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Citation

Bayat, A. (2003). The Use and Abuse of 'Muslim Societies'. *Isim Newsletter*, 13(1), 5-5.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16913>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Use and Abuse of 'Muslim Societies'

The central function of the ISIM is to conduct and promote research in contemporary 'Muslim societies'. The term refers to both a 'particular' culture and a geographical area of the world, albeit one which is dispersed across the Middle East, South and South-East Asia and Africa. While the term may offer a common identity for scholars working on countries ranging from Morocco and Iran to India and Indonesia, it can also invoke a sense of anxiety and hesitation. It is not just that as an analytical category 'Muslim societies' may be vague and therefore lacks coherence, but some may fear that it can cause more intellectual harm than benefit. By employing such a broad category are we not in a sense 're-orientalizing' Muslim societies and cultures, constructing homogeneous entities where they do not exist? Is it valid to speak of, say, 'Christian societies' or 'Buddhist societies'? Does the category 'Muslim societies' not imply that we consider religion, i.e., Islam, as the defining feature of these societies? Finally, would this category not exclude, and otherize, the non-religious and non-Muslim from membership in Muslim majority nations? While such questions address legitimate concerns, I would like to suggest that 'Muslim societies' can serve as a useful analytical category.

The terms 'Islamic world' or 'Islamic society', used in singular abstract forms, may indeed imply that Islam is the central factor that shapes the dynamics of these societies. 'Islamic society' becomes a totalizing notion which is constructed by others to describe Muslims and their cultures. It tells us the way others imagine how Muslims are and even how they should be. This worldview has partly been perpetuated by some Muslims such as Islamists, who likewise construct a unitary Islamic landscape.

In contrast, 'Muslim societies', understood as plural and concrete entities, allow a self-conscious Muslim majority to define their own reality in an inevitably contested, differentiated and dynamic fashion. Here the emphasis is not on Islam, but Muslims as agents of their societies and cultures, even if not of their own making. And 'culture' is perceived not as static codes and conducts but as processes, always changing, flexible and contested. These are the societies in which aspects of Islam, interpreted and adopted in diverse manners, have influenced some domains of private and public life—including the realms of morality, family relations, gender dynamics, law, and sometimes (but not always) politics and the state. 'Muslim communities' outside Muslim-majority countries contain perhaps a more complex social dynamic, since Muslims are compelled to negotiate their identities within the prevailing non-Islamic legal and normative structures. What make them 'Muslim communities' are the diverse 'Muslim identities' the members hold.

Yet 'Muslim societies' are never monolithic as such, never religious by definition, nor are their cultures simply reducible to mere religion. Indeed, national cultures, historical experiences and political trajectories have often produced different cultures of Islam or religious perceptions and practices across different Muslim nations. In this sense, each 'Muslim' (majority) country is comprised of an ensemble of people with various degrees of religious affiliations ranging from political Islamists, actively pious, ordinarily religious, seculars or non-Muslim minorities. Indeed, the degrees of religious affiliation among these groups may vary at different historical conjunctures.

The commonality and differentiation embedded in the category of 'Muslim societies' allow for drawing fruitful parallels, and conducting comparative studies across both time and space, as well as between Muslim and non-Muslim societies. For the relentless process of globalization, while it may accentuate differences, also produces similar

structures and processes between nations, so that social phenomena in Latin America, for example, may find parallels in Asia. Equally, many common features relating to social structures, consumer cultures and commodification can be traced between Muslim and non-Muslim societies. Such comparative exercises can greatly enrich our understanding of the social, political and cultural dynamics in different parts of the world.

Some might argue that the fluidity and differentiation embedded in the category 'Muslim societies' could diminish its intended analytical purpose. This might be a valid argument if we assume that comparable categories such as the Middle East, Europe and Latin America enjoy the social, cultural or economic cohesion that is desired, imagined, or intended. But obviously they do not. The latter also represent heterogeneous realities. Of course, the category 'Muslim societies' does not represent a bounded geographic 'area' as in Middle East or East Asia, for the obvious reason that some 59 Muslim majority countries with one billion Muslims are dispersed in pockets of lands that stretch from parts of southern Europe throughout Asia and Africa. But like the 'Middle East', 'South Asia' or Europe, 'Muslim societies' are also internally diverse in terms of languages, national cultures, peoples' religious commitments and economic capacities. The point is not that these categorical 'areas' or regions are not internally varied, but rather that the common concerns shared within these regions are perhaps larger than those shared between them and other regions or areas. While there might be differentiation within Latin America, it is surely less so than the variety one may find between Latin American and, say, Asia. The same goes for the category 'Muslim societies'. The latter holds enough coherence to allow us to pose interesting analytical questions. To what extent, for instance, does Islam play a role in constructing people's identities?

An area of study devoted to 'Muslim societies' may enjoy two advantages over conventional area studies. First, area studies have traditionally been associated with western foreign policy interests. The category of 'Muslim societies', however, permits these societies to define and characterize themselves, even if in a contested fashion. Secondly, in academia area studies are counterposed to 'disciplinary' orientations. I am hoping that 'Muslim societies' may offer a fertile scholarly 'field' in which a productive tension between the comparative advantages of area studies and disciplinary frameworks can generate both an empirically rich and theoretically innovative research outcome. The study of 'Muslim societies' becomes a plausible field to interrogate such themes as 'Muslim cultural politics', 'religion and the public sphere', 'production of Islamic knowledge', 'socio-religious movements', or 'religion, society and violence'. Scholarly endeavors of this nature not only help us address crucial empirical questions, they also assist us to contribute to theoretical debates on, for instance, 'public sphere', 'production of knowledge', 'violence', 'cultural politics and representation', 'religion and politics' or 'social movements and social change'. The study of contemporary 'Muslim societies' is, therefore, distinct from the traditional field of 'Islamic studies' which has developed its own particular focus and methodology.

I am grateful to my ISIM colleagues, Martin van Bruinessen, Dick Douwes, Annelies Moors and Abdulkader Tayob for their insightful comments.

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PHOTO: RANDA SHAA TH, 2003

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