The opportunities and limits of Islamist ideological developments on the rights of non-Muslims and women

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Abstract

Most academic scholars of the Muslim Brotherhood and like-minded Islamist organisations seem to agree that these groups have come to accept the nation state and the rules of the democratic game over the past few decades. At the same time, several scholars have shown in their work that reforms and developments among Islamists with regard to the state and democracy have not been accompanied by similar trends on religious minority rights and especially women's rights. The long-held Islamist ideal of an Islamic state in which Islam provides the identity of the state remains difficult to square with full and equal citizenship for non-Muslims. Similarly, Islamists have been willing to make concessions with regard to women's rights by reinterpreting Islamic tradition, but this has not moved as far as their revisionism with regard to the state and democracy. What is holding them back? The objective of this special issue is to begin to answer this question through various case studies, all of which focus on gaining greater insight into (the development of) views on the rights of religious minorities and women among non-violent Islamists since the Islamic revival in the Middle East and North Africa in the 1960s.

Introduction

Islamism remains a controversial topic. The term itself is sometimes abused by supposedly secular dictators in the Middle East to consciously blur the differences between democratically inclined Islamic activists — the subject matter of this special issue — and violent and radical groups such as al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State (IS), in order to obtain support for their own anti-Islamist policies (Al-Azami, 2020). This blurring goes beyond terminology, however, and is not limited to dictators. Several analysts portray non-violent Islamist organisations across the Middle East

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— and especially the Muslim Brotherhood — as merely pragmatic radicals willing to bide their time (Rubin, 2010), terrorists (Farahat, 2017) or conspiratorial plotters (Obaid, 2020).

Most academic scholars of the Muslim Brotherhood and like-minded Islamist organisations, such as Ennahda in Tunisia and the Parti de la justice et du développement (PJD) in Morocco, seem to agree, however, that these groups have come to accept the nation state and the rules of the democratic game.[1] With regard to the former, it is clear that early Egyptian Islamist ideologues such as Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949), the Muslim Brotherhood's founder, 'Abd al-Qadir 'Awda (1906–1954) and Hasan al-Hudaybi (1891–1973) were still heavily influenced by ideas on the caliphate, albeit in various ways (Wagemakers, 2020; Zollner, 2009). Yet later, Islamist thinkers in the same organisations have become thoroughly "nationalised" in the sense that they have accepted and acted upon the opportunities given to them within the confines of their respective nation states. This is not just apparent from their long-time involvement in national politics, despite the repression and authoritarianism they have endured (Brown, 2012; Cavatorta & Merone, 2013; El-Ghobashy, 2005; Rosefsky Wickham, 2013; Wagemakers, 2020, 2022; Zeghal, 2005), but also from their willingness to move beyond the caliphate and even the "Islamic state" and accept a civil state (Harnisch & Mecham, 2009).

The same applies to democratisation. The aforementioned early Islamist ideologues from Egypt certainly saw a role for the Muslim community in the affairs of state, but they believed that this should be circumscribed by the sharia, dealt with it through the prism of *shura* (consultation) rather than democracy and accorded a rather dominant role to the ruler, particularly if he was a pious Muslim (Kutscher, 2011; Moussalli, 1994; Shavit, 2010; Wagemakers, 2020). Yet decades of opportunities in the form of electoral and parliamentary participation have not only rendered the question of accepting democracy a theoretical issue at most, but various Islamists have also made ideologically underpinned choices in favour of democracy, sometimes boycotting elections merely out of political and pragmatic — not ideological — considerations (Mishal & Sela, 2002; Schwedler, 2006; Tamimi, 2001; Wagemakers, 2022). Some Islamists have even taken their reformist views on democracy and democratic participation so far that they are sometimes referred to as "post-Islamist" (Abu Rumman, 2018; Bayat, 2013; Stacher, 2002).

The changes in Islamists' views on the state and democracy and their use of the opportunities provided to them in this regard have mostly taken place since the 1960s. Islamism has grown exponentially and has greatly gained in influence since then because of the Arab military loss to Israel in the war of 1967 and the search for a new, Islamic alternative to the dominant Arab nationalism of that era (Kepel, 2002). This greater influence often led to stronger Islamist social and political entanglements, forcing Islamists to apply their views, accept compromises, join coalitions and make decisions accordingly; to take responsibility towards a societal or electoral

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[1] The literature on this subject is vast, and only a few examples will be referred to here. For a much more extensive overview of publications showing Islamists' political and ideological developments, see Wagemakers, 2022, pp. 227-30.

base to which they are accountable; and to become involved in a closer relationship with the state, on whose acceptance and tolerance they at least partly rely. While these opportunities may well have contributed to a greater acceptance of the state and democracy,[2] they seem not to have equally done so with regard to the rights of non-Muslims and women.

