Preface to the English Edition

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What you hold in your hand is the work of a trespasser. It sums up the breakthroughs of a French scholar who escaped a snug—and often smug—Western enclave to research one of the least understood political movements: Islamic activism. In the 1980s, François Burgat was one of the first Western political scientists to actively conduct field research on Islamic movements, and to meet those activists everybody feared, few met, and fewer even understood. This book tells the story of a lengthy trespassing.

French scholars are overwhelmingly white, generally male, and often proud of their liberal heritage, which they dub republican, universalist, and secular. There is a simple reason for that homogeneity: French academia, while merit-based in theory, is extremely discriminatory in practice. It tends to favor insiders, and newcomers to the game—in particular former or current colonial subjects—are few and far between. With his Catholic, bourgeois upbringing, Burgat is definitely a member of the old boys' club. Leaving for Algeria as a young professor, however, he started to trespass against his primary belonging.

"It was only in Algeria that I became political," he writes. "This did not happen, as it did to many others, through putting myself at the service of the political project of the leaders of the country, but by discovering there the scale of the distortion" between mainstream, elite, racist French culture and what his North African experience revealed to him. Reading Malek Bennabi and, later on in Tunisia and Egypt, interviewing Rached Ghannouchi and Tarek al-Bishri, he realized the limits of universalism and secularism. Back in France, he dedicated his career to understanding the one political movement that most visibly questioned Western hegemony.

Burgat's book is unique because it sums up an approach that has been largely missing from mainstream expertise. Most analysts of Islamic movements tend to see them as the latest expression of a medieval Muslim theology represented as naturally violent, sexist, and discriminatory. Those who are not satisfied with this explanation tend to focus on socio-economic marginalization: Islamic activism, for them, is the revolt

of the downtrodden. Burgat's research shows the shortcomings of both approaches, and looks for answers in the conflicted relationship between a conquering West, from Bugeaud to Bush and from Cromer to Cheney, and the Arab and Muslim fringe of the Global South, a region whose specificity is less its religion and culture than its position right outside the West's bloody borders.

During the colonial period, Islam was used to mark those colonial subjects who in Western eyes needed to be saved from their own culture and taught civilized ways. During the immediate post-colonial period, religion was often pushed out of the public realm, as many post-independence Arab regimes sought to modernize and develop along European lines. For over half a century, Islamic activists have turned religion from a mark of shame into a badge of honor, a marker of civilization not barbarism, of freedom not servitude. They adopted an Islamic religious lexicon against colonial oppression and post-colonial modernism. Islamic activists are not reactionary or medieval. They strive to create an indigenous lexicon against the perpetuation of European and Western influence after Arab independences.

Most observers think Islamic activism ("Islamism") is mostly an ideology that spreads like a disease through the contagious channels of the madrasas or of the internet. Burgat shows that Islamic movements are not linked by a common ideology. It is impossible to predict what Islamic activists will do by looking at what they think. Some collaborate with authoritarian governments while others oppose them. Some refuse elections while others embrace them. Some throw themselves into the political game while others withdraw from the world. To understand Islamic activism, one need not read the Quran or listen to taped sermons: one needs to meet activists, observe them, talk to them—acknowledge their eminently political quality. One needs to be there and conduct ethnographic fieldwork. Islamic activism is less the result of an ideology than the production of new political identities from one's own ground.

How has religion become so central to political scenes where, from the Atlantic to the Gulf and from Syria to Algeria, leftist movements were once thriving? In the post-colonial context, characterized by the one-party system (as in Nasser's Egypt) or the no-party system (as in Saudi Arabia), religious activities have allowed activists to organize under the radar of the state. Mosque activities, informal religious networks, and person-to-person relationships are hard to crack down upon. Fast urban growth has allowed religious networks to expand and thrive in times of political crack-down, as the state was after workers not clerics, officers not mosquegoers.

Repression inevitably hit Islamic movements, as in Egypt from the 1950s on or in Saudi Arabia twenty years later. Arab states reformed religious

education, sometimes claiming to modernize it; these reforms often reeked of repression. States imposed predigested Friday sermons, closed down mosques, threw activists in jail, subjected them to treatment that was ever more sophisticated and cruel. Using force, post-colonial elites in turn justified the usage of force: Arab states often vindicated terrorism at the very time when they were fighting it. “For the colonized man,” Frantz Fanon wrote, “life can spring only from the colonizer’s putrefying corpse.” For the post-colonial man, it can spring only from the destruction of what made post-colonial states violent—Western military cooperation, ministries of interior, police terror, torture chambers. Jean-Paul Sartre, commenting on the Algerian resistance to the brutal French occupation, famously quipped, “One must either remain terrified or become terrifying.”

Burgat’s book is not only a plea for a better understanding of both spectacular and hidden violence but also a candid exploration of what it means to conduct research on the very political movements that, noisily or in silence, have taken their distances from the West and Western-centric regimes. Burgat shows how political trespassing is an art that involves years of decentering and disorientation. It also entails decades of political struggle against terribly dangerous mainstream perceptions—those which fueled the criminal and useless War on Terror from 2001 on. When leaving his office to go lecture, Burgat often says, “*Allez*, I’m gonna harp on again.” This endless improvisation on the necessity of shedding one’s civilizational bearings is a salubrious enterprise.

I have been the consenting victim of this harping-on since a stormy day of July 2000, when Burgat, then head of a social science research center in Yemen, took us students hiking to the deserted Jewish village of Bayt Baws, where a torrential hailstorm sent us running down the slope and into the safety of a patio where the political scientist offered us dry clothes and Marseillais Pastis. Following Burgat like a shadow through the meanders of Sana’a’s rich prewar social life, from poetry sessions around Abdulaziz al-Maqaleh to late-night verbal jousts in faraway compounds, was the best introduction to political anthropology, this strange discipline where the researcher is to herself her own lab, and where empathy—not necessarily sympathy—is the rule of the game.

Reader, beware: the pleasures of trespassing are contagious.

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