What is Post-Islamism?

ASEF BAYAT

In 1996 I happened to write an essay entitled "The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society," [1] in which I set out to discuss the articulation of the remarkable social trends, political perspectives, and religious thought which post-Khomeini Iran had begun to witness—a trend which eventually came to underpin the "reform movement" of the late 1990s and early 2000. My tentative essay dealt only with the societal trends for there was nothing at the state level that I could consider "post-Islamist." Indeed as originally used, post-Islamism pertained only to the realities of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and not to other settings and societies. Yet the core spirit of the term referred to the metamorphosis of Islamism (in ideas, approaches, and practices) from within and without.

Since then, the term post-Islamism has been deployed by a number of prominent observers in Europe to refer primarily to a shift in the attitudes and strategies of Islamist militants in the Muslim world. While the term's currency may be welcome, the particular way in which it has been employed seems to have caused more confusion than clarity. For some (e.g. Gilles Kepel), post-Islamism describes the departure of Islamists from the *jihadi* and *Salafi* doctrines, while for others (such as Olivier Roy) it is perceived in terms of the "privatization" of Islamization (as opposed to Islamization of the state), where emphasis is placed on changes in how and where Islamization is carried out, rather than its content. Often used descriptively, post-Islamism has been presented and primarily perceived—including in my own earlier work on Iran—as an empirical rather than an analytical category, representing a "particular era," or an "historical end."

Partly due to such narrow conceptualizations and partly for its misperception, "post-Islamism" has attracted some unwelcome reactions. Critics have correctly disputed the premature generalization about the end of Islamism (understood chiefly in terms of the establishment of an Islamic state) even though they have acknowledged a significant shift in the strategy and outlook of some militant Islamist groups. What seems to be changing, they argue, is not political Islam (i.e., doing politics in an Islamic frame) but only a particular, "revolutionary" version of it. Others have argued that post-Islamism signifies not a distinct reality, but simply one variant of Islamist politics.

In my understanding, post-Islamism represents both a condition and a project which may be embodied in a master (or multi-dimensional) movement. In the first instance, it refers to a political and social condition where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted even among its once-ardent supporters. Islamists become aware of their system's anomalies and inadequacies as they attempt to normalize and institutionalize their rule. The continuous trial and error makes the system susceptible to questions and criticisms. Islamism becomes compelled, both by its own internal contradictions and by societal pressure, to reinvent itself, but does so at the cost of a qualitative shift. The tremendous transformation in religious and political discourse in Iran during the 1990s exemplifies this tendency.

Not only a condition, post-Islamism is also a project, a conscious attempt to conceptualize and strategize the rationale and modalities of transcending Islamism in social, political, and intellectual domains. Yet, post-Islamism is neither anti-Islamic, un-Islamic, nor is it secular. Rather it represents an endeavour to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty. It is an attempt to turn the underlying principles of Islamism on its head by emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past. It wants to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom, with democracy and modernity (something post-Islamists stress), to achieve what some have termed an "alternative modernity." Post-Islamism is expressed in terms of secular exigencies, in freedom from rigidity, in breaking down the monopoly of

On 26 April 2005 Asef Bayat presented his inaugural lecture at Leiden University entitled, "Islam and Democracy: Perverse Charm of an Irrelevant Question," presented here in extracted form. He posits that Islamist movements in Muslim societies are undergoing a post-Islamist turn characterized by rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past. The full text of the lecture will be available through ISIM and Leiden University.

religious truth. In short, whereas Islamism is defined by the fusion of religion and responsibility, post-Islamism emphasizes religiosity and rights. Post-Islamism may find expressions in various social practices, political ideas, and religious thought as in post-Islamist urban rationale, youth and students movements, feminist practice, or theological perspectives.

Historically, the end of the war between Iran and Iraq (1988), the death of Ayatollah Khomeini (1989), and the programme of post-war reconstruction under President Rafsanjani in Iran marked the onset of what I called a "post-Islamist" turn. As a master movement, Iran's post-Islamism was embodied in remarkable social and intellectual trends and movements—expressed in religiously innovative discourses by youths, students, women, and religious intellectuals, who called for democracy, individual rights, tolerance, and gender equality, as well as the separation of religion from the state. Yet instead of throwing away religious sensibilities altogether, they set out to push for an inclusive religiosity—one which came to subvert the Islam of officialdom. The daily resistance and struggles of ordinary actors compelled the religious thinkers, spiritual elites, and political actors to undertake a crucial paradigmatic shift. Scores of old Islamist revolutionaries renounced their earlier ideas lamenting the danger of the religious state both to religion and the state. The Islamic state generated adversaries from both without and within who called for the secularization of the state but stressed upon maintaining religious ethics in society.

Is post-Islamism, then, an exclusively Iranian phenomenon? The truth is that while the Islamic Revolution acted in the 1980s as the demonstration effect to bolster similar movements in other Muslim countries, Iran's post-Islamist experience has also contributed to an ideological shift among some Islamist movements (such as the Tunisian Al-Da'wa Islamic party led by Rashed Ghannoushi). Nevertheless, internal dynamics and global forces since the early 1990s have played a greater role in instigating a post-Islamist turn among individual movements in the Muslim world. The new pluralist strategy of Lebanese Hizbullah in the early 1990s leading to a split in the movement, the emergence in the mid-1990s of Al-Wasat party in Egypt as an alternative to both militant Islamists and the Muslim Brothers, the inclusive policy and practices of Islamic parties in Turkey (Rifah, Virtue, and Justice and Development Parties), or the emergence in Saudi Arabia of an "Islamo-liberal" trend in the late 1990s seeking a compromise between Islam and democracy, each display some diverse versions of post-Islamist trends in Muslim societies today. In each of these cases post-Islamism denotes a departure, however varied in degree, from an Islamist ideological package characterized by universalism, monopoly of religious truth, exclusivism, and obligation. Post-Islamist movements acknowledge, in other words, ambiguity, multiplicity, inclusion, and compromise in principles and practice.

The categories "Islamism" and "post-Islamism" serve primarily as theoretical constructs to signify change, difference, and the root of change. In practice, however, Muslims may adhere simultaneously to aspects of both discourses. The advent of post-Islamism does not necessarily mean the historical end of Islamism. What it means is the birth, out of the Islamist experience, of a qualitatively different discourse and politics. In reality we may witness for some time the simultaneous processes of both Islamization and post-Islamization.

Note

1. Asef Bayat, "The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society," *Critique: Critical Middle East Studies*, no. 9 (Fall 1996): 43-52.

Asef Bayat is the Academic Director of ISIM and the ISIM Chair on Islam and the Modern World in the department of Languages and Cultures of the Middle East (TCMO), Leiden University. His forthcoming book is titled, *Post-Islamism: Social Movements, Islam and Democracy*.
Email: a.bayat@isim.nl