

EXCERPTED FROM

# What Is Political Islam?

Jocelyne Cesari

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ISBN: 978-1-62637-692-2 hc



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Suite 314  
Boulder, CO 80301 USA  
telephone 303.444.6684  
fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the  
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# 1

## Political Islam: The Nexus of State, Religion, and Nation

In the March 2015 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, Princeton scholar Bernard Haykel declared, “Muslims who call the Islamic State [ISIS] un-Islamic are typically . . . embarrassed and politically correct, with a cotton-candy view of their own religion ‘that neglects’ what their religion has historically and legally required.”<sup>1</sup> His words were a response—albeit simplified—to multiple declarations from clerics around the world who had condemned the caliphate as un-Islamic.<sup>2</sup> Haykel’s article drew scholars of Islam and politics into the public debate in an unprecedented way. Some agreed that ISIS is indeed Islamic, while others rejected this premise. Prominent political figures such as then secretary of state John Kerry added to the confusion by calling ISIS’s leaders apostates.<sup>3</sup>

This controversy encapsulates two contentious questions that run through most scholarship on Islam and politics. First, is political Islam in any way decipherable from the tenets of the Islamic tradition, or is it mostly about secular actors misusing religious references? Second, is political Islam an exclusively modern political phenomenon, or is it indebted to long-standing Islamic religious commitments?

Most political scientists either dodge these questions or downplay the Islamic dimension of political Islam. They see it as a

multifaceted social movement and focus on its modes of recruitment, mobilization, and strategy.<sup>4</sup> They also emphasize opportunity structures such as the broader political context. For example, the growing influence of Islamic movements in the last three decades is usually attributed to the political liberalization of the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Although this scholarship has provided a wealth of information on how these movements gain political ground, the question of why they are more influential, compared to other social movements or political groups across Muslim countries, remains unanswered.<sup>6</sup>

In this book, I take on this “why” question. Defining political Islam as a multifaceted religious nationalism, I begin with the premise that it has materialized due to the cultural and political specificities of the nation-states built on the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Essentially, I shift the focus of the debate from professional Islamic political parties or groups to the shaping of modern political cultures.

My argument differs from the scholarly perspective dominant among religious and Islamic studies, which tends to pitch modern politics and the state as incompatible with the Islamic tradition. For example, in *The Impossible State*, Wael Hallaq argues that the “modern state is a bad fit for Muslims” due to the incompatibility and contradictions between “Islamic governance” and the “Western” modern state. In Hallaq’s view, the European invention of a sovereign modern state goes against the “Islamic state,” which is organized “organically” around God’s sovereignty with sharia as the moral code. Islamic politics is therefore solely confined to “executive rulers of rotating dynasties . . . external to the embryonic tight embrace between jurists and community.” The organizing principle of life is the individual Muslim’s “care of the self” and adherence to the sharia.<sup>7</sup>

Historical reality, however, reveals a much more complicated dialectic between ideas and social contexts, rendering this incompatibility theory difficult to hold outside the realm of normative theories.<sup>8</sup> In fact, political Islam is better defined as a political culture that cannot be read exclusively in light of the premodern Islamic tradition because it is the result of the Islamic tradition’s dual processes of nationalization and reformation/westernization. In this respect, I contend that there is no opposition between the

state and Islam, since the nation-state is the major structural element that made political Islam possible in the first place.

There is a solid scholarship describing both the nation-building processes in postcolonial Muslim countries<sup>9</sup> and the reformation of Islamic thinking since the nineteenth century, especially the pioneering work of Bobby Sayyid and, most recently, Nathan Brown.<sup>10</sup> However, at best, these two threads of knowledge do not inform each other; at worst, they conflict. In the pages that follow, I combine both threads of knowledge with the hope of overcoming the modern/traditional and secular/religious dichotomies. In discussing the doctrinal changes in Islamic thinking and how they are intertwined with the building of national identities and state institutions, I intend not to attribute all religious changes to the rise of the nation-state but to demonstrate how modern political conditions have altered religious concepts of community, law, and tradition.

It has been proven abundantly that most theories or concepts used in political science have been shaped by the Western experience and then applied to political situations in Muslim countries (or elsewhere). For this reason, the religion/politics and secular/religious divides inherited from the European and North American political experiences influence scholarly understanding of what is religious or Islamic.<sup>11</sup> Hence, most scholars of politics dismiss the life experiences of Muslims in various contexts as “subjective” and therefore irrelevant to “objective” knowledge. By contrast, a second thread of scholarship, mostly in anthropology and sociology, has analyzed Western cultural influence as a tool of political imperialism and focused on the religious experiences of Muslims that stand at odds with the westernized political contexts in which they take place.<sup>12</sup>

