WHAT IS EXCEPTIONAL ABOUT RELIGION? MAJOR DEBATES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, ISLAMISM STUDIES AND PEACE AND CONFLICT RESEARCH

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Introduction

This chapter reviews selected debates that speak to the question of whether religion is or requires something exceptional for it to be properly accounted for in analysis. We pinpoint different dimensions of what we here label the ‘exceptionalism-debate’ across three academic fields by carving out relevant discussions and questions raised in the field of International Relations (IR), the field of Islamism Studies (IS) and the Peace and Conflict Research (PCR) on Islamism and jihadism. The selected literature that we have reviewed are occupied with different ‘main’ concepts: in IR the debates drawn out are conceptual and analytical regarding religion as such. In IS, religion is central in the form of a specific ideology, and hence we zoom in on the particular debates that this prompts regarding, e.g. the significance of Islam vis-à-vis other factors. The examined PCR literature has ‘jihadist conflicts’ at the center of attention, hence it examines the violent manifestations of a particular religious interpretation of religious warfare (jihad) which has triggered debates about, e.g. in what sense jihadist conflicts should be seen as a particular conflict constellation, and why. Most of the examples we draw out deal with Islam, Islamism and jihadism, but this focus does not mean that we disregard the relevance of other religions and religiously inspired ideologies. Rather, this focus stems from two coinciding trends that took up increasing pace after the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks. Firstly, there has been an empirical development in the sense that Islamists today outnumber other religiously motivated militants in the world (Svensson and Nilsson, 2018). This empirical development has in turn sparked increasing scholarly attention, with studies exploring whether the rise in Islamist and jihadist violence reflects an exceptionality related to religion more broadly, Islam as such, or to Islamism and/or jihadism as particular ideologies. These works are therefore simultaneously relevant in relation to a potential exceptionality of Islam, Islamism and jihadism, as well as religion more broadly.
What we mean by an exceptionalism-debate is a broad dialogue about how to access religion (as a concept, ideology, or related to conflict) as being different from or similar to other manifestations: is it a special category that requires the development of new approaches and theories, does it require more refined understandings of the variations when it comes to conceptualizing religion and the ‘religious’, how does it or does it not differ from other phenomena that might function in the same way or have a high degree of family resemblance.

The ambition in this chapter is to display the multiple dimensions of the exceptionalism-debate, but also to advance our thinking about how to include religion into analysis and account for its significance. As this chapter shows, some scholars argue that religion requires an epistemological and ontological shift in order to be adapted into grand social science frameworks for thinking, while others argue that religion can be more easily adapted into existing theories and approaches. We proceed as follows. First, we zoom in on IR, where we identify three different questions that have occupied the field: is religion interesting as the dependent or independent variable, is it *sui generis* in content or in function, and what are the particular dimensions of religion that make it stand out? Secondly, we zoom in on the debates on Islamist exceptionalism in IS where we identify four currents: one that regards Islamists like no other actors, one that sees Islamists as being *made* into the exceptional Other as part of an orientalist practice, one that points out that Islamists are like any other actor, and finally one that sees Islamists as similar but not identical to other actors and is occupied with the variations among Islamists. Thirdly, we examine the PCR literature that point out three main questions that have been discussed in the literature on jihadist conflicts: one that asks if jihadist *conflicts* are exceptional, one that looks at similarities and differences between jihadists and other *rebel groups*, and one that asks whether jihadist conflicts require exceptional *conflict resolution approaches*? In all of the sections, we have focused on displaying different dimensions of the exceptionalism debates that often underlie discussions about the significance of religion.

**Religion and exceptionality in IR**

Whereas religion was a more vivid part of IR debates in the mid-twentieth century, throughout the 1990s concepts like culture, identity and civilization were more prominent in the mainstream of IR research, while religion was occasionally included as a subcategory of the broader concept of identity (Sheikh, 2012; Valbjørn, 2008). Several IR scholars have provided convincing arguments why the attention to religion has fluctuated with the development of world political events and the dominant interpretational trends. Hence, during the 1990s religion was mainly understood as part of a specific ethnic heritage, culture or history, whether in the former Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Republics, or in Central and East Africa (Haynes, 2021). The focus on religion as religion, and not a subcategory to identity, culture or civilization had its revival in the early twenty-first century, accelerated by the intensified focus on terrorism, asymmetric warfare and new types of threats sparked by the 9/11 events. This section highlights three aspects of the religion and exceptionality debate in IR that have been accentuated across these periods.