To be sure, the specific role of especially Christians in Islamist thought and practice has received some attention (Al-Anani, 2018; El Fegiery, 2012; Rutherford, 2006, 2008; Scott, 2010). This has particularly been the case in light of the Arab uprisings that started in 2010 (the "Arab Spring") (Abu-Munshar, 2012; Al-Anani, 2018; Skovgaard-Petersen, 2017) and with regard to the role the pro-Muslim Brotherhood scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926-2022) has played in this (Warren & Gilmore, 2012, 2014). Much of this literature focusses on Christians' role as citizens equal to Muslims and how such equality can be achieved in a state that reflects the Islamists' ideals, which is part of a broader focus on citizenship in the fields of Islamic and Middle East Studies (Butenschon et al., 2000; Butenschon & Meijer, 2018; March, 2009; Meijer & Butenschon, 2017).

The subject of women's rights in the Middle East has also been dealt with in light of the concept of citizenship (Joseph, 2000), but the topic has also received attention in the context of Islamist thought and practice in various countries (Abu Haniyya, 2008; Bydoon, 2011; Clark, 2006; Clark & Schwedler, 2003; El Fegiery, 2012; Maktabi, 2017; Taraki, 1995, 1996; Utvik, 2022). Some of this attention also concentrates specifically on the ideas of prominent Islamist thinkers, such as the aforementioned al-Qaradawi or the long-time leader of the Tunisian Islamist party Ennahda, Rashid al-Ghannushi (b. 1941) (Mahmoud, 1996; Stowasser, 2009). Others have focussed clearly on the new developments in Islamist experiences with regard to women's rights since the "Arab Spring" (Biagini, 2020, 2021; Škrabáková, 2017).

In a more general sense, several scholars have shown in their work that reforms and developments among Islamists with regard to the state and democracy have not been accompanied by similar trends on religious minority rights and especially women's rights (Hamid, 2014; Rosefsky Wickham, 2013; Skovgaard-Petersen, 2017; Utvik, 2022; Wagemakers, 2020). Indeed, to quote Utvik about women's rights: "In the discourse of Islamists, there has long been an awkward coexistence between a declared recognition of women as equal political actors and an explicit affirmation of a traditional Muslim view of the man as the head of the family" (2022, 1).

To mention merely a few examples of this broader phenomenon: the long-held Islamist ideal of an Islamic state in which Islam provides the identity of the state — even in the revised version promoted by Islamists in the past few decades — remains difficult to square with full and equal citizenship for non-Muslims. Similarly, Islamists have been willing to make concessions with regard to women's rights by reinterpreting Islamic tradition, but this has not moved as far as their revisionism with regard to the state and democracy. What is holding them back? The objective of this

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[2] This is a point made by proponents of the "inclusion-moderation thesis", which — in short — holds that the political inclusion referred to above will lead actors to moderate their ideological or practical behaviour.

special issue is to begin to answer this question through various case studies, all of which focus on gaining greater insight into (the development of) views on the rights of religious minorities and women among non-violent Islamists since the Islamic revival in the Middle East and North Africa in the 1960s.

This introduction argues that there are at least two reasons[3] that, broadly speaking, account for Islamists' reluctance to extend their ideological development on the state and democratic participation to the topics of non-Muslims and women: (1) unlike on the subjects of the state and political participation, there are numerous and relatively clear religious texts about these topics (especially women) that are taken seriously enough to limit ideological flexibility; and (2) the socio-political context in which Islamists operate can sometimes facilitate opportunities, but often also causes them to adopt certain restrictive positions or at least limits their ability to be ideologically flexible. By dealing with a representative selection of these limiting texts and contexts, this introduction provides a general framework for the rest of the contributions to this special issue, gives an overview of academic scholars' work on this topic and also provides a broad basis on which the rest of the articles can build.

Limiting texts

It should be made clear from the outset that it is by no means the intention of this editor — or any of the authors in this special issue — to suggest that "Islam" or "Islamic texts" are preventing Muslims in general from reforming their ideas on religious minorities' and women's rights. Indeed, the sheer diversity of Islam is merely one indication that Muslims have numerous ways of dealing with their sacred texts, including in modern times (Taji-Farouki, 2006). Yet Islamists — although they, too, are a very diverse group — not only take the texts of the Qur'an and the Sunna very seriously, but also tend to read them in a rather definitive and legislative way, which limits their own ability to view Qur'anic verses or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad as abrogated, irrelevant or best left untouched. Islamists' own approach to the texts, in other words, hampers their ideological flexibility.[4]

Religious minority rights

In the empires of Islam, ranging from the Umayyad Empire in the seventh century to the Ottoman Empire that ended in the twentieth century, Muslim sacred texts — together with contextual factors such as the interests of the rulers and political considerations — resulted in a long — but mixed — tradition on dealing with non-Muslims as second-class believers. The treatment of Jews and Christians — since

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[3] These are certainly not the only reasons, however. As Škrabáková has pointed out, issues such as Islamist groups' institutionalisation and centralisation can also be of great importance (see Škrabáková, 2017).

[4] For more on how Islamists read the Qur'an, see Carré, 2004; Yavari, 2014; Wild, 2006.

those were the religious minorities mostly encountered by Muslims — varied from outright discrimination to peaceful and respectful treatment. If discriminatory measures were taken, these ranged from concrete actions such as a poll tax for Jews and Christians (the *jizya*) to more general policies of treating non-Muslims as the people of protection (*ahl al-dhimma*) (Cohen, 2008; Courbage & Fargues, 1997; Friedmann, 2003; Levy-Rubin, 2011; Lewis, 2014; Stillman, 1979, 1991).

