
The Many Faces of Political Islam

The Many Faces

— OF —

Political Islam

Religion and Politics
in the Muslim World

MOHAMMED AYOOB

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— Ann Arbor —

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*For Salma—
intellectual companion, best friend*

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Preface

This book is a work of synthesis that aspires to fill a major gap in the literature on political Islam—namely, the need for an introductory text that is readily intelligible to the nonspecialist reader while simultaneously highlighting the complexity of the subject and avoiding oversimplification. The book is written both for students and for general readers interested in the subject. The idea of the book emerged from my own experience over the past several years of teaching an upper-division undergraduate course on political Islam to students majoring in political science, international relations, history, and sociology. It became apparent to me that an overarching text written within a comparative framework was necessary to introduce undergraduates to the subject before they proceeded to study more detailed material specific to particular themes, regions, or countries.

There is no dearth of high-quality specialist literature on various aspects of the interaction of religion and politics in Islam. However, much of it is very dense, highly specialized, country specific, and not easily ingested by students without adequate background in the study of Islam and/or of the Muslim world. Above all, there is no single text that analyzes comparatively the various forms of political activity undertaken in the name of Islam and presents them in a way that would make the multifaceted phenomenon intelligible to students and general readers alike. The book that I have written will, I believe, be able to perform this task. It aims not only at providing students and lay readers a comprehensive and comprehensible introduction to the subject of political Islam but also at directing them to further readings to which they can turn for additional and detailed information on individual themes and case studies. I believe that the greatest value of the book lies in its capacity to perform this dual function.

I reckon that the very same qualities of this book that are likely to appeal to students will attract the general reader genuinely interested in understanding the relationship between religion and politics in the Muslim world. The book will therefore help to dispel many of the misconceptions and stereotypes about political Islam—and, indeed, about Islam itself—among the general public, while still encouraging its readers to maintain a critical and analytical approach toward the subject. This, I believe, is an essential task given the distortions, whether deliberate or unwitting, apparent in a great deal of the writing on the political manifestations of Islam.

“Political Islam” has become a growth industry in the West in general and the United States in particular following 9/11. This has led to the emergence of a large number of half-baked “experts”—especially among the media and, with a few honorable exceptions, in the policy think tanks—who speak and write about the subject with a degree of confidence and authority that is usually related inversely to the amount of knowledge they possess about it. The situation in academia is, thankfully, much better. However, much of the scholarly literature on the subject is written by academics for each other, is highly specialized, and is not widely read either by the lay public or by students other than those who aspire to become specialists themselves.

This book attempts to bridge the gaps both between gown and town and between academic specialists and the large number of students in the social sciences and humanities interested in gaining an understanding of political Islam but not intending to become specialists in the subject. The large majority of undergraduates in political science, international relations, history, and related disciplines in the English-speaking and English-reading countries do not have adequate background of Islam and political Islam before taking a course on the subject. This book hopes to introduce these students and the general reader to the phenomenon of political Islam lucidly, without jargon, and without taking recourse—as far as possible—to non-English terms. At the same time, this book aims at alerting its readers to the complexities of the subject and its contextually rooted character. It does so by demonstrating, above all, that there are many faces of political Islam and that much of the political activity undertaken in the name of Islam is determined by discrete national contexts. The book therefore attempts to demolish the monolithic image of political Islam that has become standard fare in the West in much popular writing (the genre most read and most influential) regarding this subject.

Some of the major themes of the book were presented in seminars and/or lectures at a number of institutions, including the Center for Strategic and

International Studies (CSIS) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, both in Washington, D.C.; the Council on Foreign Relations and the International Peace Academy in New York; the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, University College, the London School of Economics, and the Institute of Ismaili Studies, all in London; the Department of International Relations at Bilkent University, Ankara; the Foundation for Sciences and Arts (Bilim ve Sanat Vakfı) in Istanbul; the American University of Kuwait; the School of International Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; the Centre for Security Analysis in Chennai; and the Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The feedback I received to many of these presentations helped me to refine my arguments and sharpen my conclusions.