**Explaining religion or religion as explanatory?**

One meta-analytical distinction that organizes IR approaches to religion is between literature that grapples with *explaining religion* and the literature that is concerned with *explaining other IR phenomena* and the particular role of religion therein. Though much of IR literature might be
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categorized to form part of the last-mentioned, there are also examples of the former. These are often genealogical in the sense that they are occupied with the ‘roots’ of IR theories, with modernity, or with the inspiration from religion or theology that particular IR scholars took onboard in their thinking (Kratochvíl, 2009). This literature provides critical reflections on a secular bias in IR, referring to its foundational moment where religion in world politics as well as in major modernization theories was seen as something that should be separated from rational thinking (Petito and Hatzopoulos, 2003). It highlights that the thinking about religion and the transdisciplinary influence on IR from other fields is not new. For example, Martin Wight, who was one of the foundational theorists of the English School of IR, was inspired by the theologian and philosopher Donald MacKinnon and included religious doctrines, cultures and civilizations into analysis by focusing on their role in different historic states-systems (Thomas, 2001). Also, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and his Christian realism had significant impact on the influential IR theorist Hans J. Morgenthau – an impact that could be explained by the classical realist concern with the drivers behind human decision-making, including faith, morals, fears and emotions (Rice, 2008).

The main argument is that just war theories (Rengger), classical realism (Morgenthau) or the early English School (Wight) had a natural – less tense – relationship to religious ideas, whereas a dominant secularization thesis about the outcome of modernity (predicting the demise of religion and its impact but also normatively embracing it) had estranged religion during a particular historical era. A review of this strand of literature points at two trends: one that stresses how religion and religious institutions have in fact impacted the modern state system, and another that unpacks how theological terms have been assimilated into IR thinking, hence challenging the idea that IR can be defined as foundationally secular but also stressing the religious nature of classical IR theories (Kratochvíl, 2009, p. 6). This type of literature is important to highlight in the context of this chapter as it points to a main difference in perspective: does it make sense to describe IR concepts, theories and our perspectives on the world as merely secular or does this reflect an ahistorical approach to IR and reduce the significance of religion from something that has foundationally impacted human thinking to something which is marginalized and in some cases demonized due to a specific European narrative about modernization and enlightenment? If one understands religion as a foundational category that has impacted human perception and continues to do so despite changes in vocabulary and discourses, then religion might not be understood as an exceptional explanatory variable, but something that is in fact a priori politics and vocabulary. A contrasting view is that there is a fundamental “ontological and epistemological” conflict between what one might call the transcendental and the secular (Kubáňková, 2000, p. 685).

The other side of the meta-analytical distinction we are making here is literature that is more concerned with how to include religion into the repertoire of explanatory variables characterizing the bulk of IR theories: be it power, common values or the desire for economic prosperity. These debates about what drives states and international actors in IR have always been linked to discussions or assumptions about human nature, including the role of ethics. Several questions have divided those who might find religion to be a sui generis phenomenon and those who would stress that the significance of religion for IR is how ‘it works’ (Sheikh, 2012). Examples include the questions of whether the existence of religion and the significance of religiosity require it to be carved out as a separate category, and whether religion could be easily included in the major IR frameworks of realism, liberalism and constructivism without having to adjust the major theories. Jonathan Fox’s work on how religion is relevant to international relations is an example of the last-mentioned, where religion is highlighted as a factor relevant
for decision-making and providing legitimacy behind a cause (Fox, 2001). There are of course also scholars who are both concerned with the question of what makes religion particular and with the question of how to refine our understandings of its effects on IR phenomena (Sheikh, 2012). While the field of IR corresponds with an interest in the effects produced by religion on issues of peace, behavior, legitimacy, conflict, war and order, there are also voices who call for a better sense of what one might call the more substantial aspects of religion (Sheikh, 2012, Lynch, 2014).

The content versus the function of religion

The meta-analytical distinction introduced is connected to the difference between literature that is concerned with how religion is exceptional in content (from other religions, identities, ideologies) on one side and on the other whether religion is different in its function: for example, does it have a particular escalatory function in conflict settings, or does it work in distinct ways when compared to other identities, ideologies, institutions, faiths, etc. On the content side, Scott Thomas and Jeffrey Haynes have for instance argued that religion requires special attention in IR, because it represents a transnational idea and offers a competing vision of international society challenging the universality of IR norms (e.g. sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-intervention) and perhaps even the very foundation of the Westphalian system (Thomas, 2005). The underlying premise is that religion is a particular worldview and represents a different set of norms than the hegemonic ones, though they rightfully warn against avoiding simplistic portrayals of the ‘enlightened West’ and the ‘dark Orient’ based on such differentiations (Haynes, 2009). Thomas’ suggestion about how to avoid the danger of essentialism when looking for the special ingredients that constitute religion is to approach religion as interpretive communities that can have diverse manifestations.

Within the debate about whether religion is sui generis in its function, some scholars have challenged the validity of the religious/secular divide and argued that religion as an analytical category should be entirely avoided. For example, Gunning and Jackson (2011) argue that when it comes to the evaluation of violent behavior, the terms ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ are based on assumptions about differences in motives and causes, which are not empirically robust. As a response to the stance about the analytical usefulness of the secular/religious divide, scholars have argued that giving religion separate attention does not necessarily mean accepting the religious/secular dichotomy as natural, or that there is a qualitative difference between so-called religious and secular violence. As argued by Wæver and Sheikh (2012), the analytical usage of the divide can also point to the importance of taking people’s use of the categories seriously. When people do in fact use these labels, fill these categories with distinctive content, and engage in disputes over them, scholars might risk overlooking if there are particular effects related to invoking certain ideas and ideologies over others if they are all treated like the same in analysis.