The Islamic textual tradition with regard to non-Muslims and their rights is far more detailed, however, than the concepts mentioned above may suggest. Some Qur'anic texts dealing with Jews and/or Christians are quite negative about them, speaking about them as "apes" or "swine" (Q. 2: 65; 5: 60; 7: 166).[5] While such verses can easily be used for polemical purposes, of course, to refer to modern-day Jews as "the descendants of apes" in the context of the hostile relations that emanate from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Dankowitz, 2002), they actually play no significant role in Islamist writings on Jewish-Muslim relations.[6] This may be because it is quite clear from these verses that they deal with a pre-Islamic episode in which God supposedly punished some Jews and/or Christians for their sins by turning them into apes (and swine), as opposed to a period from the Prophet Muhammad's life in which believers themselves are called upon to refer to non-Muslims as such. Another reason these verses play no significant role in Islamist discourse on non-Muslim minorities may be that the references to the sabbath that they contain suggest that they mostly refer to Jews, while — given the lack of any sizeable Jewish community in the Arab world today — Arab Islamists mostly focus on Christians in their writings on this subject.

A very different verse that purportedly deals with relations between Muslims and non-Muslims is Q. 2: 256: "No compulsion is there in religion […]". It appears that global Islamist scholars seem to take this verse and the broad sense of free expression of religion that it exudes as a general framework for religious minority rights. The Egyptian Islamist Muhammad al-Ghazali (1917–1996), for example, confirms that "Islam absolutely refuses (*yarfudu l-Islam rafdan hasiman*) to compel anyone to convert to [Islam]" and emphasises that people can believe what they want (Al-Ghazali, 1985, 59). Similarly, al-Ghannushi describes the early Islamic "religious tolerance" during the life of Muhammad as "the embodiment of a great principle of Islam in deciding freedom of conviction and religion, the basis of all freedoms", connecting this to Q. 2: 256 (Al-Ghannushi, n.d., 63).

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[5] These verses (in the translation of A.J. Arberry) read: (Q. 2: 65) "And well you know there were those among you that transgressed the Sabbath, and We said to them, 'Be you apes, miserably slinking!'"; (Q. 5: 60) "Say: 'Shall I tell you of a recompense with God, worse than that? Whomsoever God has cursed, and with whom He is wroth, and made some of them apes and swine, and worshippers of idols – they are worse situated, and have gone further astray from the right way'"; (Q. 7: 166) "And when they turned in disdain from that forbidding We said to them, 'Be you apes, miserably slinking!'"

[6] A seeming exception is the Jordanian Islamist Salah al-Khalidi, who paints a very negative portrait of Jews. He does so, however, through the prism of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, not in an effort to write about Muslim-Jewish relations in general. See Holtzman and Schlossberg (2008).

Within this broad framework of religious tolerance, however, a number of verses exist that may qualify what this means in practice. One of these is Q. 9: 29,[7] which calls for fighting (specific) people from among "those who have been given the Book" (i.e. Jews and Christians) and to continue this until, among other things, they pay "the tribute" (i.e. the aforementioned *jizya*). The precise reason why Jews and Christians should pay this tax is not always clear and it could be seen as a discriminatory measure, but the *jizya* can also be interpreted as a tribute to the rulers paid for protection (*dhimma*) (Cahen, 1991a, b). It is also as such that prominent Islamist scholars with global influence, like al-Ghannushi and al-Qaradawi, interpret the concept. As a result, they believe that levying the *jizya* becomes obsolete once non-Muslims engage in the protection of a Muslim entity. While this may have been uncommon during Muslim empires, when warfare was often equated with jihad (in which non-Muslims were unlikely to participate), national military service in modern Muslim states has made such participation the general norm (al-Ghannushi, 1993, 99-102; Al-Qaradawi, 2005, 34-9; Al-Qaradawi, 2006, 205).

While the interpretation mentioned above removes the duty to fight non-Muslims in general, the Qur'an still states that believers should not take Jews and Christians (or non-Muslims in general) as friends in, for example, Q. 5: 51 and Q. 60: 1.[8] Al-Qaradawi, however, who has had an enormous influence on the Muslim Brotherhood (Tammam, 2009), points out that these verses refer to specific unbelievers who were actively hostile to Muslims, not to non-Muslims in general. This is confirmed by other verses that explicitly allow cordial relations with friendly non-Muslims, including Q. 60: 8-9[9] (Al-Qaradawi, 1999, 293-6; Al-Qaradawi, 2005, 6, 72-5). In fact, al-Qaradawi even refers to these two verses as "a comprehensive constitution (*dusturan jami'an*) on this issue" (Al-Qaradawi, 1999, 290).