I am very grateful to Mustapha Tlili, founder and director of *Dialogues: Islamic World—U.S.—The West*, a program currently based at New York University and earlier at the New School University in New York, for inviting me to coauthor the background paper “Who Speaks for Islam?” for the project “Who Speaks for Islam? Who Speaks for the West?” and present it at a workshop hosted by Prince Hassan bin Talal in Amman. Chapter 2 of this book, “Islam’s Multiple Voices,” was inspired by the work I did on the background paper for the project, and Mustapha deserves much of the credit for focusing my attention on this very important topic. I am also grateful to Shireen Hunter, formerly director of the Islam Program of the CSIS and currently director of the Carnegie Project on Reformist Islam at the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, for inviting me to participate in a CSIS project called “Barriers to Modernization and Democratization in the Muslim World.” The paper that I presented on the interplay of internal and external factors obstructing the democratization of Muslim countries in the Middle East as part of that project helped to clarify much of my thinking on the prospects for democratization in the Muslim world. Several of the ideas first presented in that paper are reflected in parts of this book in more mature fashion.

This book would not have been completed but for a generous Capacity Building Grant from the MSU Foundation through the Office of the Provost of Michigan State University. The grant helped me get release time from teaching and funded research travel undertaken in connection with this project. Dean Sherman Garnett and Associate Dean Norman Graham of James Madison College, the school of public affairs at Michigan State University, supported my endeavors and facilitated the completion of the book in multiple ways, for

which I owe them a huge debt of gratitude. Hasan Kosebalaban, Gamze Cavdar, and Matthew Zierler, three of the brightest and most promising young scholars of international relations I have come across in recent years, helped me in several ways in bringing the project to fruition, for which I am deeply grateful. In particular, Hasan spent long hours on the final draft of the manuscript, making substantive comments, checking and formatting endnotes, and making sure that the manuscript conformed to the publishers' specifications. I cannot thank him enough for his assistance, always rendered with a smile and a request for more "work." Jim Reische, my editor at the University of Michigan Press, was an invaluable source of sage advice that helped to keep me on the "straight and narrow" and prevented me from going off on too many tangents.

This book has profited immensely from the fact that, thanks to the vision of current president and former provost Lou Anna Kimsey Simon, Michigan State University has in the past three years assembled a critical mass of faculty interested in diverse aspects and regions of the Muslim world. The presence on campus of my Muslim studies colleagues—young, energetic, highly intelligent, and exceptionally committed to the study of the Muslim world—provided me with an environment very conducive to thinking about and discussing various facets of political Islam. Their input, while often indirect, has been very valuable to my work. MSU has further demonstrated its commitment to the study of the Muslim world by simultaneously establishing a Muslim Studies Program and a Muslim Studies Undergraduate Specialization. Both these ventures have dramatically helped increase MSU students' and faculty's exposure to and understanding of the Muslim world. I am particularly proud of having been chosen to lead these efforts at Michigan State University at this critical juncture.

My wife, Salma, was, as usual, a source of great strength during the period I was working on this book. She has had a long-standing interest in the interaction between religion and politics in countries of the Middle East and South Asia. Her incisive comments about various aspects of this complex subject, based on her readings and her observations as we traveled together several times in the Middle East during the past few years, often helped me sort out in my mind issues that would otherwise have remained unresolved. The book is dedicated to her in gratitude for her support and in recognition of the fact that she is the only person whose ideas I have felt free over the years to appropriate without acknowledgment or attribution.

Abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party
AM	al-Muhajiroun
FIS	Islamic Salvation Front
HT	Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islamiyya
JI	Jamaat-i-Islami
JUI	Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MMA	Muttaheda Majlis-i-Amal
NU	Nahdlatul Ulama
PA	Palestinian Authority
TJ	Tablighi Jamaat

CHAPTER 1

Defining Concepts, Demolishing Myths

Over the last decade and a half, but especially since 9/11, three major assumptions have inspired much of the popular discussion about political Islam. These are, first, that the intermingling of religion and politics is unique to Islam; second, that political Islam, like Islam itself, is monolithic; and third, that political Islam is inherently violent. This book will argue that none of these assertions captures the reality of the multifaceted phenomenon fashionably called “political Islam.” It will do so by demonstrating that the Islamic religious tradition is no different from many others in terms of wrestling with the issue of religion in politics and politics in religion. It will also do so by exploring the multiple voices that claim to speak for Islam and the discrete national contexts that give different manifestations of political Islam their distinctive local color. It will do so further by arguing both that mainstream Islamist parties—which form the overwhelming majority of Islamist political formations in terms of numbers, membership, and support bases—by and large abjure violence and that factions that engage in violent activity often do so in response to state repression or foreign occupation. It will also argue that transnational extremist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah, are fringe phenomena that are marginal to the primary political struggles going on within predominantly Muslim societies. Finally, it will demonstrate that political Islam does not operate in a vacuum and that variables external to Islamism, principally the nature of domestic regimes and the substance of major powers’ foreign policies, have substantial impact on the emergence, popularity, and durability of Islamist movements and parties.

What Is Political Islam?

Before beginning a discussion of issues related to political Islam, one must provide an adequate definition of the terms *political Islam* or *Islamism*—that is, Islam as political ideology rather than religion or theology. At the most general level, adherents of political Islam believe that “Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world and implemented in some fashion.”¹ While correct as a broad, sweeping generalization, this is too nebulous a formulation for it to act as an analytical guide capable of explaining political activity undertaken in the name of Islam. Greg Barton points out: “Islamism covers a broad spectrum of convictions. At one extreme are those who would merely like to see Islam accorded proper recognition in national life in terms of national symbols. At the other extreme are those who want to see the radical transformation of society and politics, by whatever means, into an absolute theocracy.”²

A more precise and analytically more useful definition of Islamism describes it as “a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives.” According to this definition, Islamism “provides political responses to today’s societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition.”³ While Islamists do not necessarily agree on the strategies or tactics needed to re-create a future based on their conceptions of the golden age of early Islam, they share the yearning to “go back to the future” by reimagining the past based on their readings of the fundamental scriptural texts.

The reappropriation of the past, the “invention of tradition”⁴ in terms of a romanticized notion of a largely mythical golden age, lies at the heart of this instrumentalization of Islam. The invention of tradition provides many Islamists the theoretical tools for dehistoricizing Islam and separating it from the various contexts—in terms of time and space—in which Islam has flourished over the past fourteen hundred years. In theory, this decontextualizing of Islam allows Islamists to ignore the social, economic, and political milieus within which Muslim societies operate. It therefore provides Islamists a powerful ideological tool that they can wield in order to “purge” Muslim societies of “impurities” and “accretions,” natural accompaniments of the historical process, which they see as the reason for Muslim decline. However, context has

a way of taking its own revenge on abstract theory when attempts are made to put such theory into practice. This is exactly what has happened to Islamism, a topic I will return to later in this book.

The Islamic Conception of the Golden Age

Patricia Crone characterizes the Islamic notion of the golden age, central to Islamist thinking, as a “primitivist utopia, both in the sense that it presented the earliest times as the best and in the sense that it deemed a simple society to be the most virtuous.”⁵ This notion of a golden age, limited to the time of the Prophet and the first four “righteously guided” caliphs, is not a novel twentieth-century idea.⁶ It has existed, with certain variations, from the earliest centuries of Islam. However, what is new is the way it is used by modern Islamists. These Islamists posit that it is possible to re-create that golden age in the here and now and that the political energies of Muslims should be devoted toward achieving this goal by reshaping and reconstructing Muslim polities in the image of Islam’s first polity, the city-state of Medina.