Whether religious and secular doctrines function in the same way is a central question raised in the IR literature, particularly in the debate regarding the securitization theory and its different sectors (Buzan et al., 1998). Laustesen and Wæver (2000) introduced religion as a separate security sector by arguing that faith worked as a referent object in certain securitization attempts, and that the previous treatment of religion as part of the societal sector was only able to cover the community aspect of religion and not religion as faith. Their initial way of defining religion pointed to limitations in the applicability of the theory on non-Western cases, and a West-centric bias in the design of the theory (Sheikh, 2018). However, it also opened a debate on whether doctrines rather than religion ought to be seen as the referent object, in order to
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embrace equally the securitization of doctrines conventionally designated as secular (Sheikh, 2014). The literature that has tried to define religion as *sui generis* has hence been met by concerns about the importance of being aware of variations within and across religions, avoiding ethnocentric approaches to other religions than ‘our’ own, but also being aware of the similar functions that the elevations of doctrines to an uncompromising level can have.

Religion as religion means what?

There are different takes in the broader field of IR on which dimensions of religion are particular and which of them share traits with other doctrines, institutions, identities, etc. The vast amount of social science and theology literature dedicated to defining religion testifies to the fact that religion is a composite concept that could be studied as a distinctive type of culture, identity, rationality, power, doctrine or interpretative community. In the IR literature, religion as religion can hence mean many different things, but typically some dimensions are highlighted more than others. Other than faith, as described earlier, Scott Thomas, for instance, argues that religious identity is characterized by its strong relation to the integrity of faith communities and is thus harder to compromise than other types of identity markers (Thomas, 2005). Religion as an individual and social identity is considered to be distinctive, since religious differences and identifications are perceived as more fundamental and unchangeable than other forms of identity. Religious rationality has also been described as containing distinct qualities since it is guided by particular ethical considerations about the common good (Lynch, 2009). Others maintain that religious rationality is exceptional because of its abductive reasoning influenced by an emotional affiliation to the faith community, or because of its alternative objectives to be achieved not in this life but in the life hereafter (Kubalkova, 2000; Moghadam, 2008). One should be aware that the conceptual debates that regard the question whether religion is *sui generis* in essence or function apply to each of the different dimensions of religion. Thus, one could ask if religious rationality is essentially a particular form of rationality and in what sense, but also to what extent it functions in the same way as other forms of rationalities. These are two different research questions, and there might be variations in the answer to them. This means that if religious rationality is seen to have a particular trait, then it does not necessarily follow that it will also ‘work’ in a special way or vice versa. This distinction is important to bear in mind for IR scholars considering whether they need to rethink schemes that are often applied to determine or predict the behavior of international actors.

Are Islamists exceptional?

In the broader debate on linkages and conceptualizations of religion and politics, much attention has revolved around the relationship between Islam and politics and, in particular, Middle Eastern Islamism. Over the years, scholarship in Middle East studies on Islamism has on the one hand become increasingly sophisticated. On the other hand, the field is still highly contested (Volpi, 2010). For instance, it is not clear how Islamists can be distinguished from non-Islamists within a context of ‘Muslim Politics’, where Islam constitutes ‘the language of politics’ for a wide range of different actors (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996). It is likewise contested whether it is necessary to subdivide the Islamist category internally, and if so which of the countless existing typologies are then most useful (Lynch, 2017).

In view of this confusion about what Islamism is, it should not come as a surprise that there also is little agreement as to whether Islamists should be regarded as any other or like no other
actor, and what this implies for the scholarly study of Islamism. In other words, are, for instance, Islamist political parties first and foremost political parties in the sense that they can be grasped with analytical tools from the general literature on party politics? Or are they so fundamentally different from non-Islamist parties that they can only be understood on their own uniquely Islamic terms by scholars specializing in Islam? Simplified, it is possible to identify four overall approaches to the exceptionality question in the study of Islamism.

**Like no other actors**

According to the first approach, often labelled *essentialist* or *orientalist* (Yavuz, 2003, Sayyid, 2015), Islamists are *like no other actors*, and they must accordingly be approached on their own distinct Islamic terms. This approach takes its point of departure in the assumption that if one is going to understand anything at all about what is happening in Muslim societies, it is, as Lewis (1976) puts it, necessary to recognize the universality and centrality of religion as a factor for Muslims. Thus, Islam is perceived as concerned “with the whole of life – not a limited but a total jurisdiction” affecting every aspect of Muslim societies, including warfare, governance, family structures, architecture and fashion.

In this way, Islam becomes a kind of master explanatory variable. It is necessary to grasp the essential nature of Islam to obtain any real understanding of Muslim societies, including Islamists. From this perspective, Islamism is, first and foremost, about Islam. The two are, therefore, also often conflated as illustrated in Huntington’s (1996, p. 217) statement about how ‘the underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization’. The uncovering of the ‘Islamist view’ on a topic is typically based on a textual exegesis either of classic Islamic primary sources such as the Qur’an or the hadith or of the writings of some of the founding figures of Islamism such as al-Banna, Maududi, Qutb or Khomeini.