The above-mentioned verses thus seem to point to a general willingness to treat non-hostile Jews and Christians in a peaceful and friendly way, at least in the interpretation of Islamist scholars with a global influence. Indeed, major global Islamist scholars like al-Ghannushi, al-Ghazali, al-Qaradawi and the prominent Sudanese Islamist ideologue Hasan al-Turabi (1932–2016) all indicate that they support freedom of religion for non-Muslim minorities in an Islamic state in the sense that they are free to express their religious rituals and preach their beliefs (Al-Ghannushi,

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[7] Q. 9: 29: "Fight against those who believe not in God and the Last Day and do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden – such men as practise not the religion of truth, being of those who have been given the Book – until they pay the tribute out of hand and have been humbled".

[8] Q. 5: 51: "Oh believers, take not Jews and Christians as friends; they are friends of each other. Whoso of you makes them his friends is one of them. God guides not the people of the evildoers"; Q. 60: 1: "O believers, take not My enemy and your enemy for friends, offering them love, though they have disbelieved in the truth that has come to you, expelling the Messenger and you because you believe in God your Lord. […]"

[9] Q. 60: 8–9: "[8] God forbids you not, as regards those who have not fought you in religion's cause, nor expelled you from your habitations, that you should be kindly to them, and act justly towards them; surely God loves the just. [9] God only forbids you as to those who have fought you in religion's cause, and expelled you from your habitations, and have supported in your expulsion, that you should take them for friends. And whosoever takes them for friends, those – they are the evildoers".

2011, 48-9; Al-Ghazali, 1985, 59-62; Al-Qaradawi, 2005, 47-55; Al-Turabi, 2009, 220, 222).

Yet these same scholars qualify religious minority rights when it comes to politics. Al-Ghannushi, for example, uses Q. 5: 59[10] to claim that members of parliament are not the ones meant by the words "those in authority among you (*uli l-amr minkum*)", who need to be obeyed. As such, he argues that non-Muslims should be allowed to participate in parliaments of Islamic states, but simultaneously contends that "the core legislation (*al-tashri' al-asli*)" remains the prerogative of God. Moreover, he also suggests that "those in authority" (i.e. the rulers) *should* be Muslims (Al-Ghannushi, 2011, 140-3, quotation on 143). More specifically, while al-Ghannushi sees no objection to non-Muslims obtaining "all general positions (*kull al-waza'if al-'amma*) in the Islamic state", he excludes them from the position of overall leader (*imam*) and the leadership of the army because he sees these as posts related to Islam (Al-Ghannushi, 1993, 79).

Al-Qaradawi concurs with this approach of giving non-Muslims their political rights, but only within a framework ultimately controlled by Muslims. He sees no objection to allowing non-Muslims to become members of parliament in an Islamic state on the basis of aforementioned verses like Q. 60: 1, but only as long as the overwhelming majority of deputies remains Muslim (Al-Qaradawi, 2001, 193-5). Similarly (and like al-Ghannushi), he excludes non-Muslims from top political positions because he considers them related to Islam (Al-Qaradawi, 2005, 23-4). The implications of such Islamist views for non-Muslims' status as full citizens are addressed by Skovgaard-Petersen and Scott in this special issue. It has already become clear, however, that there are obvious textual limits that Islamist scholars such as those mentioned are not willing to go beyond.

Women's rights

The Qur'an is probably more explicit about the equality of men and women than it is about equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. Verses such as Q. 3: 195 and Q. 24: 30-31[11] clearly suggest a parity between men and women by explicitly stating "the one of you is as the other" or applying rules of chastity equally to men and women, respectively. Yet as Tucker has noted, classical Muslim scholars have often interpreted such rulings in a one-sided way, stressing or highlighting only the responsibilities of women (Tucker, 2008, 53). Islamist scholars with a global influence, however, do not appear to have done so, but have presented verses like those mentioned above as such (Al-Ghazali, 1985, 153-4; Al-Qaradawi, 1999, 138-9; Al-Turabi, 2000, 16). In fact, with references to *hadith*s and to verses like those cited

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[10] Q. 4: 59: "O believers, obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. […]"

[11] Q. 3: 195: "And their Lord answers them: 'I waste not the labour of any that labours among you, be you male or female – the one of you is as the other[']"; Q. 24: 30-31: "[30] Say to the believers, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts; that is purer for them. God is aware of the things they work. [31] And say to the believing women, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts […]".

above, global Islamist scholars claim that women are equal in human dignity and religiosity to men and refer to them as "sisters", although they also make clear that equality does not mean that men and women are the same (al-Ghannushi, n.d., 160; al-Ghazali, 2003, 50; al-Qaradawi, 1996, 9-16; Qutb, 2002, 57; al-Turabi, 2000, 8).

