



POLITICAL ISLAM AND PUBLIC POLICY

Conference Report

Introductory Remarks

In March 2010, the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, IPPR, the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung jointly organised a conference on 'Political Islam and Public Policy'. The conference aimed at bringing together politicians, academics and representatives of civil society to identify various forms of (non-violent) political Islam and discuss how Western states deal with the issue both at home and in Muslim countries.

With initial thoughts on the phenomenon 'political Islam' given by HE Georg Boomgaarden, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to the UK, the conference started. The Ambassador expressed the need for accurate differentiation between various forms of Islamism in order to avoid seeing dialogue with the Islamic world from the exclusive viewpoint of security. 'There are many different manifestations of political Islam – just as there are many manifestations of other religious traditions in politics' he said. 'The key is to understand the political agenda of an Islamist group.'

With regards to Islam in Germany, Ambassador Boomgaarden said: 'The integration of Muslims in Germany into state and society is a major priority.' At the same time the government has to ensure religious freedom and maintain ideological neutrality. 'Germany,' he stated, 'has no tolerance for intolerance.'

With a view to the lack of democratic legitimacy within many parts of the Islamic World, the

Ambassador said: 'Pressure for reform is also coming from forces which do not necessarily favour secular discourse. Indeed, in the last few years it has become apparent that conservative Islamic civil society can provide significant impetus for the rule of law.' 'Dialogue – as the history of last century's East-West conflict taught us – can break down enemy images and prejudices,' he concluded his speech.

Founder and Trustee of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), Henry Sweetbaum, then welcomed the audience and introduced the organisers of the conference before handing over to the Chair of the first panel session, Dr. John Bew, Deputy Director of ICSR.

Session 1: Dividing lines and common ground

The aim of this session was for the four speakers to discuss political Islam so as to find 'dividing lines and common ground'. Magali Rheault, Senior Analyst at the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, opened the session by sharing key Gallup findings about Muslims' attitudes towards the intersection of governance and Islam. Ms. Rheault started with a brief historical overview of the rise of Islamist movements and political parties, which has raised concerns in both Western and Muslim countries. But drawing from the extensive body of survey research from more than 35 predominantly Muslim countries, Ms. Rheault explained that most Muslims view the democratic process and religion as compatible. Strong majorities of

Muslims around the world say they would include a freedom of speech guarantee if asked to write a new constitution for a new country. At the same time, many Muslims say Shari'a should be a source of law (Turks are the notable exception). For example, 62% of Iranians say Shari'a should be one of the sources of legislation, but not the only one and 17% say it should be the only source. However, Muslims' desire to incorporate religious principles into the law does not translate into support for theocracies. In Iran, about 6 in 10 respondents say religious leaders should play no role in the area of writing national legislation.

Yayha Birt, former director of City Circle, spoke more narrowly about political Islam in the UK context. 'A wide definition of "Islamism", such as Muslim "engagement with modern politics", is more helpful than the more limited definitions that refer only to violent Salafi groups,' he said. Many Muslim immigrants see political Islam as a means of bringing their interests onto the political agenda of their host countries - enabling the rise and development of Islamic movements in the UK over the past decades. Mr. Birt cited the conflict in Bosnia as one of the catalysts which contributed to the emergence of an 'extreme fringe' from Muslim communities in the UK. 'A way forward,' he argued, 'needs to be based on a creative intellectual dialogue on values, with civil society playing an important role in this process.'

Dr. Guido Steinberg, from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), talked about German experiences with Islamist movements. Muslims in Germany have traditionally been grouped along national lines, with a distinct Turkish-Arab divide. Turkish Muslim groups have been more influential in Germany due to both a greater number of activists and the establishment of their main organisation, the Islamic Council, in the 1980s. Due to the Turkish dominance of political Islam, political developments in Turkey tend to be felt in Germany. As such, Dr. Steinberg predicted major upheavals in the future with regards to political Islam in Germany as a reaction to political changes currently taking place in Turkey (e. g. marginalisation of the Milli Görüs movement since the inauguration of the AKP government). In contrast, Islamists have tried to remain untouched by national allegiances, and have actively sought to unify the Muslim community. Since 2001, there have been signs of greater cooperation between the Turkish and Arab Muslims manifesting itself in the creation of the 'Muslim Council of Coordination'.

After tracing the rise and fall of political Islam

from a historical perspective, the final speaker of this panel, Dr. Khaled Hroub, from the Centre of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at Cambridge University, highlighted the importance of understanding the root causes of political Islam: 'These movements are a product of their social, political and historical context.' In order to solve the problem of radicalisation in Islam, we need to 'deradicalise the context'. 'A powerful Israel and oppressive elites ruling the Middle East,' Dr. Hroub argued, 'are the main factors causing this radical context.'

