Political Islam in North Africa: History, Ideology, and Social Orientation

Project Goals:

I am interested in studying the history, ideology, and potential mass appeal of Islamist political movements in contemporary North Africa, with an emphasis on Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Narrowly speaking, I seek to understand what it is these different Islamist groups actually advocate, the religious and philosophical arguments that support their ideologies, the historical context out of which they have arisen and the reasons for and extent of the support they enjoy in their respective political communities. I am also interested in understanding what, if anything, distinguishes North Africa's Islamist movements from their Middle Eastern counterparts. More generally speaking however, I hope to make a larger argument about the relationship between religion and politics and the way secular and religious authority are conceived of in Islamic polities. My hope is that the arguments advanced in my culminating research paper can be applied to analyses of Islamism outside of the project's specific regional focus. To gain as complete an understanding of this political phenomenon as possible, I will draw upon a multitude of texts across a wide variety of academic disciplines. I hope to combine elements of intellectual history, religious studies, political theory, public policy and political anthropology to produce the most nuanced, meaningful analysis possible.

Methodology/Potential Areas of Study:

Most analyses of political Islamism that I have read seem to identify with one of two “intellectual camps.” The first such camp seems to suggest that political Islamism is often just the cosmetic face of sincere opposition movements to more grounded, material problems. Someone with this line of thinking would sympathize with the view, held by many, that the 1979 Iranian Revolution was essentially an economic uprising resulting from severe class inequities rather than the massive ideological shift often suggested by the media. More controversially, they might suggest that the current threat that the Western nations face from militant Islamists like Al Qa'ida has little to do with the group's stated ideology and everything to do with Western foreign policies and the history of colonialism in the region.

The other camp tends to view ideology and theology as the primary drivers of Islamism. Under this theory, Muslims are socialized into or otherwise persuaded, independent of material conditions, that their religion compels them to support certain political movements or beliefs. Such thinkers would look at the Iranian revolution and argue that specific aspects of Shi'a Islam's delineation of religious and temporal authority make its adherents more likely to support Islamic government. Proponents of this line of thinking might also be sympathetic to Samuel Huntington's thesis that religious and cultural differences between the Islamic World and the Western World are so significant that conflict between them is inevitable.

As an analyst, I find both of these views compelling. It is clear to me that ideas have intrinsic power and that ideological beliefs as fundamental as religion clearly impact the way
people behave politically; however, it also seems obvious that material conditions impact the way people apply their ideologies to their political behavior. I have been disheartened, however, to observe that many analysts have adopted one of these two theories as the only considered explanation for political Islam. In my study of political Islam in North Africa, I hope to pursue a middle ground and attempt to discover the ways in which ideology and material conditions interact in the formation of Islamist movements.

I intend to use both a top-down and a bottom-up approach in my research. The first thing I plan to do is to build an historical and political context for my research. While the coursework I have engaged in and am currently engaged in is exposing me to the basic narrative of the modern history of each of the three countries on which I am focusing my research, I will still have gaps in my knowledge that will need to be filled. Thus, I plan to begin my research by reading modern histories of each of the three states I am focusing on: Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. My adviser, being an accomplished scholar of the region, will be able to help me select texts that meet the specific needs of my project. If not immediately apparent from the histories, I will also read references that describe the specific governmental structures and institutions that constitute the realm of the political in these states.

Having gained this context, I will then begin with a study of some of the most influential philosophical writings promoting Islamism from some of the most influential thinkers. Because I believe that the philosophical dialogue of Islamism is necessarily transnational, I plan to incorporate both North African and Middle Eastern thinkers. Every effort will be made to read texts by the leaders of the specific Islamist movements I plan to analyze and/or their ideological influences. A preliminary list of some of the thinkers who I plan to read is as follows:

- Hassan Al Turabi (Sudan)
- Sayyid Qutb (Egypt)
- Abdessalam Yassine (Morocco)
- Rashid Al Ghanushi (Tunisia)
- Abdullah Azzam (Palestine)
- Hassan Al Bannah (Egypt)
- Abul ala Al Mawdudi (Pakistan)
- Abdelkarim Al Khatib (Morocco)

While I do have some background in the Arabic language, I regret that I am not yet at the level to conduct research in it. While I can read Arabic texts with heavy reliance on a dictionary, I believe that the opportunity cost would be too great to use texts in their original language. That being said, these authors have texts and/or interviews published in the English language, and so I do not believe my project will suffer. Still, if a very important Arabic text came along that was sufficiently short that I could read it in a reasonable amount of time, I would be willing to make an effort at it.