While this approach might be more common in popular discussions about Islamism, reminiscences of this mindset can still be traced in more academic debates as well. In addition to Wood’s (2015) much discussed statement that ‘the Islamic State is Islamic. Very Islamic’, this perspective has, for instance, also been present in the discussion on Islamists in electoral politics, in particular on whether Islamists’ ‘true’ view on democracy is about ‘one man, one vote, one time’ as once remarked by the American diplomat Edward Djerejian. Thus, much ink has been spilled on quoting different passages from the Qur’an to support a view on the (in)compatibility of Islam(ism) and democracy.

On the one hand, this approach is attentive to cultural difference as it does not assume that all actors are necessary alike or are holding identical worldviews. Instead, it aims at taking the role of religion seriously by recognizing that Islam may actually matter for Islamists. On the other hand, it is also vulnerable to various charges. The strong focus on religion easily comes at the expense of attention to the role of other and more general socio-economic and political factors. The textual and essentialist approach to Islam is, moreover, often very simplistic. It does not pay much attention to how Islamic sources are multifaceted and can be interpreted in various ways by different actors at different times. As a consequence, the approach easily becomes blind to variances in both time and space and internal diversities among Islamists, e.g. consider the profound differences between al-Qaeda and an-Nahda, how some of the traditionally quietist Salafists changed their views on electoral politics after the Arab uprisings, or how the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 2011 established the Freedom and Justice Party despite al-Banna’s original skepticism toward party politics. The strong focus on Islam may furthermore lead to a neglect of how some Islamists might be quite similar to non-Islamist actors, posing the question why Islamists then often have been perceived as exceptional.
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Making of an exceptional other

This question is addressed by a second approach sometimes labelled as Saidian, critical or post-structuralist/colonialist (Sayyid, 2015). It reverses the perspective by asking how Islamism has become an object of study in (Western) academia, and how and why Islamists often have been represented as the exceptional Other to a Western normalcy. This approach draws on Said’s (1978) argument in Orientalism – Western conceptions of the Orient about how geographical entities such as the ‘Orient’ are not an inert fact of nature or just discovered to be ‘Oriental’. On the contrary, they are, Said explains, ‘Orientalized’ because they ‘could be – that is submitted to being – made Oriental’ (pp. 5–6). While Western conceptions of the ‘Orient’ may have ‘less to do with the Orient than it does with “our” world’, they are, nevertheless, not harmless. Besides functioning as a contrasting image strengthening an identity as ‘Western’, an Orientalized Orient is also supposed to be part of a ‘Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority’ over other parts of the world (pp. 12–13).

Based on the observation that Islamism allegedly is a term only coined in the 1970s French academia but rarely used by the actors it refers to, there has, similarly, been a debate, echoing Said’s broader argument, on whether Islamism was invented by Western scholars much in the same way as Orientalists ‘Orientalized’ the Orient (Volpi, 2010, p. 8). Instead of asking whether Islamists really are like any or no other actors, this approach focuses on how and why Islamists have been represented as or made exceptional. Thus, some observers argue that Western representations of Islamism often draw on a classic Orientalist schema between a modern, rational, peaceful West morally superior to a traditional, irrational and violent Orient, and suggest that this has played an important role in shaping Western policy and media framings of social phenomena such as the fight against Islamic State, the military coup toppling the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, or electoral politics with secular and Islamist parties (Bassil, 2019; Jacoby, 2017).

This approach provides an important reminder of how the production of knowledge may not be neutral and invites to a (self)reflection on how our (implicit) assumptions about an Islamist exceptionality may form the way we grasp Islamism as a phenomenon. At the same time, it has less to offer when it comes to providing analytical tools for gaining a less Orientalist understanding of the Islamists just as it has little to say about whether and, if so, how Islam matters for Islamists.

Like any other actor

A third approach sometimes labelled as contextualist, materialist or instrumentalist, is also a critique of the essentialist tendencies, as it perceives Islamists like any other actor situated in a similar context. For this reason, it is also assumed that they can be approached by analytical tools from the general social sciences. Influenced by a universalist assumption, for instance found in the modernization theory, this approach takes its point of departure in the assumption that all societies are basically alike. In the long run, they are moving in the same direction, and all actors are assumed to be rational and shaped in the same way by the socio-economic context and the political opportunity structures within which they are situated. This also applies to Islamists, so in order to grasp their views and behavior, one should, instead of identifying the ‘essential nature of Islam’, focus on how they are affected by the specific socio-economic and political contexts. Thus, Islam is assumed to play a limited role for Islamists, and to the extent it does, Islam is mainly perceived as a tool for rational actors maximizing their material or political interests.
Islamist groups have, for instance, been perceived as examples of social movements and analyzed within a general social movement theory framework (Wiktorowicz, 2004). Islamists such as al-Qaeda or Hamas have been classified in generalist typologies as, respectively, ‘ideological’ and ‘nationalist’ terrorists, where, for instance, Red Army Faction and Irish Republican Army figure as non-Islamist examples of the same two categories (Fettweis, 2009). In discussions about the emergence of Islamism, the focus has been directed at well-known general political and socio-economic factors such as modernization, globalization, (anti)colonialism, urbanization, uneven development, authoritarianism, the post-1967 failure of Arab nationalism and the 1970s oil-boom. Burgat (2019), for instance, argues that Islamism should be perceived as a part of a larger anti-colonial trend in the Global South, and despite its Islamic references it is less a product of Islam than a reaction to foreign powers and authoritarian Arab regimes. Similar to Roy’s (2013, p. 15) statement following the 2011 Arab uprisings that ‘Islamists are shaped more by the new landscape than vice versa’, there has also been a strong interest in examining how the political opportunity structures are affecting Islamists’ views on electoral politics and democracy. For instance, there has been a renewed interest in the classic debate on whether Islamists are ‘moderated’ and ‘normalized’ by being included, or whether exclusion radicalizes (Schwedler, 2011).