During the Q&A, members of the audience criticised the panel for failing to adequately define key terms, such as 'Islamist' and 'political Islam'. They also asked for an assessment of the threat presented by Islamists, considering the possibility of the creation of an Islamic power block along the lines of the Communists during the Cold War. According to Mr. Birt, the formation of such a global Caliphate in the near future is unlikely. 'The important question we should be asking,' he suggested, 'is why are Islamist groups talking about creating a Caliphate in the first place?' 'The suffering of Muslims in the Middle East, in particular in Palestine, is one of the causes,' Mr. Birt stated in answer to his own question. Ms. Rheault commented that, in fact, Muslims in the EU have confidence in their national institutions, are loyal to their countries and do not want to islamise the EU. Dr. Steinberg added that the way forward is to foster interethnic cooperation, while isolating security matters from religious policy. In Germany, one of the mechanisms for this was the dialectic approach of the 'German Islam Conference'. The conference was, however, criticised by members of the audience for being heavy-handed due to the strong influence of the government.

Session 2: Domestic policy towards political Islam

Focusing on domestic policy responses towards political Islam, the next panel of speakers offered a range of perspectives on the way forward. Following up on the first panel's discussion on the importance of a workable definition, Martin Bright, from The Jewish Chronicle, emphasised that the 'state and its institutions should have a dialogue with political Islam, but they must have an understanding of what they are in a dialogue with.' He criticised the intellectual left Islam critic's viewpoint as well as emotional Islamist trends - with regards to the East London Mosque in

particular, but also regarding the umbrella organisation Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). The latter provided a forum for the South Asian – and ‘totalitarian’ – Jamaat-e-Islami.

Prof. Herta Däubler-Gmelin, former German Federal Minister of Justice, took the issue of a comprehensive understanding of political Islam one step further by saying that ‘there cannot be one single approach.’ ‘There must be different approaches because political Islam is understood in different ways.’ However, any dialogue between fundamentalist groups and the state has to have boundaries. We cannot cooperate with groups that do not want to accept our institutions of law and government, equality (particularly between genders), democratic political values, and the separation of religion and the state. ‘The way forward in Germany,’ she said, ‘is for Muslim groups to establish a legal framework for interaction with the state and participation in public life, as other religious groups have done.’ This would allow them to be properly represented and have greater political influence on democratic decisions, which the German constitutions is prepared to offer.

Taking a historical perspective, Oliver McTernan, Director of Forward Thinking, highlighted the need to invest in more expertise: ‘Our lack of understanding of political Islam has resulted in the creation of flawed strategies by the government, which too often ignored the fact that the religious identity for Muslims is only one of many.’ This attitude has promoted a diffuse feeling of threat which minarets and headscarves have become symbols for. According to Mr McTernan, there is a need to ‘move away from a secularism that believes that religion is irrational, as it prevents us from moving forward.’ ‘The strict focus on free elections/democracy without taking time to ensure that the institutions are in place to guarantee good governance undermines our ability to recognise the importance of Islamic political movements and to engage with them in a constructive and necessary partnership.’

In reply to the speakers of the first panel, Maajid Nawaz of the Quilliam Foundation criticised Mr. Birt’s definition of Islamism for being too broad, and argued that Dr. Hroub’s narrow focus on the Israeli-Palestinian issue as a cause of radicalisation was too simplistic: ‘Palestine is an important issue, but we have to recognise that the world does not revolve around Palestine and that there are many other issues that motivate political Islamic groups.’ Mr. Nawaz outlined six recommendations that should be considered when addressing the issue of political Islam including: the

government must recognise that various paradigms exist in political Islam; human rights must be respected and racism must not be excused or tolerated because it has a basis in culture; a distinction must be made between legal tolerance and civil tolerance – a group which operates legally does not need to be tolerated by society; and we must broaden our engagement with Muslims away from models of dialogue which focus on umbrella groups, to include smaller groups and even individuals.

A lively debate followed in the Q&A focusing on whether or not there was a need, as Mr. Nawaz had suggested, for the government to move away from dialogue with umbrella groups. Mr. Nawaz argued that it might be more helpful to build groupings along political rather than religious lines. Disagreeing with this, Prof. Däubler-Gmelin pointed out that umbrella groups are important because they provide a way for people to be included in the political process at the national level. Mr. Nawaz responded to this comment by stating that the focus on umbrella groups put pressure on Muslims to create a clergy, which is something they do not want to do. The final comment on this issue came from Mr. Bright, who suggested that umbrella groups can be effective provided they are pluralistic and representative, at which point the debate moved on to focus on the relationship between Jihadism and Salafism, and whether or not Salafism should be considered a security threat. Mr. Nawaz responded that Salafi – or Wahhabi groups as he preferred to call them – have been linked to violence in the past. However, it is certainly not the case that all Wahhabists should be considered a security threat.

