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The term Islamist is used to describe both violent anti-democratic groups like Islamic State as well as non-violent democratic groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Dr Usaama al-Azami analyses the pernicious effects of blurring the lines between these two opposed groups, arguing that this blurring plays into the hands of authoritarians.

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WHY WORDS MATTER: THE PROBLEM WITH THE TERM ISLAMIST

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Why Words Matter: The Problem with the Term Islamist

The term Islamist has meant different things at different times to different people. Today, when used in English it usually conjures up terrifying images of masked gunmen on the streets of European capitals killing innocent civilians in the name of Islam. Ironically, the term first began to take hold amongst Western academics and policymakers so that they could talk about largely non-violent Islamic activism in the Muslim world without resorting to the derogatory label of “Islamic fundamentalism.” This in turn appears to have influenced democratically-oriented Islamic movements in the Middle East to refer to themselves using the term’s Arabic equivalent: Islamiyyūn. Yet, the word Islamist is used today by media commentators and policymakers alike to describe both democratically oriented political parties like the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as well as anti-democratic terrorist groups like ISIS.

In Libya, experiencing nearly a decade of civil war between complex factions, political parties and armed groups, the term “Islamist” has been used to describe designated terrorist groups such as al-Qa’ida as well as democratically-oriented groups like the MB. For example, the term has routinely been used by Khalifa Haftar, the self-styled leader of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) to describe all of his

opponents, including the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. The UN has relaunched a process aimed at unifying the GNA and LAAF in a single government and finally ending Libya’s second civil war. However, Libya’s last two wars have centred almost exclusively on the term Islamist. Haftar, who launched both of Libya’s civil wars has used the terms “Islamist” as a pretext to overthrow Libya’s first democratically elected parliament in 2014, and most recently to overthrow the GNA on April 4th 2019, the government established to end Libya’s last civil war. The dangers that can arise from blurring the important distinctions between democrats and terrorists in Libya are not simply an academic concern, they have policy implications and consequences for the diplomatic process too. In February 2020, the US state department described the civil war in Libya as being driven by “The Three M’s”— “Money, Militias, and the Muslim Brotherhood.”— Thus, the MB, a democratically-oriented political party, appears to be used as a catch-all phrase to describe “extremists” that would include ISIS in Libya. In a European context, we are far more careful in making such distinctions, for example between Nazism and liberalism, despite the fact that both are technically ‘Western’ ideologies that have emerged out of the Enlightenment and uphold secular values.



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Between secularism and Islamism

Despite sharing the same genealogies, such groups should not be routinely described as part of the same ideological family without further explanation. Nazism is not routinely referred to as “secularist,” in public discourse, or as upholding “Enlightenment values,” even though such descriptions technically apply. Indeed, while the genealogy is perfectly defensible in an academic context, most Europeans would fairly argue that they want to reject any association between Nazism and the ideals they cherish from the secular Enlightenment. This

might also help us understand why the average Muslim similarly rejects any association between Islam and ISIS. Yet, the widespread use of “Islamist” in this ambiguous fashion to simultaneously designate both terrorist groups and democratic groups continues including in response to recent attacks in France and Austria. And its effects are arguably quite insidious.

Such a blurring of the lines between democratic Islamic groups and fascist groups like ISIS plays right into the hands of authoritarians in the Middle East and North Africa where it has harsher consequences. In recent years,

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Libya has experienced two civil wars, both of which Haftar launched in 2014 and 2020 in the name of “purging Islamists.” While these wars appear to have finally come to an end with the announcement of a new UN-brokered permanent ceasefire, the future of political participation and democracy in Libya remains at risk as long as this blurring of lines continues. Indeed, the text of the ceasefire has the potential to make a positive contribution in this regard. It calls for an end to the “currently rampant media escalation and hate speech” by the rival factions particularly online. Blurring the lines between democratic Islamists like the MB and fascists like ISIS as a means of smearing democrats as terrorists could and should be viewed in this connection as the expression of hate speech and an incitement to violence against advocates of democracy.