This book is not another attempt to objectify political Islam by dismissing the religious variable. Nor is it a project of restituting the “incommensurability” of political Islam because of its authentically Islamic dimension. While the exportation of nationalism and state is the direct outcome of the unequal relationship of power between the West and the other parts of the world, it is only one part of the story. The other part is the role of local actors in adapting and recreating these concepts. While Western concepts were indeed imposed during colonialism, they were neither totally

endorsed nor entirely rejected by local elites. Furthermore, the Western state was not merely an oppressive or annihilating force in the preexisting reality. In fact, the promoters of “indigenous” tradition often readapted it willingly and sometimes in opposition to the colonial powers in order to compete with foreign political concepts. To assume that the Islamic religion and local cultures remained authentic is to understand political Islam only as a reaction of “indigenous” actors to preserve their “untouched” heritage.

Similarly, the local champions of the Western culture did not simply duplicate it. It is therefore misleading to analyze the modus operandi of Muslim “liberal” “secular” states within the parameters of the ways European or North American counterparts behave. For example, in *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad draws a sharp distinction between Arab nationalism and Islamism. He argues that Arab nationalism is committed to the doctrine of separating law and citizenship from religious affiliation and confining Islamism, which seeks to restore Islam to its central social position, to the private domain.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, as I show in this book, there was no such neat demarcation between “westernized” nationalists and “traditional” Islamist actors. Despite having opposing goals, these two groups were in continuous dialogue from the nineteenth century to the decolonization phase (at least). The effect of this cross-pollination on modern political understandings of religious terms such as *taqlid* (tradition), *ijtihad* (interpretation), and *ummah* (community) has been underestimated. Both groups, even if not in agreement, rely on these contemporary meanings.

Consider the renewed academic interest in Middle Eastern sectarianism in the wake of the Iraqi and Syrian crises. Some scholars such as Saba Mahmood and Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel see sectarianism as a reaction against the “imported” state or the Western influence on the region.<sup>14</sup> Others—such as Melani Cammett, Ben White, Max Weiss, or Toby Matthiesen—see it as triggered by the incomplete or failed adoption of liberal governance.<sup>15</sup> By addressing the legal and political conditions for sectarianists, these scholars take the role of the state seriously. Nonetheless, they neglect the changes brought by the state to preexisting religious communities and groups. As such, sectarian

divides are often seen as the remnants and/or exacerbation of the *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire, when in fact they are a different beast entirely.<sup>16</sup> The transition from Muslim empire to nation-state marked a decisive rupture, one that drastically changed the social and cultural conditions of the *millet* system.<sup>17</sup>

The presence of religious communities and Islamic concepts within nation-states is due not simply to their resilience and unchanged nature. They are, in fact, unprecedented hybrid institutions, concepts, and ideas. They can be considered “vernacular modernities,” not because they are “untouched” indigenous alternatives to external Western modernity but because they are syncretic responses by local actors faced with new challenges.

Therefore, it is important to take into consideration the way all actors have played a decisive role in adapting/adopting external concepts, granting them specific meanings by using indigenous terminology and in the process changing or adding new connotations to these indigenous concepts. Political Islam is not the outcome of an impossible clash between Western modernity and authentic noncolonized Islam, as it is often presented by Islamist actors and (some) scholars alike. Rather, it results from grafting the concepts of religion, nationalism, and secularism in Muslim territories. It must be understood in terms of its own cultural premises and not as a mediation of forces from elsewhere, whether it is a transfer of economic grievances, a medium for old class politics, or a vehicle for new political identities.

Hence, it is necessary to go beyond groups’ interests and pay more attention to institutional projects. In this respect, political Islam derives as much from the institutional space it inhabits as from the social position of individuals who become Islamist. My investigation starts with the introduction of the concepts of nation and state, meaning the institutional architecture of social relations shared by all political actors, secular and Islamic. Consequently, the key to my argument is the assertion that a proper analysis of religious and political practice depends on a robust conceptualization of the modern nation-state.

State-centered approaches to religious mobilizations are undoubtedly significant.<sup>18</sup> They usually emphasize the tensions created by the self-governing power of religious groups, particularly

religious institutions, in the face of state power. When it comes to Muslim countries, state actions are usually considered a key factor in the politicization of religion.<sup>19</sup> More generally, state-centered scholarship examines control of religious activities by the state, as well as the state's appropriation of religious symbols and functions.<sup>20</sup> Some sociologists, such as Colin Beck, have argued that state-building activities, specifically a regime's incorporation of religious institutions and symbolism, are the primary explanation for the variation in Islamic mobilization across the Middle East.<sup>21</sup>

However, while the development of state policy is crucial, cultural processes cannot be reduced to state actions.<sup>22</sup> As such, I prefer the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, which emphasizes the connection between techniques of the self (governing the self) and techniques of domination (governing others).<sup>23</sup> Governmentality refers to different procedures for regulating human behaviors; it is not limited to state actions or policies. In fact, state actions are not decipherable outside the ingrained acceptance by citizens of these techniques, or what Norbert Elias calls *habitus*. Therefore, we cannot explain policies without analyzing the sets of acquired ideas, emotions, behavioral codes, and social etiquettes that people in a given territory associate with political power and community. Under these conditions, religion becomes a significant mode of power. Analyzing the politicization of religion in general, as well as Islam in particular, means paying attention to specific governmental apparatuses and relevant bodies of knowledge.