This approach highlights some of the socio-economic and political factors the first approach has been charged with neglecting. By doing so, it also brings attention to how Islamists using a religious rhetoric might be motivated by fewer religious factors. In this way, features of Islamism that at first sight appear exceptional may at closer inspection become less puzzling. Contrary to the common assumption in the literature on electoral politics that parties try to gain power by vote maximizing, Islamists are sometimes ‘losing on purpose’ (Hamid, 2011). At first sight, this might seem odd, but on closer inspection it turns out to be a quite rational strategy in authoritarian elections, where ‘victory is not an option’ (Brown, 2012). This approach is also attentive to how Islamism is not a monolith. Thus, Islamists situated in different kinds of contexts are assumed to differ. Against this background, it is less puzzling that branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Kuwait have evolved differently. Changes in the political context, such as increasing/decreasing inclusion/exclusion, are similarly expected to change the behavior and maybe also the views of specific Islamist movements. The strong focus on broader socio-economic and political factors and the neglect of Islam as a possible factor does, however, also come at a price. This approach is far less sensitive to the role of meaning, worldviews and cultural diversity, and the tendency to reduce religion to an insignificant epiphenomenon raises several questions it is less well-equipped to answer. For instance, how can Islamists be said to be Islam-ists, if Islam does not really matter? It is moreover puzzling why non-Islamists movements, when addressing material grievances, often have been less successful in a “Muslim politics” context than Islamists framing similar grievances within a specific Islamic rhetoric (Munson, 2001), or why some Islamists, when included in politics, seem to have different ‘red lines’ than non-Islamists, when it comes to a willingness to moderate views on, for instance, moral questions.

**Similar but not same**

Much of the current debate on Islamism draws on a fourth approach, often labelled as constructivist (Yavuz, 2003), which perceives Islamists as similar but not identical to other actors. In this way, it aims at combining insights from some of the other approaches. It acknowledges that religion, worldviews and meaning deserve attention, but does also recognize that religion can be used instrumentally and that socio-economic and political factors are important. It perceives religion as dynamically (re)constructed in a relational interaction between actors embedded
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within structures rather than as an unchanging essence discovered through textual exegesis. It does at the same time hold that religion structures how actors perceive and pursue their interests in the first place by shaping their identity, worldviews and repertoire of meaningful forms of behavior. From this perspective, it is, therefore, necessary to situate Islamists not only in their socio-economic and political contexts, but also in the context of what Eickelman and Piscatori (1996) have coined as ‘Muslim politics’. This means that when studying Islamism, one should on the one hand acknowledge that Islam constitutes (an important dimension of) ‘the language of politics’ (p. 12) in the sense that political struggles in Muslim societies often draw on and are informed by specific symbols and references from an Islamic tradition. On the other hand, it is equally important to pay attention to ‘the politics of language’. Thus, instead of searching for the Islamic view through textual exegesis, it is important to focus on the multiple and often rivaling interpretations of what Islam may say about a given topic provided by concrete Muslims situated in a specific time and space.

This last approach provides a nuanced alternative to some of the previous, as it aims at acknowledging that Islam matters for Islamists without reducing religion to an ahistorical essence or ignoring more general socio-economic and political factors. During recent decades, this approach has given rise to a rich and complex discussion, where the focus is re-directed from the question about whether Islamism is about either piety or politics to an interest in how Islam and other factors matter and interact. There has been a growing attention to how Islamists have provided very different and changing interpretations of the relations between Islam and politics, and how religiosity is not only about doctrine but also lived religion and a communal feeling of belonging. In this regard, increasing attention has also been paid to the question of how Islam can matter in quite different ways for Islamists. It may play a major role in Islamists’ ultimate motives and notions about who they are and what they aim at. The role of Islam may also be limited to a shallow ex post facto rationalization serving to give a veneer of rectitude to actions informed by other motives. Or it may constitute a moral, cultural and intellectual resource delimiting the scope of what is permissible and hence more or less likely, though without being the ‘root cause’ for action. The degree and the specific ways in which Islam matters may vary among Islamists and over time, and in order to understand this, it is from this perspective necessary to also include non-religious factors, including some of the aforementioned socio-economic and political variables. While holding many promises, this approach does, however, also face its own challenges. Thus, it turns out to be quite challenging to explain exactly how Islamists are like but not the same as other actors, or to specify how Islam shapes and is shaped without collapsing back into a form of quasi-essentialism or instrumentalism.