In contrast, the classical Muslim notion of the golden age hinged on the assumption that it is unattainable in historical time. This implicitly contextualized it in seventh-century Medina and thus ruled out its re-creation in the present or future. In fact, this continues to be true of the majority traditionalist view of the golden age today. Carl Brown has pointed out: “[M]ainstream Muslim political thought throughout the ages has protected inviolate the idealized early community by resisting the temptation to relate too precisely the pristine model to stubborn reality. The model of the early community remains thus an unsullied norm, but in the terminology of modern political science the maxims derived from the idealized model are not readily operationalized.”⁷ This idealization but presumed inoperability of the golden age model helped the vast majority of Muslims to reconcile themselves to the reality of imperfect political arrangements, including unjust orders and tyrannical rulers.

Only some small groups no longer politically relevant, such as the Kharijites and the early Ismailis, advocated implementing the golden age model in historical time. But they were either suppressed or unable to capture the imagination of the large majority of Muslims, who remained rooted in reality and suspicious of millenarian movements.⁸ The largest minority sect, the Imami, or Twelver Shiites, came to terms with what they considered to be unjust rule through the mechanism of the occultation of the twelfth imam, the Mahdi,

whose return is considered essential by them to usher in legitimate rule among Muslims and in the world.⁹ Had it been otherwise—that is, had the golden age been generally perceived by a substantial segment of Muslims as a model to emulate in historical time—it would have led to incessant turmoil threatening Muslim societies with recurrent anarchy. The notions of justice and equality, enshrined in the golden age model, would have attained priority over those of order and hierarchy, thus threatening the fragile stability, first, of the Umayyad and Abbasid empires and, subsequently, of the multiple Muslim polities that succeeded them. Moreover, the model of the city-state of Medina would have never worked in the context of huge agricultural and hydraulic empires that emerged out of early Muslim conquests. These needed dynastic rule to provide continuity and stability, thus rendering the quest for the ideal an exercise in futility.¹⁰

Justifying the Status Quo in Classical Islam

Political quietism, which, despite periodic turbulence, became the norm among Muslim masses living under Muslim rulers for a thousand years, was the product in part of the indefinite postponement into the far future of any attempt at replicating the imagined model of perfect justice and equality that were presumed to reign supreme during the time of the Prophet and his immediate successors. The Shiites, as pointed out earlier, achieved this by sending their twelfth imam into occultation and postponing the creation of a just order until his return. The majority Sunnis achieved the same result partly by accepting the notion of the return of their own *mahdi* toward the end of time. In greater part, however, political quietism was justified by the Sunni *ulama*, the religious scholars, with the help of two interrelated arguments.

First, they argued that the alternative to tyranny would be anarchy that could lead to the dissolution of the *umma*, the community of believers, thus throwing out the baby with the bathwater. This argument was buttressed by selectively quoting from the Quran, especially the verse “O ye who believe! Obey Allah and obey the messenger and those of you who are in authority.”¹¹ It was reinforced by reference to the maxim, often attributed to the Prophet, that “sixty years of tyranny is better than one day’s anarchy.” Carl Brown points out: “Rather than a divine right of rule, Islam came to recognize a divinely sanctioned need for rule . . . The Islamic tradition asserted, in effect, that mankind’s need for government was so overwhelming as to make the quality of that government decidedly secondary.”¹² It would not be wrong to

assert that Thomas Hobbes must have been familiar with this classical Islamic argument. His social contract theory mirrors it quite faithfully.

The second argument took as its starting point the assumption that a Muslim ruler, however corrupt and unjust, was essential to preserve and defend the land of Islam against infidels and to ensure that Muslims in the realm could practice their religion freely. The existence of less-than-perfect political orders was also justified with reference to the belief that Muslims could not perform their religious obligations unless they had an imam or caliph presiding over the community, in whose name the Friday sermons could be read and who could be deemed the leader of the caravan (the metaphor used by Patricia Crone for the Muslim *umma*),¹³ leading the community to salvation. Again, the character of the imam/caliph was deemed secondary, and Muslim theologians went to great extents to legitimize rule by caliphs who were visibly unjust, cruel, and corrupt.