Blurring these lines is no accident

Treating groups like ISIS and (democratic) Islamists as the same thing is no doubt highly expedient for those opposed to democracy in the region. Everyone, Muslims included, can agree that ISIS’ vision of politics is one of nihilistic violence. Those who wish to discredit mainstream Islamists can more easily do so by associating them with groups like ISIS and using politically-loaded terms like “terrorism.” The term terrorism facilitates the removal of the usual norms of international law and the observance of due process. Even powerful states in the global system that uphold the rule of law domestically will routinely disregard international legal norms when killing those they designate as “terrorists” through drone strikes

ostensibly in the interest of national security. If this terrorism loophole can be extended to include democratic Islamists, at least as a matter of suspicion, then the suppression of democratic forces—Islamist-oriented or otherwise—across the Middle East and North Africa becomes more palatable to Western leaders, policy makers, and voters who believe the world is being made a safer place as a result of these policies.

This is why Middle Eastern and North African autocracies frequently appeal to the language of “terrorism” when seeking to delegitimise their overwhelmingly non-violent (democratic) Islamist critics. Their ultimate purpose in using the term “Islamist” in this indiscriminate manner is to crush democratic tendencies within their societies without saying that this is in fact what they are doing. Democratic Islamist organisations are some of the most cohesive grassroots political forces in the region and pose a serious (democratic) threat to Middle Eastern autocracies. The discourse promoted by authoritarian states and their proxies in Libya is designed to blur the distinctions between nihilistic terrorists like ISIS and democratic Islamist groups. In the context of the global war on terror, this is a powerful strategy for containing democracy.

The Myth of Islamists vs Secularists

There are also significant costs to Western support for those like Haftar and their repression of democracy in the name of countering terrorism in the Middle East. The symbolism here plays right into narratives put forward by

groups like ISIS that, experts have argued, found the perfect opportunity to emerge after the 2013 Egyptian coup crushed the democratic aspirations in the most populous and historically influential state in the modern Middle East. As the *Economist* put it shortly after the bloody crackdowns of the Egyptian coup: “Muslims across the Middle East will conclude from all this that the West applies one standard when secularists are under attack and another when Islamists are. Democracy, they will gather, is not a universal system of government, but a trick for bringing secularists to power.”

The reality of Middle Eastern “secularists” is more complex, however. Just as the label Islamist is often used to signal “terrorist,” the term secular in the Middle East and North Africa, has been

acquired by authoritarians who, like their Islamist opponents, draw heavily on religious discourse to legitimate their actions and those of their armies. They are, in fact, no more secular than the Islamists are. Haftar’s rise in Libya and his embrace by the West is in large part due to his claim to be “secular.” Yet, the LAAF is composed of entire brigades of Madkhalis, Saudi-inspired armed Salafi groups who closely resemble ISIS in their theology, are committed to authoritarianism, and violently oppose “secular” democracy. Indeed, the democratic values that are usually associated with “secular” government in the West—political freedoms, democracy, and the rule of law—are entirely alien to Haftar, the Madkhalis, and their allies. By contrast they are characteristic of the Islamist mainstream associated with the MB that the former



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insist on referring to as “terrorists.”

Seeing through the authoritarian strategy

It is a recognition of the Western preference for secularism that leads authoritarians in the region to present themselves as a secular bulwark against the “Islamist” threat. In fact, like their democratic Islamist opponents, these “secular” autocrats similarly appeal to religious arguments to legitimate their absolute rule. While they know that the term Islamist conjures up fears of the black flags of ISIS, what they are in fact most concerned about are democratic groups that cannot be confronted with firepower as effectively. Recognition of this fact could not come at a more critical time in Libya’s political transition. UN-brokered talks that have brought to an end Haftar’s latest war and sought to unify Libya’s rival institutions this month are an opportunity for a new political chapter and peaceful era in Libya, though caution should be exercised.

Haftar has historically rejected peace deals with the GNA on the grounds that Islamists were involved and were not welcome as “part of any ceasefire,” peace process or political deal. The years of ambivalence to his threats by policymakers backfired when Haftar launched his most recent “counter-terrorism” campaign—“Operation Flood of Dignity”—to overthrow the GNA in 2019. But the ceasefire now offers an opportunity to temper the language that is used by The LAAF’s leadership and their allies against democratic Islamist opponents. The term Islamist should no longer be used as a slur that is synonymous with “terrorist,” and efforts to do this should be recognised for what

they are, hate speech and incitement to violence. This is why words matter, and why the blurring of the lines between democratic Islamists and terrorists is central to the authoritarian strategy. Western policy makers need to see through this ruse and recognise that this narrative not only fosters more instability, but distorts our policy lens and our design of political deals when we, and Libya, need them the most.



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