I will then apply this study of philosophy to an analysis of the ideology of six specific North Africa Islamist groups which I believe span the ideological spectrum from accommodationist political parties to hardened militants. To buttress this analysis, I will find and analyze public statements made by these groups’ leaders in order to understand how the philosophy is actualized.
in the groups' specific political worlds. The movements are listed below:

- Justice and Development Party (Morocco)
- Justice and Charity Party (Morocco)
- Islamic Salvation Front (Algeria)
- Armed Islamic Movement (Algeria)
- Armed Islamic Group (Algeria)
- Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat/Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (Algeria)
- Renaissance Party (Tunisia)

Having established this base-line ideological understanding, I will then expand my analysis to include the recent histories of the groups, studies of the way they have operated, and demographic profiles of these movements' adherents. While the philosophical and ideological works I read will be largely primary sources, I expect this second group of sources to be primarily secondary. From these sources, I should be able to form an argument about the primary ideological and material drivers of these movements and the roles that each plays in group formation and activity. While I will not be able to provide a clear description of the exact structure of the final paper until I have formulated my exact thesis, as I have found that different theses lend themselves to different argumentation styles, I believe that the above description makes clear the approach I will be taking.

Possible Texts:

NOTE: This is NOT an exhaustive list of the texts I plan to use. It represents a small sample from which I can start to compile my larger, more in-depth bibliography.


**Rationale and Plan of the Project**

As a double major in Government and Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, I am in the position of having to choose in which of my two programs I would like to pursue an honors thesis. While ultimately I decided that pursuing a Government thesis was the best fit for me, I still have a strong desire to pursue in-depth research in interdisciplinary regional studies. I thus conceived of this project as a sort of “mini-thesis” that I think would represent the best “capstone” to the multi-year study of the Arab and Islamic world in which I have engaged for the past three years.

I envision this culminating experience as a middle way between the standard senior seminar, AMES 91, and the Honors Program, AMES 87. While, like the seminar, it will be completed in one term, the project is meant to foster in-depth study of particular texts, all with the goal of stimulating analysis for a final research paper.

More concretely, I envision the creation of a specific plan of readings with my faculty adviser, Professor Trumbull. Once a week, I will meet with him for a period of time to be determined upon consulting him. During these weekly meetings, we will discuss the readings I have completed and discuss how they impact the overall argument I plan to make in the final paper. While the schedule of weekly readings for the whole term will be agreed upon in advance, if there is a discovery I make that, for the purposes of my final paper, compels me to explore a topic further,
I would hope that there would be flexibility to alter the plan of readings, if my adviser deems it appropriate.

As far as written work is concerned, I plan to produce a series of short papers during the term that contain my reactions to specific texts as well as a culminating research paper. I do not see these papers as being as structured as normal essays. While they will obviously contain my carefully considered analysis, I do not see them as being strict, complete arguments that prove a specific thesis but rather collections of thoughts that can guide me towards the synthesis of the overall argument I plan to make in my culminating paper. I envision my culminating research paper as a 25-35 page analysis of North African Islamism in which I advance a specific argument about this socio-political phenomenon. I will incorporate readings from the entire term and I expect it to form the lion's share of my grade. While it cannot reasonably be expected to go into the same depth as an Honors thesis given that it will be completed in only one term, I think it is reasonable to hold it to the same standard as a thesis in terms of its originality, rigor of argumentation, and effective use of supporting evidence.

**Preparation:**

I believe that I am extremely well-prepared to undertake this research. I have had a broad interest in the Islamic and Arab worlds since I was 12 years old and have pursued this passion with vigor throughout my undergraduate career. I am a double major in Government and Asian and Middle Eastern Studies and have done extensive coursework in each. Below is a list of courses I have taken which I believe have prepared me for this project:

- Arabic 1: First Year Courses in Arabic (07F)
- Arabic 2: First Year Courses in Arabic (08W)
- Government 6: Political Ideas (08W)
- Religion 16: Modern Islam (08S)
- Arabic 3: First Year Courses in Arabic (08S)
- Anthropology 15: Political Anthropology (08F)
- Arabic 21: Intermediate Arabic (08F)
- Government 50: What's So Civil About War Anyway (09W)
- Arabic 22: Intermediate Arabic (09W)
- Government 40: Political Economy of the Arab Gulf States (09X)
- Government 60: Democratic Theory (09X)
- Arabic 31: Intermediate Modern Arabic (09F)
- Arabic 32: Intermediate Modern Arabic (09F)
- Arabic 11: Modern Morocco: Literature, Politics, and Society (09F)
- History 53: Islam in Africa (10W)
- History 54: History of North Africa (10W)

In addition to this coursework, I have living experience in the region. This past fall, I participated in the inaugural Arabic FSP in Tangier, Morocco, where I spent three months immersed in Moroccan language and society. I believe this experience will prove to have been
extraordinarily valuable in helping me contextualize the sometimes abstract study of politics with my real-life experiences in-country.