Session 3: Foreign policy towards political Islam

The third session, which was chaired by Dr. Peter Neumann, Director of ISCR, began with a critical review of British foreign policy towards political Islam by Baroness Kishwer Falkner, Liberal Democrat Peer, who stated that ‘UK policy towards the Islamic world has been confused, contradictory, and at best complacent.’ ‘An example of this,’ she explained, ‘is British policy towards the Taliban.’ We are willing to partner with the Taliban in order to facilitate peace in Afghanistan, but we are unwilling to allow them a place in Pakistani politics. ‘There is a need to be consistent,’ she argued, ‘either engage with them or don’t.’

The discussion once again returned to the issue of Palestine, with the second speaker, Ruprecht Polenz,

German Christian Democrat MP and Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the German Bundestag, commenting that as Palestine is perceived to be one of the root causes of radicalisation - whether or not this is actually the case - it needs to be addressed. 'We must deal with perceptions,' he explained. One of the problems faced by our governments is that more moderate Muslim groups in the Arab world are often marginalised due to the lack of democratic channels and that they are not taken seriously by the West. 'We should,' Mr. Polenz argued, 'focus on developing structures that would allow these more moderate groups to participate politically.' However, there would need to be an understanding that these groups would continue to promote democratic rule and Western values such as equality, should they gain power.

Anas Altikriti, from the Cordoba Foundation, followed up on this last comment by Mr. Polenz by stating that two thirds of Muslims lived in democracies and participated in them, 'so to take for granted the idea that Islam is undemocratic is wrong.' With regards to the issue of who to engage with he argued that 'if a group has a constituency and is non-violent, then it should be acknowledged politically.' It is wrong to set terms for participation in dialogue, such as to require a group to be in favour of democratic rule.

Outlining the Conservative Party's stance on political Islam the final speaker of this session, Crispin Blunt, Conservative MP, informed the audience that if the Conservative Party came to power after the next election the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir would be banned. 'This is necessary,' he explained, 'because, while the group has remained non-violent in the UK, its overseas branches have promoted violence.' He stated that 'British foreign policy must reflect British values.' That means the government should support

democratic outcomes abroad, but it should also avoid too much interference in the domestic issues of foreign countries.

Baroness Falkner began the Q&A session by commenting that a number of speakers had taken the view that the government should not cooperate with groups that choose violent means to achieve their aims. 'The problem with this policy,' she explained, 'is that conflicts are not clean with beginnings and ends.' There is not always a clear dividing line between violent and non-violent groups, as often violent groups can renounce violence to engage in dialogue. Mr. Polenz responded by referring to the example of Hamas. He pointed out that in the case of Hamas, there has been no renunciation of violence and the group is still listed as a terrorist organisation by the European Union (EU), therefore dialogue with this group is not possible. At this point a heated debate began on whether or not dialogue and cooperation was possible with groups that use violence.

The discussion went on to the question from the audience of how a 'moderate' Muslim should be defined. Mr. Polenz responded that a 'moderate' Muslim refuses to use violence to achieve political goals and wishes to uphold democratic values and principles. Several other issues were also highlighted in the discussion, such as whether or not the British government should engage with Muslim groups that have signed the Istanbul Declaration, and what steps Britain should take to contain Iran. On the Istanbul Declaration Mr. Blunt argued that we should not engage with groups that have signed it, whereas Baroness Falkner urged for a more inclusive view. After a final discussion on the issue of whether or not to ban Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Q&A session, and the conference as a whole, drew to a close.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is a German think tank with a wide reaching network of offices worldwide. The London office concentrates on organising a British-German dialogue on bilateral, European and global policy issues.

The Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) is the UK's leading progressive think tank. It works to shape policy across a broad range of domestic and international issues, driven by a belief in the importance of fairness, democracy and sustainability.

Dialogue with the Islamic world has been a key focus of the work of the German Embassy London since 2004. As part of this commitment, it has been very glad to co-organise a conference on Political Islam and Public Policy. The Embassy is delighted that through this report the results of the conference can be made known to a wide circle of decision-makers in the UK, Germany and beyond.

The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence aims at educating the public in relation to diplomacy and strategy, public administration and policy, security and counter-terrorism and international conflict resolution. It produces first-class research, addressing the most pressing questions regarding the occurrence and impact of radicalisation and political violence.