Exceptionality questions related to jihadist conflicts

The PCR literature has, especially since the rise of Islamic State from 2014 onwards, investigated various dimensions of potential ‘exceptionality’ around conflicts that involve jihadist rebel groups. This body of scholarly research has interacted with studies that fall within the wider literatures both on jihadism and terrorism. Overall, these contributions can be sub-divided along three sets of questions.

Are jihadist conflicts exceptional?

The first of these regards the question if conflicts involving jihadist actors follow different patterns than other types of armed conflicts. This question has been examined in a range of large-N, cross-country studies of armed conflicts with self-proclaimed ‘Islamist’ or ‘jihadist’ insurgents.
One empirically well-documented fact is that these conflicts have dramatically increased in terms of their frequency. As shown by Svensson and Nilsson (2018, p. 1136), the share of religiously defined conflicts among the world’s total number of armed conflicts increased from 3% in 1975 to 55% in 2015. Of all the religiously defined conflicts in 2015, 75% involved groups that had formulated ‘self-proclaimed Islamist aspirations’. When disaggregating the category of Islamist conflicts (defined as those in which at least one of the conflict parties ‘advocate an increased role of Islam in the society or the state’, Svensson and Nilsson, 2018, p. 1132), the authors find that it is one particular type of Islamist conflict that has become more frequent, namely those involving transnationally oriented groups. While jihadist conflicts are thus more frequent than other types of conflicts, they also appear to be fought at higher intensity levels. A study by Gleditsch and Rudolfsen (2016, p. 1) highlights that in 2012, all of the world’s six conflicts that caused at least 1,000 fatalities had been fought in Muslim-majority countries, and of the nine involved rebel groups, seven were Islamist. Even in 2018, after the loss of the Islamic State’s self-declared caliphate, the share of fatalities related to the Islamic State alone made up 20% of all of the world’s battle deaths (Rustad et al., 2019). On a more aggregated scale, during the past decade (2009–2019), conflicts involving al-Qaeda, Islamic State and their local affiliate groups accounted for the majority of battle-related fatalities in state-based conflicts around the world (Pettersson and Öberg, 2020, p. 7). Accordingly, Toft (2021, p. 12) finds that civil wars with Muslim combatants who aim to impose their religious views upon a particular region, or the state as a whole, result in, on average, three times more battle-related deaths than any other type of civil war.

Besides their frequency and intensity, scholars have further examined questions related to the duration, recurrence and termination of jihadist conflicts. Deitch (2020) finds religious conflicts as such to last longer, yet without distinguishing between different religious denominations. Still, given the strong prevalence of jihadist conflicts among the category of religious conflicts, it is likely that the finding is indeed driven by jihadist conflicts. This is further supported by the results produced by Nilsson and Svensson (2021), who demonstrate that Islamist conflicts are not only significantly less likely to terminate but also that they are more likely to recur after leaps of inactivity. With respect to Islamic State, specifically, Rustad et al. (2019, p. 2) conclude that when the organization establishes links with local rebel groups, conflicts become ‘more complex and difficult to resolve’.

Last, while these empirical patterns suggest that jihadist conflicts stand out among the world’s contemporary armed conflicts, parallels have been drawn to conflicts of the Cold War era. On a more conceptual level and using macrosecuritization theory, Sheikh (2022, p. 2) argues that what links today’s jihadist conflicts with the Cold War era is the ‘bundling’ of various underlying conflicts, both local and transnational ones, into an overarching ‘ideological macro-narrative’.

Are jihadist insurgent groups exceptional?

Scholars have further investigated if jihadist groups share different group-level characteristics than other types of insurgents. Three dimensions of exceptionality can be distinguished in this regard.

First, distinct characteristics in the organizational structure of jihadist insurgents have been identified. Although the recruitment of foreign fighters has a long history that predates the rise of jihadism, in recent decades it was overwhelmingly jihadist groups that made use of this type of recruitment (Malet, 2013). Authors have further identified the structure of al-Qaeda’s and Islamic State’s networks of affiliate groups as exceptional. Kilcullen (2005) coined the term ‘global insurgency’ to describe this phenomenon. According to Pettersson and Öberg (2020,
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p. 8), ‘there is nothing similar in recent history’, although they note similarities to transnational, leftist insurgent movements during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such similarities have also been identified by Kalyvas (2018) and Lia (2016). For instance, Kalyvas notes that both radical leftist and jihadist insurgent leaders are typically driven by ideological concerns, rather than the desire to enrich themselves economically (Kalyvas, 2018, p. 41). In addition, both Kalyvas (2018, p. 42) and Lia (2016, p. 76) observe that Marxist insurgents of the Cold War, similar to jihadists, relied heavily on guerrilla tactics against militarily superior states, while receiving significant material support from external sponsors, although such support came primarily from states, especially the Soviet Union, rather than from non-state actors as is the case with al-Qaeda and Islamic State (Kalyvas, 2018, p. 42; Lia, 2016, p. 86; Moghadam and Wyss, 2020). As further jihadist-Marxist similarities, Kalyvas notes the rejection of liberal capitalism and the key role played by individual rebel leaders who took on great personal risks in the early phases of rebellions (Kalyvas, 2018, pp. 42–43). Moreover, both Marxist and jihadist rebels have repeatedly alienated local populations due to their radical attempts to impose their ideological views (Kalyvas, 2018, p. 44).