Religious traditions, organizations, discourses, and practices are a part of governmentality even when they have relative autonomy from the state. Notably, Islam was already an institutional space before the nation-state. Through a network of sacred sites and ritual spaces, community centers, associations, schools, hospitals, courts, and charities, Islam offered a social space from which to mobilize, as well as a concrete cosmos within which to imagine and prefigure an alternative vision of the social. At the same time, Islam remained independent from the political institutions of the caliphate. With the building of the nation-state, Islamic institutions became identified with the nation. Meanwhile, state rulers simultaneously restructured them to fit the



recomposition of the Islamic religion around the notions of private belief and individuality.

In sum, I argue that political Islam first emerged as a modern technique of governmentality with the adoption of the nation-state and the westernization/secularization of Islamic tradition. From this perspective, nationalism—that is, the loyalties organized through the state in the name of the political community—creates the nation, rather than the reverse.<sup>24</sup> Nationalism is a program for the co-constitution of the state and the territorially bounded population whose name it speaks.<sup>25</sup> In Roger Friedland’s words, “Nationalism is not simply an ideology: it is also a set of discursive practices by which the territorial identity of a state and the cultural identity of the people whose collective representation it claims are constituted in a singular fact.”<sup>26</sup> While nationalism offers a form of representation, it does not determine the content of the representation or the identity of the represented collective subject, whether they are civic, liberal, ethnic, and/or religious.

One may contend that my linking of political Islam with religious nationalism is hardly new. Scholars who have made this argument before have emphasized that Islamism shares with Arab nationalism a strong anti-Western sentiment that has become more influential after the decline of secular nationalism.<sup>27</sup> However, as I demonstrate in this book, political Islam is not simply a religious version of the national ideology, or rather, merely an ideology. More accurately, political Islam is the cultural bedrock on which both nationalist and Islamist ideologies are grounded.

In this respect, political Islam takes four main forms—coercive, hegemonic, civil, and transnational or global—which are at play today in both national and international contexts. To elaborate, first, political Islam is a technique of coercion and discipline exacted by the state on a given territory and population, creating cultural identities in which national and Islamic belongings become intertwined. In Chapter 2, I provide a conceptual history of key terms such as *ummah* (community) and *taqlid* (tradition), which are critical to the shaping of this modern political culture by “secular” and religious actors alike.

Chapter 3 presents the dominant form of religious nationalism, which I have called hegemonic in my previous research.<sup>28</sup>

Building on this earlier work, I focus here on Egypt and Turkey, because they usually serve as exemplary cases of secular nationalism. In both Egypt and Turkey, religious hegemony occurred because Islamic institutions and religious authorities were absorbed into the state system, which made Islam central to national identity but also up for ideological competition. Based on the findings of my previous research, in this chapter I present the correlation between religious hegemony and low levels of democracy across countries. Hegemonic Islam has a direct influence on civil liberties and human rights ranging from freedom of speech to sexual liberties. I also discuss the inclusion-moderation paradigm and argue that the insertion of Islamic parties into political systems is not a sufficient condition for moderation. As attested by the evolution of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey since 2007, when the Islamic party reflects the majoritarian national culture and is a part of hegemonic Islam, there is less probability that it will moderate ideologically.

In Chapter 4, I discuss Indonesia and Senegal as two of the few Muslim countries not defined by hegemonic Islam (i.e., the state has not absorbed religious institutions, and religious diversity is acknowledged). In these two countries, can Islam be considered as a form of religious nationalism close to a civil religion? Robert Bellah's decisive work has described civil religion as the nonsectarian religious beliefs shared by all citizens regarding the symbols and history of their nation. The cases of Indonesia and Senegal, however, are better explained by introducing Jean-Jacques Rousseau's original take on civil religion. Rousseau analyzes civil religion as a state-centered project aimed at securing the loyalties of citizens through rituals and symbols. Thus, in this chapter I look at civil Islam as a specific combination of social and state-centered approaches to religion and show how the social dimension of civil Islam in Senegal has superseded the state-centered project, while the opposite has taken place in Indonesia.