Yet just like with regard to non-Muslim minorities, the Qur'an also offers texts that are less easily explained as promoting equality between the sexes and that global Islamist scholars have to deal with. Some texts about female dress and chastity, such as Q. 24: 31[12], are so detailed and generally formulated that a scholar like al-Qaradawi does little else than to explain and clarify them (al-Qaradawi, 1999, 139-47). Other verses, such as those about unequal rights (Q. 2: 228)[13], different inheritance shares for men and women (Q. 4: 11, 176)[14] or the unequal value of a witness statement (Q. 2: 282)[15], are nevertheless portrayed by global Islamist scholars as signs of equality. They do so by pointing out that a woman's smaller inheritance is meant as compensation for a man having to pay the dower (*mahr*) at the start of their marriage (al-Ghazali, 1985, 51-2; al-Qaradawi, 1996, 23-7). Similarly, al-Qaradawi points out that women — in their capacity as mothers and wives who often do not work outside the home and are therefore ignorant of some things — are incapable of forming proper judgements about the subjects dealt with in many court cases, thereby naturally rendering their witness statements less valuable than men's (al-Qaradawi, 1996, 17-23).

The latter problem could, of course, be solved by allowing women to work outside the home. This way, they could gain the experience needed to act as full witnesses. Yet several texts related to this topic have the potential to limit Islamist options in this respect, since they seem to compel women to remain separate from men by staying at home (Q. 33: 33)[16] or to set up a physical separation between men and women (Q. 33: 53)[17]. Such texts may be related to a broader idea about women

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[12] Q. 24: 31: "[…] and reveal not their adornment save such as is outward; and let them cast their veils over their bosoms, and not reveal their adornment save to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or what their right hands own, or such men as attend them, not having sexual desire, or children who have not yet attained knowledge of women's private parts; nor let them stamp their feet, so that their hidden ornament may be known. And turn all together to God, O you believers; haply so you will prosper".

[13] Q. 2: 228: "[…] Women have such honourable rights as obligations, but their men have a degree above them; God is All-mighty, All-wise".

[14] Q. 4: 11: "God charges you, concerning your children: to the male the like of the portion of two females […]"; Q. 4: 176: "They will ask thee for a pronouncement. Say: 'God pronounces to you concerning the indirect heirs. If a man perishes having no children, but he has a sister, she shall receive half of what he leaves and he is her heir if she has no children. If there be two sisters, they shall receive two-thirds of what he leaves; if there be brothers and sisters, the male shall receive the portion of two females. God makes clear to you, lest you go astray; God has knowledge of everything".

[15] Q. 2: 282: "[…] And call in to witness two witnesses, men; or if the two be not men, then one man and two women, such witnesses as you approve of, that if one of the two women errs the other will remind her […]."

[16] Q. 33: 33a: "Remain in your houses; and display not your finery, as did the pagans of old. […]"

[17] Q. 33: 53b: "[…] And when you ask his [i.e., the Prophet's] wives for any object, ask them from behind a curtain; that is cleaner for your hearts and theirs. […]"

as a source of temptation for men, which means that gender-mixing (*ikhtilat*) could lead to unwanted situations (sexual harassment, extra-marital sex, etcetera). A *hadith* ascribed to the Prophet stating "I have not left after me a temptation more harmful to men (*fitna adarra 'ala l-rijal*) than women"[18] seems to underline this.

It is to avoid the very *fitna* mentioned in this *hadith* that Islamist scholars with global influence argue in favour of limiting *ikhtilat* between men and women somewhat, for example in situations when it may easily lead to seclusion and intimacy (al-Ghazali, 1985, 154-5; al-Ghannushi, 2000, 81-2; al-Qaradawi, 1996, 41-66). Regarding the Qur'anic verses mentioned, however, several global Islamist scholars state that these only applied to the Prophet's wives, not to women in general, thereby severely limiting their applicability today (Stowasser, 2009, 204; al-Turabi, 2000, 13-14). As a result, these scholars believe women should be allowed to work outside the home, but only under certain conditions of modesty and chastity and/or as long as caring for their families comes first (al-Ghannushi, 2000, 74-7; al-Qaradawi, 1996, 159-64; al-Qaradawi, 2006, 175-6).

Similar arguments can be heard from Islamist scholars with a global influence regarding women's political participation, although their room to move is further limited by other texts that specifically address the issue of ruling. These include Q. 4: 34, which states that "men are the managers of the affairs of women".[19] Despite the political overtones this verse may have for some, several global Islamist scholars limit its applicability to marriage, thereby depriving it of broader (political) implications (al-Ghannushi, 2000, 119; Stowasser, 2009, 203; see also al-Turabi, 2000, 11). This is different, however, with a *hadith* that states that "a people ruled by a woman will not be successful".[20] Both al-Ghannushi and al-Qaradawi claim that this means that women cannot have overall leadership over a state. Moreover, while they do believe women are allowed to work in politics and become members of parliament, they should never occupy a majority of seats so as not to have them "rule" over men (Al-Ghannushi, 2000, 119; al-Qaradawi, 2001, 165). Furthermore, any work that women do in politics does not mean they can freely mingle with men or abandon their tasks as mothers and wives (Al-Ghannushi, 2000, 120; al-Qaradawi, 1996, 31). Similar conclusions are drawn by the writers dealt with in Santing's contribution to this special issue.

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[18] *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 62 ("Kitab al-Nikah"), *bab* 18 ("Ma Ittaqa min Shu'm al-Mar'a wa-Qawl Ta'ala Inna min Azwajikum wa-Awladikum 'Aduwwan Lakum"), no. 33.