The second, group-based dimension of exceptionality regards a particular use of battlefield tactics. Nanninga (2019) finds that over two-thirds of the world’s approximately 6,600 suicide attacks committed between 1981 and 2017 were carried out by jihadists. There have been disagreements about the role of jihadist ideology in driving this trend, with some authors being more sceptical towards its centrality (Pape, 2005) and others highlighting its central role but acknowledging that it interacts with political factors (Moghadam, 2008). Attention has further been paid to the degree to which jihadist groups target civilians. Here, again, findings point towards differences between locally focused and transnationally oriented jihadist groups. Piazza (2009) finds that while al-Qaeda-linked groups are more likely to target civilians, the same is not observed with respect to other jihadist rebels. He explains this finding through the organization’s transnational audience and the resulting lack of sensitivity for public backlashes in particular local contexts (Piazza, 2009, p. 65). Toft and Zhukov (2015, p. 225) use a similar theoretical argument – rebels being less dependent on local support due to their transnational linkages – to explain why Islamists appear to be more resistant towards counterterrorism and willing to accept high civilian casualties.

Third, scholars have discussed to what extent the claims formulated by jihadists differ fundamentally from those formulated by other rebel groups. There is general agreement that religious claims as such are not exclusive to jihadists but have rather been formulated by militant Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish or Sikh militant groups too, although less frequently in recent decades (Juergensmeyer, 2003; Svensson, 2012). But, again, the differences between various jihadist claims appear to matter, particularly with regard to transnational jihadist claims. Although al-Qaeda and Islamic State disagree over when and where to establish a global caliphate (Crenshaw, 2017, p. 60), their global focus sets them apart from jihadist groups with revolutionary or separatist claims (Lia, 2016, p. 83). Parallels have been drawn to transnational leftist groups of the twentieth century. Piazza (2009, p. 65), for instance, aggregates both transnational jihadist and transnational leftist claims under the category ‘universal/abstract’ goals, as they transcend national borders and share a more ‘conceptual nature’.

Do jihadist conflicts require exceptional approaches to be resolved?

Empirically, Islamist conflicts fought over revolutionary or separatist incompatibilities have been found to be neither more nor less likely to see the onset of negotiations than other conflicts, but those fought over transnational Islamist demands were found to be significantly less likely to be negotiated (Nilsson and Svensson, 2020). As observed by Melander et al. (2016), groups
affiliated with al-Qaeda or Islamic State have, thus far, never signed a peace agreement. To explain the seeming intractability of these conflicts, previous research has highlighted factors that fall both upon the respective governments and the insurgents involved in these conflicts.

As regards the role played by governments, scholarly debates have particularly revolved around the implications of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Some of these studies have emphasized that the GWOT indeed reached some at least temporary successes, for example by depriving al-Qaeda from its safe haven in Afghanistan and diminishing its ability to carry out attacks in Western countries (Byman, 2014, p. 461; Henne, 2021). On the other hand, it has been argued that military interventions, drone campaigns, but also Western support of repressive regimes have contributed to fostering anti-Western grievances, which jihadists have successfully capitalized upon (Hegghammer, 2006; Lia, 2016, p. 74–75). Moreover, the transnationalization of al-Qaeda’s and Islamic State’s networks has been analyzed as a form of risk diversification in response to counterterrorism pressure (Bacon, 2018, p. 19).

One facet of the GWOT with direct implications for the prospects for conflict resolution is the vast increase in terrorist-listings of insurgent groups. It has been observed that this policy, which has targeted jihadist groups to a larger extent than other groups (Lundgren et al., 2022), closed off non-violent paths for jihadist groups and overemphasized their transnational linkages (Toros, 2008). In a similar vein, it was argued that terrorist-listings lead to the ‘vilification’ of the insurgents (Haspeslagh, 2021, p. 361), while also placing major hurdles for third parties to become involved in negotiations (Haspeslagh, 2013). Scholars have also pointed towards the problems around de-listing terrorist groups (Forcese and Roach, 2018, p. 269). Speaking to some of these arguments, recent case studies of jihadist conflicts show that, rather than the jihadists, the involved governments themselves often lack the willingness to even discuss basic, non-ideological incompatibilities (Matesan, 2020; Söderberg Kovacs, 2020a). In this literature, the exceptionality lies in the responses to jihadistism more than the nature of jihadism.