Sunni theologians of Islam's classical period turned the defense of the status quo into a fine art. When the Abbasid caliph became a mere handmaiden of Turkic warrior-rulers from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, leading *ulama* devised ways to bestow legitimacy on him even though he no longer exercised power in any real sense of the term. For example, in a novel interpretation of the caliph's role, the famous theologian Al-Ghazali of the eleventh and twelfth centuries advocated a division of labor between the sultan and the caliph, with the former exercising power on the latter's behalf while the latter continued to symbolize the religious unity of the *umma*. He went to the extent of justifying usurpation of power by Turkic dynasts, who constantly overthrew and replaced each other in different parts of the nominal caliph's domain, by ex post facto investiture by the caliph of their right to rule over territories they had acquired by force.¹⁴ In fact, this practice became common in the later Abbasid period in a desperate attempt by the caliph and his advisors to make theory conform to reality. Writing two hundred years later, the Hanbali theologian Ibn Taymiyya, commonly considered to be the forebear of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his puritanical interpretation of Islam, argued: "The essence of government . . . was the power of coercion, which was necessary if men were to live in society and their solidarity was not to be destroyed by natural human egoism. Since it was a natural necessity, it arose by a natural process of seizure, legitimized by contract of association. The ruler as such could demand obedience from his subjects, for even an unjust ruler was better than strife and the dissolution of society; 'give what is due *from* you and ask God for what is due *to* you.'"¹⁵

Despite the contemporary Islamists' admiration for Ibn Taymiyya, they have in theory radically reversed the traditional orientation of Islamic theological interpretation. Their position that the golden age of pure and pristine Islam can be re-created in the contemporary era has had the opposite effect of that of political quietism and stable political orders so dear, for good reasons, to the hearts of most Islamic scholars of the classical period. The Islamists' current rhetoric mobilizing popular opinion in support of their vision has capitalized on the increasingly democratic and participatory sensibilities of the modern age. It has thus helped to mobilize large segments of the population in many Muslim countries that may otherwise have remained politically apathetic. This has certainly had destabilizing effects; but, at the same time, it has contributed in substantial measure to democratizing the political culture of several Muslim countries because of the high value it places on political activism and participation. I will return to this theme when I discuss the impact of political Islam on important Muslim countries later in this book. However, it is clear that leading theologians of the classical period of Islam would not have approved the use of political Islam for objectives against the status quo.

Colonialism and the Emergence of Islamism

As we know it today, Islamism, or political activity and popular mobilization in the name of Islam, emerged in response to a set of factors that were introduced into the Muslim world as a result of the latter's encounter with the West from the eighteenth century onward, when the West became increasingly powerful and the lands of Islam became progressively weak. This, in Muslim perceptions, was a reversal of the normal and presumably divinely ordained order of things, at least as it had persisted for a thousand years before the beginning of European ascendancy. Thus it needed both explanation and remedy. One of the most powerful explanations of Muslim degeneration was provided by those who came to be known as Salafis (meaning emulators of the *salaf al-salih*, the "righteous ancestors"). They argued that the primary reason for Muslim decline lay in the fact that Muslims—rulers and subjects alike—had deviated from the model set out for them by their righteous ancestors. The Salafis advocated that the remedy for Muslim degeneration lay in their return to the original path of Islam and in the re-creation of the model that had prevailed in the presumed golden age of the Prophet and the first four caliphs.

To be fair to the original proponents of the idea of returning to the pristine Islam of the earliest centuries, leading figures among them, such as the nine-

teenth-century theologian and jurist Muhammad Abduh of Egypt, advocated such a course because they believed the original teachings of Islam to be in total accord with the scientific positivism and rationality that underpinned modernity. Eminent historian Albert Hourani explains things from Abduh's point of view: "[T]he mark of the ideal Muslim society is not law only, it is also reason. The true Muslim is he who uses his reason in affairs of the world and of religion; the only real infidel (*kafir*) is he who closes his eyes to the light of truth and refuses to examine rational proofs."¹⁶ Abduh's aim and that of his peers who thought on similar lines was to rescue Muslim societies from backwardness and superstition, which they saw as consequences of un-Islamic accretions introduced in the later centuries of Islam.