[19] Q. 4: 34: "Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another, and for that they have expended of their property. Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God's guarding. And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, and beat them. If they then obey you, look not for any way against them; God is All-high, All-great". It goes without saying that the issue of beating women, as stated in this verse, touches upon the question of physical abuse and is therefore an important issue in the context of women's rights. Because this is a private, family issue (rather than a public one, which is the focus of this article), this will not be dealt with here.

[20] *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 59 ("Kitab al-Maghazi"), *bab* "Kitab al-Nabi Salla llah 'alayhi wa-Sallam ila Kisra wa-Qaysar", no. 709.

Limiting contexts

So far, we have looked at how texts can act as limits to global Islamists' willingness or ability to reform beyond their own hermeneutical standards, but such interpretations obviously take place in various contexts. The latter also influence their views and may limit their desire to reform their ideas, especially on the rights of religious minorities and women. In this regard, we can distinguish the influence that broadly held views in society may have on Islamists' willingness to reform and the role that the state plays in (not) forcing certain rules or views upon them.

Society

As mentioned above, the Arab world has gone through an Islamic revival since the late 1960s, expressing itself in an increased role for public expressions of religion. This has resulted in the building of more mosques, more overtly Islamic dress in the streets, more influence of Islamist political actors, etcetera. This Islamic revival has not just expressed itself in outward factors, however, but can also be discerned in people's views. According to extensive polling research conducted by Pew in 2013, clear or even overwhelming majorities of Muslims in Tunisia (56%), Jordan (71%), Egypt (74%) and Morocco (83%), among others, supported making the sharia the law of the land. In the Middle East and North Africa as a whole, where support for the sharia among Muslims was 74%, only a bare majority of 51% of Muslims believed Islamic law should only be applied to Muslims, with sizeable minorities (and, sometimes, clear majorities) in favour of applying it to non-Muslims, too (Pew, 2013).

With regard to women's rights, clear majorities of Muslims in the region wanted religious judges to oversee family law (78%) and believed women should obey their husbands (87%) in 2013. More specifically, a minority of 33% of Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa believed women should have the right to divorce, while only 25% believed sons and daughters should have equal inheritance rights. These points of view are clearly part of a broader sense of social conservatism, with overwhelming majorities of Muslims in the region disapproving of supposedly immoral behaviour such as homosexuality (93%), extra-marital sex (94%) and drinking alcohol (83%), while 56% of them favoured execution for people who leave Islam (Pew, 2013).

Such polling results are not incidental. Other scholars have pointed to similar results in opinion research (Hamid, 2014, 173), and the Arab Barometer has shown equally conservative views regarding women's rights in 2022 (Arab Barometer, 2023). Moreover, Islamist successes in the free elections that were held after the "Arab Spring" may also support these findings. The Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt, for example, won 47.2% of the vote in the 2012 parliamentary elections and Salafi parties won almost a quarter of the seats in the same elections. Together, this amounted to almost 70% of the total number of seats (Pargeter, 2016, 39-40). Similarly — though less overwhelmingly — the Islamist Ennahda in Tunisia won about 37% of the national vote in parliamentary elections in

2011. This seems like much less than in Egypt, but it received more than four times as many votes as the party that came second, Al-Mu'tamar min Ajl al-Jumhuriyya (Congrès pour la République (CPR)), which won 8.7% of the vote. Moreover, it won in virtually every constituency (McCarthy, 2018, 136-7; Wolf, 2017, 133-4). Although support for Islamist parties can have multiple reasons and does not necessarily mean support for their socially conservative ideas, the large share of votes Islamist parties received does indicate that their socially conservative agendas are apparently not enough of an obstacle for people to refrain from voting for them.

Given this strong support for social conservatism among Muslims in Arab societies, socially progressive points of view, particularly with regard to women, are unlikely to be very popular. This means that Islamist proposals of a more socially progressive nature (such as more female candidates) are bound to meet with societal resistance, which acts as a limiting context, making them less attractive from an electoral point of view (Škrabáková, 2017, 334, 344). In fact, as several scholars have shown, Islamists have argued in favour of their own (socially conservative) views partly because they accurately reflect the people's will, thereby underlining Islamists' democratic credentials, but undermining their liberal ones. Moreover, Islamists are often in competition with one another, leading to their outbidding of each other based on their Islamic credentials. Such a climate is unlikely to lead to more support for socially progressive ideas (Al-Anani, 2018, 38, 39-40; Hamid, 2014, 80, 171-89; Rosefsky Wickham, 2013, 214-18, 225-6; Wagemakers, 2020, 218, 227, 230), as Santing and Scott also show in their contributions.

The state

A second factor that may act as a limiting (or, conversely, as a facilitating) context is the state. While society may merely keep Islamist groups from taking electorally risky positions, the state can actually impose its views, forcing Islamists to adjust to a certain situation. Such state pressure may sometimes be against Islamists' wishes, but it can also facilitate and empower certain elements within Islamist organisations, helping them to gain the upper hand in internal conflicts. Yet states can also decide not to act or not to exert pressure, thereby providing Islamists with more freedom to decide on their own. While this may sound attractive to them, it can also implicitly limit the options for more socially progressive Islamists to turn against a socially conservative society.

