses the following points:

- taking into account the diversity of Islamic activism;
- recognizing Islamic activism as a potentially constructive political and juridical factor in the development of Muslim countries;
- associating with endogenous processes and courses of development which promote democracy and human rights;
- investing in an informed public opinion about Islamic activism and the main features of the policy in this area.

Diversity
Between and within Muslim countries there are many different interpretations of the way in which Islam relates to politics, democracy, and human rights. Whether Islam and democracy can coexist, and whether Islamic legislation is at odds with human rights, cannot be established in any general sense but differs according to particular views and/or practices of Islam or Sharia, and may also change over time. The Netherlands and the EU will have to invest in knowledge of these different views and practices as a foundation for a policy concerning Muslim countries.

Constructive or not
In the past, the EU, in its advocacy of democratization and the improvement of human rights in neighboring Muslim countries, primarily put its hopes on non-religious movements and parties, even if these groups had little political support within the local population. It becomes increasingly apparent, however, that ignoring the political and juridical agendas of religious activism offers no solution and may even be counterproductive. Not only does such a stance discourage Islamic groups with substantial followings who are prepared to pursue gradual political liberalization from *within* the existing system, but it also fuels the widely-held view amongst ordinary citizens in the Muslim world that secularism and (Western) democracy, by definition, serve anti-religious interests. This will only fan the demand for Islamization, either because radicals will receive more support from the population for their religious views, or because political rulers themselves will play the conservative 'Islamization card' in order to maintain political legitimacy.

The EU and the Netherlands should no longer rule out in advance Islamic movements as potential interlocutors, but should be guided by the concrete political actions of these groups. They should strongly support groups moving towards the acceptance of democracy and human rights and condemn groups which move away from this goal. In addition, they must develop more positive incentives to be able to encourage and reward reforms. Furthermore, they must be prepared to levy sanctions in the case of serious violations of human rights. In the case of Euro-Mediterranean policy, this may amount to the (temporary) suspension of a partnership agreement. In this way, the Union allows space for different courses of democratization and the progressive realization of human rights, while at the same time maintaining its own values in this area.

Endogenous dynamism

Democracy and human rights cannot be permanently imposed from outside. The Netherlands and the EU should influence without lecturing and accept the fact that within an Islamic frame of reference democracy and human rights may sometimes (provisionally) be worked out in a manner different from that which is customary in Western countries. In many respects, Muslim countries do not satisfy contemporary international standards regarding democracy and human rights. In this, for that matter, they do not differ from many (other) developing countries. Precisely because of this, the question of whether and how they wish to aim for *improvement* is crucial. Serious reforms in the direction of international standards deserve support, including those which proceed from an Islamic discourse. Progressive improvements of human rights in many Muslim countries are simply easier to accept if they can be imbedded in the local tradition and culture. This is illustrated by the new family legislation in Morocco; considerable improvement in women's rights has taken place under the banner of Sharia.

Implications for the Netherlands

Internal European and Dutch relations also demand attention to diversity and dynamism. This, however, will require a cultural shift. To date, political and public debate in the Netherlands demonstrates insufficient knowledge of Islam and the many Islamic-political movements and schools of thought. Governments should support active and especially structural initiatives which broaden the supply of information about these themes among Muslims and non-Muslims. Structural contributions may serve as an excellent counterbalance to the one-sided information and influence mechanisms, such as that of 'web Islam' practiced by radical factions.

In the Dutch situation, the formation of parties (partially) based on Islam or Muslim identity can offer a constructive contribution to political debate. Political parties inspired by Islam can give voice to those who do not feel themselves to be represented in the Muslim representative bodies. Such parties attest to the aspiration for participation in the existing institutions and according to the democratic rules that obtain.

Conclusion

A climate of confrontation and stereotypical thinking does not create stable conditions for security, democratization, and increasing respect for human rights. The only advisable alternative is to engage the reference points for democracy and human rights in Islamic activism itself. The analyses presented in this report demonstrate that these reference points, indeed, exist.