Chapter 5 addresses radical transnational Islamic movements as the most recent expressions of political Islam. Instead of interpreting these movements as the negation of the religious nationalism described in Chapters 3 and 4, I show that they operate under the political meanings infused into religious concepts at the time

of nation-building. In other words, global political Islam, especially in its radical forms, is the global dissemination and alteration of the national political cultures that see the *ummah* as a transnational imagined community. In this respect, the globalization of political Islam illustrates a broader trend, the globalization of nationalism, that underlies most international conflicts today.

Throughout the book, I present hegemonic, civil, and global political Islam as evolving categories that continuously interact and compete with each other, both nationally and internationally.

## Notes

1. Wood, Graeme. "What ISIS Really Wants." *Atlantic*. March 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980>.

2. One of the rare religious authorities to do so was Shaikh Ibrahim Saleh al-Hussaini, who called on other Muslim leaders to declare ISIS "infidels" at a conference hosted by al-Azhar University. The shaikh continued to say that "a Muslim who fights another Muslim is an infidel." See Ibrahim, Ayman S. "So ISIS Is Not Infidel—Are Christians?" *First Things*. December 16, 2014. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/12/so-isis-is-not-infidelare-christians>.

3. Kaplan, Michael. "ISIS Not Islamic? John Kerry Calls Terror Group 'Apostates.'" *International Business Times*. February 3, 2016. <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-not-islamic-john-kerry-calls-terror-group-apostates-2291791>.

4. See Clark, Janine A. *Islam, Charity, and Activism: Middle-Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004; Schwedler, Jillian. *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Snow, David A., and Scott C. Byrd. "Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements." *Mobilization* 12, no. 2 (2007): 119–136.

5. Sutton, Phillip, and Stephen Vertigans. "Islamic 'New Social Movements'? Radical Islam, al-Qa'ida and Social Movement Theory." *Mobilization* 11, no. 1 (2006): 101–115.

6. Hafez, Mohammed M. *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003.

7. Hallaq, Wael. *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 272.

8. For a critique of the incompatibility theory from a legal perspective, see Emon, Anver M. "Codification and Islamic Law: The Ideology Behind a Tragic Narrative." *Middle East Law and Governance* 8 (2016): 275–309.

9. See Nasr, Vali Reza. *Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the Making of State Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; El-Affendi, Abdelwahab. *Who Needs an Islamic State?* London: Grey Seal, 1991.

10. For example, Esposito, John, and John Voll. *Makers of Contemporary Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; for detailed bibliographical

references related to Islamic reformism, see part one. See also Sayyid, Bobby. *Islamism as Philosophy: Decolonial Horizons*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017; Brown, Nathan. *Arguing Islam After the Revival of Arab Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

11. See Pasha, Mustapha Kamal. "Nihilism and the Otherness of Islam." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 42, no. 1 (2013): 177–197; Mirsepassi, Ali, and Tadd Fernee. *Islam, Democracy and Cosmopolitanism: At Home and in the World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

12. See Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003; Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

13. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.

14. See Mahmood, Saba. *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016; Hashemi, Nader, and Danny Postel. *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

15. See Cammett, Melani Claire. *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014; White, Ben. *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012; Weiss, Max. *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi'ism and the Making of Modern Lebanon*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010; Matthiesen, Toby. *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

16. White, *The Emergence of Minorities*, 59.

17. The term *millet* refers to non-Muslim communities living in an Islamic state. During the Ottoman Empire, the word defined the autonomous religious communities led by separate leaders who connected their groups to the central government. See "Millet." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. July 20, 1998. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/millet-religious-group>.

18. See Swanson, Guy. *Religion and Regime: A Sociological Account of the Reformation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967; Rokkan, Stein. "Dimensions of State Formation and Nation-Building: A Possible Paradigm for Research on Variations Within Europe." In *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, ed. Charles Tilly, 562–600. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975.

19. Wiktorowicz, Quintan. "Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan." *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 1 (2000): 43–61.

20. See Clark, *Islam, Charity, and Activism*; Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel*; Moaddel, Mansoor. *Jordanian Exceptionalism: A Comparative Analysis of State-Religion Relationships in Egypt, Iran, Jordan, and Syria*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002; Nasr, *Islamic Leviathan*; Starrett, Gregory. *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

21. Beck, Colin J. "State Building as a Source of Islamic Political Organization." *Sociological Forum* 24, no. 2 (June 2009): 337–356.

22. See, for example, the work of Nathan Brown on the Egyptian public space: Brown, *Arguing Islam*.

23. Foucault, Michel. *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*. Edited by Arnold I. Davidson. Translated by

Graham Burchell. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

24. Calhoun, Craig. *Nationalism*. Concepts Social Thought. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

25. Friedland, Roger. "Money, Sex, and God: The Erotic Logic of Religious Nationalism." *Sociological Theory* 20, no. 3 (2002): 381–425.

26. *Ibid.*, 386.

27. Luciani, Giacomo. *The Arab State*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

28. Cesari, Jocelyne. *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.