Examples of the state *not* interfering in certain issues related to women's rights can be seen in Jordan and Morocco. In the former, elements of the state and human rights activists have long spoken out against honour killings, in which adulterous women are murdered to save their tribe's honour, yet the state has never fully imposed its will regarding this issue. Although the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Action Front (IAF) party rejects such honour killings, it also rejects the idea of extra-marital affairs so strongly that it consistently voted against outlawing the practice for fear of condoning adultery (Rosefsky Wickham, 2013, 211-12; Wagemakers, 2020, 215-16). Similarly, in Morocco in 1999, King Muhammad VI wanted to reform the country's personal status law, which included an expansion to women's

rights, such as the right to enter a marriage without permission from a guardian. The Islamist PJD (together with others) opposed these reforms because it believed them to be Western and secularist and the proposals were eventually dropped altogether (Wegner, 2011, 87-8; Zeghal, 248-52). In both cases, the lack of state action on this front allowed (or compelled) Islamist groups to conform to socially conservative norms, as Santing's contribution also shows.

On the other hand, states may also impose laws that force all political actors — including Islamists — to abide by them. This sets new rules for Islamists with which they have to deal. Again, this is especially clear regarding women's rights. In Morocco, the situation described above changed after the terrorist attacks in Casablanca of 2003. Although the attacks had been committed by al-Qaida, Islamism as a whole came under fire in this period. The regime, realising that Islamist opposition was on the back foot, decided to introduce its personal status law reforms again. This time, the anti-Islamist climate made the PJD feel it could not refuse the regime's proposed reforms, which entailed that they were adopted, forcing Islamists to deal with them (Rosefsky Wickham, 2013, 234-6; Wegner, 2011, 83-9; Zeghal, 2005, 252-4).

An example from Kuwait is even more instructive. There, the Islamic Constitutional Movement (Al-Haraka al-Dusturiyya al-Islamiyya; Hadas) had long been divided on the issue of women's rights, pitting socially conservative members against more socially progressive ones. In this context, the regime decided — against a parliamentary majority — to give women the right to participate politically. This not only decided the internal Islamist debates on this issue in favour of the more socially progressive position by imposing a decision on Hadas, but it also enabled the organisation as a whole — freed from the possibility to be "out-Islamised" by other Islamists on this issue — to actively work towards including women (Freer, 2018, 110; Lahoud-Tatar, 2011, 219; Rosefsky Wickham, 2013, 226-7). As such, the state's imposition of its views is not limited to pushing Islamists in a certain direction, but can also decide internal disputes about matters such as women's rights.

Outline and main findings

The articles in this special issue are presented in two different ways: chronologically (from earliest (Skovgaard-Petersen) to latest (Scott) ideas and developments) and from individual ideologues (Skovgaard-Petersen) and popular discourse (Santing) to actual practice (Scott). In his article "Islamists, Civil Rights and Civility: The Contribution of the Brotherhood Siras", Skovgaard-Petersen concentrates on specific textual sources used by Muslim Brotherhood activists in their smallest organisational cells (usar, sing. usra), namely the sira (biography) of the Prophet Muhammad. More specifically, he focusses on the Brotherhood interpretations of the Prophet's biography by the first leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Mustafa al-Siba'i (1915-1964), the aforementioned Egyptian pro-Brotherhood scholar Muhammad al-Ghazali and the Libyan Islamist politician 'Ali al-Sallabi (b. 1963), all of whom admonish the reader to learn practical lessons from the Prophet's life. This is particularly the case for the so-called Constitution of Medina, in which

Muhammad set down rules about relations between the Muslims and the Jews of Medina. As Skovgaard-Petersen shows, the authors defend the Prophet's expulsion of the city's Jews, treat the latter as untrustworthy or see them as citizens, but only in a limited way, essentially meaning that all three Islamist authors see Jews (and non-Muslims in general) through the prism of *dhimma*, rather than full equality.

Santing, in her article "The Muslim Brotherhood and Women's Issues under Sadat: Dogmas and Discussions", deals with the question of why the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, while clearly changing its views on politics and the use of violence during the presidency of Anwar al-Sadat (r. 1970–1981), was apprehensive about developing its ideas on women in the same period. She shows that Egyptian Islamists in this period successfully tried to steer legislation into a more sharia-based direction, including with regard to women's rights, despite — and contrary to — the regime's own efforts to promote gender equality. Making extensive use of the Egyptian Brotherhood's own periodicals, Santing makes clear that the organisation believes in, for example, a woman's right to choose her own husband and that it wants women to get an education. At the same time, however, the Brotherhood's publications maintain that female education must take place in accordance with the sharia, that women's employment should be limited and centred around their primary job — that of wife and mother — and that women should not give in to "Western" or "colonial" ideas on gender, behaviour and clothing.