However, this modernist interpretation of the golden age was overshadowed by those among the revivalists, such as Abduh's Syrian disciple Rashid Rida, who interpreted the return to the golden age in literal terms and advocated the creation of an authentic Islamic polity based on their imagined model of the Islamic society at the time of the Prophet and his immediate successors in seventh-century Arabia. Paradoxically, Abduh himself was responsible for opening the way for such a revivalist interpretation. Malcolm Kerr has argued convincingly: "[B]y asserting that Muslims must look back to their earliest history to discover the principles of their faith, he encouraged others to reexamine traditional institutions of government and law as they had presumably existed in the great days of the Rashidun [the righteously guided] and to explain in what respects they had become corrupted. 'Abduh's stimulus thus made the almost forgotten classical theory of the Caliphate and the resurrection of the Shari'a as a comprehensive legal system live options for such men as Rashid Rida."¹⁷

Abduh's ideas, therefore, not only generated much of the modernist thinking in the Arab world but also inspired what came to be known as the Salafi movements in the early decades of the twentieth century. H. A. R. Gibb has pointed out: "In the matter of doctrine he [Abduh] had made a stand against uncritical acceptance of authority, or *taqlid* [imitation] . . . [But] his theological followers, led by a Syrian disciple, Shaikh Rashid Rida, continued the process with a characteristic glide toward extremism. By carrying the rejection of *taqlid* back beyond the founders of the schools [of jurisprudence] to the primitive community of the *salaf*, the 'great ancestors,' and combining with this the quasi-rationalism of scholastic logic, but without Muhammad Abduh's ballast of catholicity, they naturally gravitated toward the exclusivism and rigidity of the Hanbali outlook."¹⁸ Scriptural fundamentalism and the rejection

of accumulated tradition emerged out of this rigid literalist and decontextualized version of Salafism that has spawned much of contemporary Islamist thinking. Thus Abduh's prescription about returning to pristine Islam to rediscover the rational roots of the Islamic faith turned out to be a double-edged sword. It inspired both modernist and rationalist discourse within Islam as well as a more literal call to return to Islam's golden age and re-create it in the modern world.

The replacement of Muslim rulers by European colonial powers also reopened the whole question of legitimate authority in the Muslim world. As long as Muslim potentates ruled over Muslim subjects, the fiction of religious legitimacy for such rule could be maintained even if the rulers did not measure up to the original yardstick set up by the Prophet and his immediate successors. Colonialism, by replacing Muslim rulers with infidel ones, changed the entire paradigm on which authority was based in the Muslim world. Fundamental religio-political questions, including whether Muslim countries under European rule were any longer *dar al-Islam*, "the abode of Islam," began to be raised. It was argued that if they were not, then it was the right of all Muslims, collectively and individually, to restore them to their Islamic status. If they were, then it was by definition illegal under Islamic law for them to be ruled by infidels, and it became the duty of all Muslims, individually and collectively, to strive to overthrow colonial regimes.

Therefore, out of the colonial experience emerged the equation of the Islamic concept of jihad with "striving" and "struggle" for freedom and independence in the modern political sense. Jihad, in this sense, provided the motive and the justification for many anticolonial wars and uprisings from British India, through the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Italian Libya, to French Algeria. Consequently, the defense of the homeland and the religious obligation to defend *dar al-Islam* became inextricably enmeshed with each other in the popular Muslim imagination.¹⁹ Resistance against non-Muslim foreign domination and encroachment, whether direct or indirect, thus became the paradigmatic jihad of modern times. The use of the term *jihad* today by Islamists denoting resistance not merely against direct foreign occupation, as in Iraq, but more generally against an iniquitous international order dominated by the United States and its allies has emerged as a logical corollary of the jihads waged against European colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, political Islam as a major vehicle for resistance against occupation and domination receives its legitimacy and credibility to a large extent from this equation of the term *jihad* with resistance to foreign domination of Muslim lands and peoples.

