

## Theorizing the Statist Threat to Intellectuals' Autonomy: How the State Features in Clerics' Arab Spring Politics

Politics has been at the heart of the sociology of intellectuals, where understanding what shapes intellectuals' political stances is a central question. Some sociologists insist that intellectuals' actions "emerge[] from a depth of commitment to ethics" (Alexander 2003:193), while many others consider intellectuals' material and ideal interests key to understanding their acts. Such interests include securing satisfying employment conditions and socioeconomic privileges (Karabel 1996; Lipset 1959; Mannheim [1956] 1992; Schumpeter [1942] 2003) or political and bureaucratic power (Kurzman 2008; Szelenyi and Martin 1988). Bourdieu's field theory is probably the most popular account of this interest-based understanding of intellectuals (Bourdieu [1984] 1988).

Though the state's importance in intellectuals' politics is implied in some of these accounts, the state is not directly addressed as an important actor that intellectuals consider before they act. To be sure, there have been significant discussions on the decline of public intellectuals and the role of academics' salaried jobs in their increasing powerlessness and self-censorship (Jacoby [1987] 2000; Mills 1945). But the state, per se, stayed implicit. It is only in applications of Bourdieu's field theory on cultural fields under authoritarian states (Eyal 2000; Sapiro 2014) that the statist threat got more visibility. In such cases, the autonomy of the cultural field and the importance of cultural capital are jeopardized by the statist intervention, not the economic one. Here, the punishment for intellectuals' dissidence moves from potential economic threats (e.g., losing jobs) to imminent existential threats (e.g., being killed).

My paper contributes to this debate by theorizing different types of this *statist threat* to the autonomy of intellectuals. I propose that statist threats can be better understood through two dimensions: the threat's *imminence* and *type* (see Figure 1). The threat's imminence is about the extent of oppressive measures the state takes against dissident intellectuals, varying from implicit discrimination to detention, torture, and assassination. But statist threats are not always *security threats*: threats to the safety of one's body, family, and money, for example. Another crucial yet overlooked type of statist threats to intellectuals is *legitimacy threats*: threats to one's moral

authority as an intellectual. In other words, the state sometimes surveils intellectuals' private lives, searching for moral contradictions to blackmail them into complying with its policies, or even fabricates such moral contradictions to damage their reputation. Put in Bourdieusian terms, the *threat imminence* is directly related to the field autonomy/heteronomy: the extent the statist capital determines the power dynamics in a cultural field. The *threat type* is about the capital targeted: security threats target one's heteronomous/material capital (economic, social, statist, physical, etc.), while legitimacy threats target one's autonomous/cultural capital, without which an intellectual ceases to be an intellectual.

		Threat Imminence				
		Distant ←				→ Existential
Threat Type	Security	Microaggression	discrimination	arrest	torture	execution
	Legitimacy	Badly fabricated scandals		blackmailing	exposing real scandals	

Figure 1. Examples of statist threats to intellectuals' autonomy based on their imminence and type.

This theorization is empirically grounded in a five-year in-depth study of the politics of Muslim religious scholars (*ulama*) during the Arab Spring, where I use process tracing and comparative methods to qualitatively analyze chronologically ordered, systematically collected primary sources (news reports, official statements, memoirs, and interviews). After outlaying the literature, theoretical contribution, and methods, the paper presents two empirical sections to discuss the two types of statist threats. The first explores legitimacy threats through the case of Ali Gomaa, a cleric with international fame and Egypt's 2003-2013 second-highest official religious authority (grand mufti). Gomaa, famous for his "moderate Islam," took an extremely pro-state stance to the extent of legitimizing the military's murdering of a thousand protestors in the bloodiest massacres of Egypt's modern history (HRW 2014). This puzzling stance sparked a body of literature (Al-Azami 2021; Fadel 2016; Moosa 2015; Muzakkir 2019; Osman 2015; Warren 2017) that adopted idealist explanations, only disagreeing on what ideal made Gomaa take such a stance. Showing the weakness of these accounts' empirical base, I propose that Gomaa's politics is best understood as a consistent effort to please the state that, I find, threatens his legitimacy, partly with documents on his private life. To show that such an explanation is not far-fetched, I discuss the Egyptian

state's long history of using intellectuals' private moral contradictions to blackmail them. I, then, refer to other similar cases in liberal democracies.

The second empirical section addresses the more familiar statist security threats. Here, I show that even intellectuals with ethical commitments are still not free-floating, unattached from any calculations. On the contrary, the state features greatly in their political deliberation and partly explains their contradictory politics. This becomes clear in the contradictory politics of Ahmad al-Tayyib, the shaykh of al-Azhar and Egypt's highest official religious authority, and the self-identifying revolutionary International Union of Muslim Scholars. I show how calculations regarding security threats impact these intellectuals' Arab Spring politics. Security threats are further demonstrated by examples from liberal democracies.

These findings necessitate "bringing the state back in" if we seek to understand intellectuals' politics. But the immanence of statist threats is not equal to all intellectuals, even if they reside in the same state. In the paper's final section, I propose two historically-specific conditions under which certain intellectuals become more concerned with statist threats than others: (1) identity securitization: a state's implicit or explicit designation of certain identities, regardless of one's beliefs or actions, as potentially dangerous (e.g., Blacks are dangerous in Jim Crow America; Jews are dangerous in Nazi Germany) and (2) opinion securitization: a state's implicit or explicit designation of certain intellectual traditions as dangerous, despite internal diversity and similarity to other "non-dangerous" traditions (e.g., "Salafi" Islam is radical, "Sufi" Islam is peaceful after 9/11). In the conclusion, I summarize my findings and contribution, calling sociologists of intellectuals to move beyond "ideal vs. interest" or "structure vs. culture" debates, as each intellectual will have different degrees of each. Rather than asserting hasty generalizations on the role of ideals or interests, each shall be determined empirically on a case-by-case basis.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The data collection and analysis for this paper is already completed. I postponed the paper writing because of other priorities, but the paper will be done toward the end of the Spring semester.

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