As regards challenges towards negotiations that fall on the jihadists’ side, it has been argued that their transnational demands diminish the bargaining space vis-à-vis governments, but also that due to their transnational support channels, they are less likely to perceive a mutually hurting stalemate (Matesan, 2020; Nilsson and Svensson, 2020). At the same time, the complexities of both organizational linkages and formulated claims were highlighted. For instance, Sheikh (2020) argues that despite the Pakistani Taliban’s organizational linkages to al-Qaeda, the group’s main grievances remained local. Both Sheikh (2020) and Söderberg Kovacs (2020a) further point towards intra-jihadist fragmentation as an additional obstacle, as governments may struggle to identify relevant spokespersons amongst the jihadists’ ranks (see also Engvall and Svensson, 2020). In line with Toros (2008, p. 422), Söderberg Kovacs (2020b, p. 385) emphasizes the ‘multilayered nature’ of jihadist conflicts as a potential entry point, because it allows the conflict parties to start by focusing on less exceptional, non-ideological issues such as economic and political empowerment. Beyond the sole question of how to approach the issue of negotiations with jihadist groups, previous studies have also examined cases of jihadist rebel-to-party transformations, identifying dynamics that resemble those observed with non-jihadist rebel groups (Dalacoura, 2011; Krause and Söderberg Kovacs, 2022).

Concluding remarks

This chapter has pointed out different questions that the fields of IR, IS and PCR have posed – more or less explicitly – regarding the exceptionality of religion and its different dimensions. The questions and debates highlighted across the fields should be perceived as ideal types in the sense that they rarely come in their pure form.
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In IR, the debates we draw out are structured around three questions: first, is religion something that explains or should be explained? The literature that has sought to explain religion has pointed at how religion and religious institutions have in fact impacted the modern state system, and that theological terms have genealogically been assimilated into IR thinking. This strand of literature challenges the exceptionality of religion in the sense that it is not seen as something odd or external that can be explained separately from other developments. Instead, it highlights the integrated-ness of religion and politics, not as a recent development but as something that has also affected theory-building in IR. The second debate is on whether religion is *sui generis* in content or in function, and particularly the literature comparing the function of religious and secular doctrines has pointed out family resemblances, hence challenging perceptions of exceptionality when it comes to the way religion ‘works’. The third debate differentiates between the significance of different dimensions of religion, including religion as faith, as social identity and as rationality. This literature is occupied with the question of what sets religious beliefs, identity and rationality apart from other forms of beliefs, identities and rationalities, and might develop further if the different dimensions are examined out of a functionalist interest also in whether they ‘work’ exceptionally in an IR context.

In IS we point out four tendencies. In the first, Islam is considered to be exceptionally explanatory when it comes to understanding Islamist behavior. This approach is faced with the danger of essentialism and the disregard of other factors than religion that could potentially explain behavior. Instead of asking whether Islamists are like no other actors, a second tendency in the literature displays a self-reflexive interest in examining how and why Islamists have been represented as or made exceptional, hence the exceptionality question is seen in relation to Orientalist practices and power dynamics. A third tendency identified are approaches that perceive Islamists to be like any other actor-type, hence approached through general social science tools. In these approaches the similarities are at the center of analysis, highlighting often non-ideological aspects as being significant drivers of behavior. The fourth tendency is occupied with internal differences among Islamist movements and has a leaning towards perceiving religion as not only about static doctrine but rather as lived practices. Here the substance and manifestations of religious interpretation matter, but in tandem with other sociological factors that can explain the variations within.

In the PCR literature on jihadism, the point of departure is that transnational jihadist conflicts from a statistical point of view appear to be exceptional: they are not only more widespread and fought at higher intensity levels than other conflicts, but they are also harder to resolve with traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. Our review of the PCR literature identifies potential explanations for these findings on different analytical levels. First, on a conflict level, it has been argued that similar to the Cold War era, jihadist conflicts are particularly complex because they ‘bundle’ several underlying conflicts, both local and transnational ones, into ideologically charged macro-narratives. Second, on the group level, existing studies point towards both similarities and differences to other rebel groups. Those that detect exceptionality point at al-Qaeda’s and Islamic State’s particular type of organization involving transnational affiliate groups, the large-scale recruitment of foreign fighters, but also the use of exceptional battlefield tactics and the particularly far-ranging claims for a global caliphate. Yet, in the last-mentioned there is a sub-debate on how much transnationality means in relation to the creed, when explaining escalation. A third strand within the wider PCR literature moves the lens to the exceptionality in ‘our’ responses to jihadism, posing the question whether jihadist conflicts indeed require a rethinking of traditional approaches to conflict resolution, or whether these conflicts have in fact been treated exceptionally by the international community.
A better understanding of the multidimensionality of religion, but also the multidimensional debates, is helpful in order to understand how religion is similar to or exceptional in relation to other forms of large-scale identities and ideologies invoked in world politics. Additionally, awareness of the difference that lies in the exceptionality-debates related to the content versus function of the religious, and a continued reflection regarding the exceptionality in ‘our responses’ to religion and the positionality in scholarly conceptualizations of the religious is warranted.

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