However, while it would be extremely difficult for common Muslims to disentangle the political and religious dimensions of resistance to foreign domination, there was and continues to be a clear distinction for hard-core Islamists between merely throwing out the foreign occupier and the creation of a state based on their imagined model of the pure and pristine age of Islam. The former was perceived as but the first step toward attaining the latter. Earliest instances of anticolonial jihad, such as those in Algeria, India, Sudan, and Libya, also witnessed attempts by the leaders of the premodern Islamist resistance movements to establish Islamic polities based on their conceptions of sharia law on territories liberated from colonial powers.²⁰ Contemporary Islamist political formations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan, are heirs both to the Salafi intellectual tradition and to the practical endeavors on the part of those nineteenth-century anti-colonial leaders in the Muslim world who strove to create Islamic polities (as opposed to merely independent Muslim ones) in zones liberated from colonial occupation.

Contemporary Islamism

As the preceding discussion suggests, political Islam as we know it today is a relatively modern phenomenon, although not a very recent one. Its roots lie in the nineteenth-century Muslim encounter with European domination and in Muslim reactions to subjugation by infidel powers. It is no wonder, then, that political Islam speaks the language of resistance to foreign domination not only in the political but in the cultural and economic spheres as well. This is true of most manifestations of this religio-political ideology and of the movements that represent it. The Islamic Republic of Iran, despite its Shia heritage that sets it somewhat apart from the Sunni majority, has best epitomized this phenomenon in recent times.

It is also clear that the Islamists' totalistic bent betrays a very modern sensibility. Robert Hefner has pointed out: "Rather than fidelity to prophetic precedents . . . , the Islamist dream of an all-encompassing religious governance bespeaks a modern bias, one all too familiar in the twentieth-century West. It is the dream of using the leviathan powers of the modern state to push citizens toward a pristine political purity."²¹ The twentieth-century concept of the "Islamic state," which has become the central focus for Islamist energies, emerged out of this preoccupation with capturing the state in order to change society. This emphasis on the importance of the state as the instrument of God's (and the Islamists') will sets the Islamists apart from Muslim

traditionalists, who are usually wary of too much state interference in matters of religion.

The use of religious vocabulary as the vehicle for resistance against oppressive rule has given contemporary Islamists (as it did their nineteenth-century precursors) a powerful tool for bonding with and, thus, successfully mobilizing Muslim masses. Islamists speak the language of the people by using religious idioms that the common Muslim can relate to because he or she has been socialized in it since childhood. This is one of the major reasons why Islamism has garnered so much emotive appeal in the current era and is able to capture the imagination of ordinary Muslims suffering under foreign domination or oppressive and autocratic rule.

Moreover, as stated earlier, Islamists argue that Muslim societies declined the more they moved away from the model of the golden age that can be found in their romanticized version of the early years of Islam. Their prescription is to return to the primitive utopia of early Islam. The model of the “strangers” having failed, there is a strong tendency to revert to a highly romanticized model of the “ancestors,” despite such warnings as Fouad Ajami’s that the “people who surrender to the ancestors are, strictly speaking, surrendering to strangers” and that “[a]uthenticity can be as much an escape as dependence and mimicry can be.”²²

Religion and Politics in Islam

Does the conception of a religiously inspired golden age and the striving on the part of some groups to turn this imagined model into reality mean that politics and religion are inextricably intertwined in Islam? Furthermore, does it mean that the politicization of religion is unique to Islam and that other religious traditions are immune to this “malady”? These two questions, while closely inter-related, are analytically distinct and therefore need to be answered separately from one another.

In much of the popular analysis and even in a substantial portion of academic discourse, it is frequently assumed that there is no separation between the religious and political spheres in Islam. This is a myth to which Islamist rhetoric has contributed in considerable measure, especially by making constant reference to the sharia and the concept of the “Islamic state.” Consequently, an image has been created not merely of the indivisibility of religion and state but of religion being in the driver’s seat determining the political trajectory of Muslim societies, including their inability to accept the notion of

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