

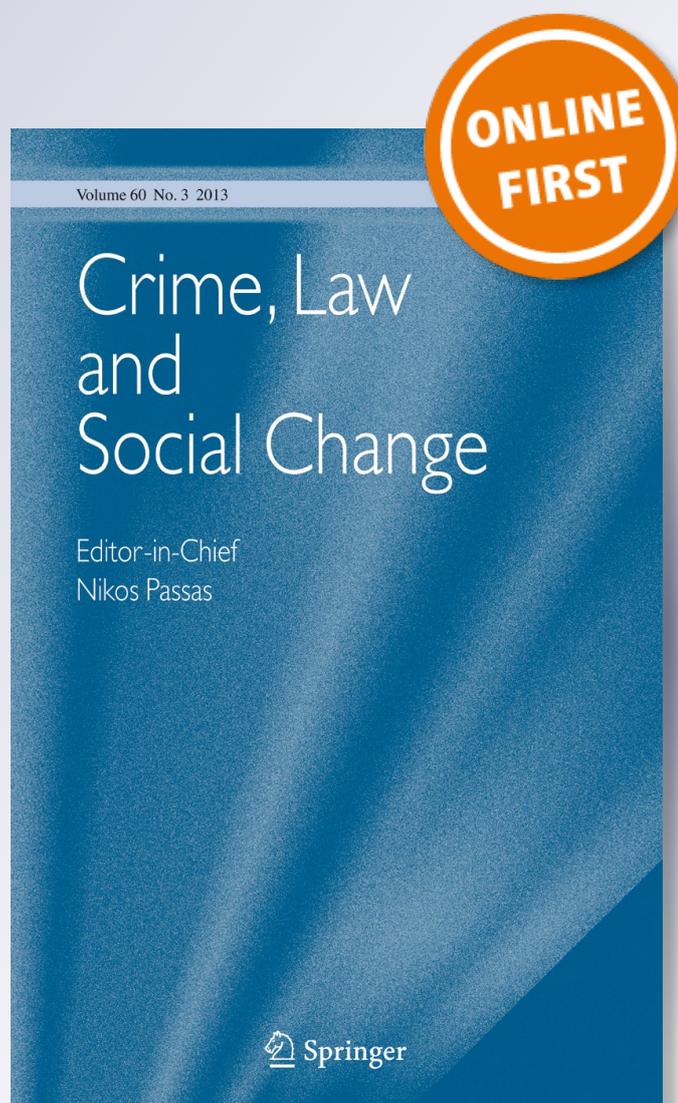
# *Radicalisation and de-radicalisation of social movements: The comeback of political Islam?*

**Andreas Armborst**

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# Radicalisation and de-radicalisation of social movements: The comeback of political Islam?

Andreas Armbrorst

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**Abstract** Forty years after Mathiesen wrote the ‘politics of abolition’ his work can enhance our understanding about radicalisation and de-radicalisation of social movements and terrorist groups. In ‘the politics of abolition’ Mathiesen explains the mechanism of two social factors that moderate the most contested goals and means of abolitionists groups. Due to these mechanisms, abolitionist movements often split into one rather moderate and one ‘radical’ current. The Islamist movement is an empirical example for the split the model predicts. Jihadism (e.g. al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups) represents the most radical form of contemporary Islamism, while nationalist Islamism (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood) and non-jihadi fundamentalism (mainstream Salafism) can be considered less radical because these currents either dismissed their abolitionist goals in favour of political integration, or reject terrorist violence as a means to enforce abolitionist goals. The communiqués and public statements of al-Qaeda give insight into the discourse within the Islamist movement. A sample of jihadi media is reviewed in this article as to compare al-Qaeda’s political positions with those of other Islamist movements and organisations.

## Introduction

This article applies Thomas Mathiesen’s model of “the unfinished” [1] to a contemporary abolitionist group: al-Qaeda (AQ), whose goal is the abolition of the “religion of democracy”<sup>1</sup> and secular governance in general. It is indeed intriguing to see how well the model applies not only to the academic research on al-Qaeda but also to the discourse of the jihadi movement itself. Academics, journalists and al-Qaeda alike distinguish between four currents of Islamism. The model helps to explain the analytical and phenomenological differences between these currents as well as some of the social forces

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<sup>1</sup>as a treatise of the famous ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdese is called. An English translation of the book can be downloaded at his website <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/democracy-a-relegoin.pdf>

A. Armbrorst (✉)  
University of Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany  
e-mail: andreas.armbrorst@soziologie.uni-freiburg.de

which have caused the division of the formerly monolithic Islamist movements into four currents.

This article argues that this split is due to the political and ideological strains explained in Mathiesen's model of abolitional politics. To elaborate on this argument the first part summarises Mathiesen's model, the second part describes how the four varieties of abolitional politics relate to the four varieties of contemporary Islamist movements, namely jihadi fundamentalists (al-Qaeda), non-jihadi fundamentalists (Salafism in general), Islamic nationalists (like the Turkish AKP) and political Islamists (like HAMAS and its parental organisation the Muslim brotherhood). The final part portrays AQ's very own position towards competing Islamist movements using a sample of video statements from three AQ ideologues. The material shows that the critique AQ holds against other Islamist movements precisely resembles Mathiesen's analysis of abolitional politics to a striking degree.

### The politics of abolition and the unfinished

In his book "the politics of abolition" criminologist Thomas Mathiesen explains a typical dilemma of political activists. His analysis does not concern everyday politics and incremental political changes but "... political work geared towards what I call 'abolition' of a repressive social system or part of that system" ([1]: 9).<sup>2</sup> The dilemma of abolitionists is due to the difficulty to carry out a program that is both, antagonistic to the system it seeks to abolish and, at the same time, politically competitive and assertive within this system. When abolitionists enter the political arena their rivals – those who see no need for change and thus want to preserve the status quo – will urge them to specify the abolitionist agenda, which then reveals its radically new thoughts together with its far reaching social consequences. Although it is ideologically important for the movement to stress its radical contradiction to the established system these radical ideas, at the same time, threaten the political competitiveness of the group because those who are satisfied with the status quo can easily dismiss abolitionist programs as being irrelevant and crazed. Therefore, the abolitionist has to compromise on his radical political program in order to gain access to the political arena where social change is negotiated, but then political bargaining will lead to concession making and strips the reform of its actual antagonistic feature. This dilemma is stronger the more the intended reform contradicts the political mainstream, namely when the goal is the abolition of a hitherto conventional (i.e. legal) social practices e.g. prison sentences, use of atomic energy, prohibition of abortion, or animal testing.

Mathiesen's particular point of view in "the politics of abolition" is that of a group of activists seeking change in penal policy, namely to abolish the prison sentence as the primary social response to crime and to reach a "permanent international ban on prison building" ([2]: 88). It goes without saying that the goals of AQ and the prison abolitionist movement are two different things, but what both movements have in common, what in fact all social movements have in common, is that they perceive some

<sup>2</sup> "Repressive" here does not necessarily mean political repression through the state authorities, but refers to the general tendency that institutions and organisations reflexively counter efforts from the outside that seek to change the organisational or institutional structure. This point becomes clearer in the course of the first chapter where he speaks, in the cybernetic sense, about authoritarian social systems: "any social system which is established is also authoritarian" ([1]: 23).