Finally, Scott, in her article "Points of Convergence: Islamist Conceptions of Citizenship and the Struggle of Egyptian Christians for Rights as a Religious Group", focusses on Egyptian Islamist ideas on the concept of citizenship. She challenges the view that there is a specific universal idea of citizenship and argues that there is much variation in views on citizens' rights, both in the West and the Middle East. Concentrating on a communitarian approach to citizenship — as opposed to one focussing on the rights of individuals — espoused by Egyptian *wasati* (centrist) Islamists since the late 1980s, Scott finds that these intellectuals — unlike those analysed in Skovgaard-Petersen's contribution — have moved away from *dhimma* as a lens through which to view non-Muslims. This has not yielded a form of citizenship that concurs with liberal interpretations of the concept dominant in Europe and the USA, but a communitarian type of citizenship that is not only espoused by *wasati* Islamists, but is also shared by members of the Christian Coptic community in Egypt.

The main findings of the articles of this special issue concur with but also build on those set out in this introduction. Firstly, this pertains to the textual limits analysed above. As Skovgaard-Petersen shows, unlike those Muslims he refers to as "revisionists", who have used the Constitution of Medina as the religious basis of the idea of full and equal citizenship (including in politics) for Muslims and non-Muslims, the Brotherhood-affiliated scholars he deals with in his article have not gone so far. While they clearly adopt some aspects of citizenship for Jews and Christians — for example the recognition that an Islamic state may very well include non-Muslims, who also enjoy certain rights there — they are careful not to take this too far. Instead, they are inclined towards more traditional readings of the life of the Prophet as someone who provides Islam as a definitive system of laws, rather than seeing Muhammad's words and actions as representing a particular stage in Islam's

development. As such, they are reluctant to incorporate certain elements of political equality into their idea of citizenship. This, in turn, shows that their continuing adherence to relatively clear texts seen through the prism of a clearly Islamist interpretation is not just limited to the Qur'an and the Sunna, but also extends to the *sira*, partly explaining their reluctance to change their ideas on non-Muslim rights.

Secondly, we find the same concurrence with the aforementioned factor of limiting contexts. Santing's findings show that under al-Sadat's presidency, there was a clear effort by the president's wife, Jihan, to lead a state-sponsored campaign in favour of women's rights. Given what we have seen above, this might suggest that more socially progressive elements in the Brotherhood would seize their chance to push their own views to the fore. This did not happen, however, because the state never actually imposed its views on this topic, allowed its efforts to be offset by the abovemention legislative developments that went in the opposite direction and because Jihan al-Sadat's efforts were partly meant to portray the presidential couple as Western, delegitimising them to much of Egyptian society. President al-Sadat therefore had to resort to presidential decrees to push through socially progressive reforms, rather than relying on a more socially conservative (yet more representative) parliament. The latter points to an important factor in this respect, namely the socially conservative attitudes prevalent in Egyptian society since the start of the Islamic revival after 1967. This was even more the case given that the Brotherhood's Salafi competitors for societal influence and authority could challenge and "out-Islamise" the organisation if it became more progressive on the issue of women's rights. Moreover, all of this took place in a broader "culture war" in which the Brotherhood sought to keep and expand its role in shaping morality in Egyptian society. As such, Santing's contribution shows that even in the case of a state that is actively involved in promoting women's rights, pressure from various actors in a socially conservative society may be more important to a democratically inclined organisation like the Muslim Brotherhood.

The subject of Scott's contribution is very different, but her main findings nevertheless align with Santing's. She shows that support for communitarian forms of citizenship as espoused by *wasati*s are widely shared in Egyptian society, including among Muslims beyond the Islamist movement. This shows that, again, Islamists do not so much deviate from society in their views on citizenship and rights for non-Muslims, but reflect it. Scott goes beyond this insight, however, by pointing out that there is societal support for *wasati* Islamists' views on the communitarian form of citizenship even among non-Muslims — in this case, Christian Copts. The "points of convergence" between the two communities, as she calls them, include (1) a shared emphasis on opposition to a neutral state and, instead, favouring the state as the promotor of the common good in the form of monotheism and Muslim-Christian unity, an attitude that has also been enshrined in the constitution; (2) a common desire for communal rights (rather than as individuals), which have also been enshrined in the constitution; and (3) a shared belief that individual civil rights and liberties strongly at odds with religious teachings — such as divorce, in the case of Coptic Orthodox Christians — should not be granted to people.

All of this underlines that both texts (the Qur'an and the Sunna as well as the *sira*) and contexts (the influence of both society and the state) can act as limiting

factors in reforming Islamists' ideas on non-Muslim and women's rights, particularly when compared to the more far-reaching changes in their views on the state and democracy. In fact, the contributions to this special issue show that these factors are even more important than hitherto suspected. To be sure, Islamists are not trapped in either their texts or their contexts, as the development of post-Islamism shows. Nor should it be ignored that there is a strong focus on Egypt in this special issue and that other contexts may yield different results. It is nevertheless clear that the limits provided by both textual sources and contextual factors like the state's specific policies and societal pressure help explain Islamists' reluctance to reform their views on non-Muslim and women's rights.

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