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The Nationalist Origins of Political Islam

JOCELYNE CESARI

According to the implicit academic consensus, the term political Islam refers primarily to religiously based political movements that contest or undermine "secular" political and state institutions. The consensus thus assumes that modern secular politics and political Islam are incompatible. Yet this does not address the question of why Islam is such an influential vehicle for political mobilizations and collective identities—an intriguing conundrum, given that most Muslim-majority countries were built by secular Westernized elites. To properly understand the origins of political Islam, it is necessary to take a closer look at the presumed oppositions between secular and religious worldviews, and between religion and politics.

Indeed, political Islam is decipherable only by looking at its foundational moment during the era of nation building in Muslim countries. The emergence of nation-states from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire irrevocably changed the dynamic between Islam and society. The transformation wrought by the adoption of Western concepts of nation and state led to an unprecedented fusion of religious and national identities. Although most of the founders of Muslim-majority countries were secularized, they nevertheless incorporated Islam in the institutions of the new states. That process accelerated the politicization of Islam by turning it into a national ideology that served as a common denominator for all political forces, secular or otherwise.

This form of religious nationalism is not specific to Muslim countries. It actually originated in Europe, where religions first became part of national identity and patterns of religious conflict were adjusted to fit the narrative of national unity. In Britain and the Netherlands, for example, where legal discrimination against Catholics had been in place since the Reformation, such laws were removed in the nineteenth century in order to unify all citizens under the national banner.

What is specific to Muslim countries is the combination of the nationalization of religion with cultural homogenization, which occurred when a particular denomination of Islam was absorbed into the state apparatus and granted a monopoly over society and public space. When the state nationalizes the institutions of one sect, including the clerics and places of worship, to the exclusion of all others, it creates a form of Islam that becomes central to national identity and standards of behavior in public—and thereby is imposed on all citizens, even those who are not members of that denomination.

The combination of this particular form of institutional relationship between state and religion with a monopoly on social influence is what I call hegemonic religion. While political modernization in Europe led to a deinstitutionalization of religion and acceptance of religious diversity (as well as nonbelief), the opposite occurred in postcolonial Muslim countries.

NEW NEXUS

Muslim empires had hierarchies and clear divisions of labor for temporal and spiritual authorities as early as the tenth century of the common era. In the medieval period, rulers sometimes sought religious justification for their policies. But religious authorities and institutions enjoyed independence from the centers of political power in financial and organizational terms.

Although the Caliphate at that time represented the community of believers that followed the message of the Prophet Muhammad, its geographic sprawl turned it into a succession of royal dynas-

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ties (from the Umayyads to the Abbasids and finally the Ottomans) ruling over multiple ethnic and religious groups. The *Ummah* was therefore defined as the totality of the territories and populations under the Caliphate's rule. It encompassed a vast array of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups, including Muslims of all denominations as well as Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahai, and Druze. While the caliphs recognized society's cultural and religious diversity, this did not mean equal legal and political status for everyone.

At the time, sharia referred to laws applying to Muslims. Other laws applied to non-Muslims living under the Caliphate as well as relations between the Caliphate and non-Muslims at the international level. The modern conception is different. According to the consensus of contemporary Muslim scholars, the *Ummah* is a spiritual, nonterritorial community that includes all Muslims present and past. It has been transformed into a kind of Muslim citizenship unconnected to territory.

The nation-building process in Muslim countries reorganized the nexus of state, society, and religion. As the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the state emerged as the central political institution while different ethnic and religious communities were subjected to a process of homogenization. The nation-building project systematically tried to erase ethnic, religious, and linguistic variety in order to create a unified nation defined by one religion and one language. This homogenizing effort also led to a politicized narrative of religion.

Islam had been an important part of anticolonial rhetoric, but after independence the faith was portrayed as a symbol of the past.

In this regard, Muslim countries are not exceptional. The advent of the modern nation-state redefined the rules of engagement between religion and politics everywhere. The dilemma facing the architects of non-Western nation-states was deciding to what degree traditional collective identities should be sacrificed to adopt the Western institutions and technologies needed to increase the military and economic power of the state.

RESISTING THE WEST

The 1856 Treaty of Paris, which ended the Crimean War, was a milestone. For the first time, the Ottoman Empire was included as a participant in the Westphalian order of sovereign states. Subsequently, three factors contributed to the adoption of the Westphalian system across the Middle East in the first half of the twentieth century: the fall of imperial governments in the region; the rise of local nationalist movements in cities such as Cairo, Tunis, Baghdad, and Damascus; and the emergence of states with demarcated borders.

The Ottoman modernizers and reformists had pro-Western, liberal aspirations. But internal resistance against Western imperialism grew in response to Western claims that the Caliphate was not "civilized" enough to gain the loyalty of its Christian subjects. It led to two different movements: Pan-Islamism and Pan-Arabism.

Pan-Islamism was an intellectual and political movement that viewed the *Ummah* as the ideal basis for political unity, taking the life and works of the Prophet Muhammad and his first four successors as its model. Western imperialist exploits like Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 galvanized nineteenth-century reformers such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–97) and his disciple, Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905). In their journal *al-Urwa al-Wuthqa* (The Firmest Bond), they urged all Muslims to unite in the face of Western imperialism.

At the time, this was not an anti-Western movement. Even after World War I, pan-Islamism did not promote indiscriminate hatred or rejection of the West. Its reformulation as a categorically anti-Western ideology happened after World War II, under colonial and postcolonial rule. This ideology would inspire the reactionary, antimodernist positions of future radical groups such as al-Qaeda.

Pan-Arabism, which emerged at the same time as pan-Islamism, held that all Arab peoples should unite under one banner as a linguistic and cultural community. The movement's origins were in the al-Nahda cultural renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which saw the revival of Arabic poetry and literature and the rise of Arabic print media.

Both movements shaped resistance to foreign domination in Muslim-majority countries after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Anti-Western campaigns used Islamic terminology to portray European modernization and its secularizing components as being in conflict with Arab regional or Islamic identity. Given this context, even the most secular national rulers could not afford to ignore or try to stamp out Islamic references and norms.

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In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood emerged in 1928 as an embodiment of pan-Islamism and the major competitor to the secular nationalist ideology. However, the Egyptian secular state, from the rule of King Farouk through the pan-Arabic regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalized and reordered the traditional religious establishment, assuming authority over the promotion of legitimate Islam.

YOUNG TURKS

Pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism produced tensions within the Ottoman Empire that led directly to the Turkish nation-building project. The last Ottoman sultans, most notably Abdulhamid II (1876–1909), made use of pan-Islamic ideology to promote imperial unity and push back against the penetration of Western political ideas. In the final years of the empire, the Young Turk movement emerged as an alternative political project. The movement was not necessarily anti-Islam, but it challenged the version of the relationship between religion and politics represented by the Caliphate. Confronted with national independence movements sprouting throughout the empire, the Young Turks emphasized the idea of "Turkishness" and a Turkish nation. They also promoted a local form of Islam, with prayers and sermons performed in the Turkish language.

After the Ottoman Empire collapsed at the end of World War I, the nationalist movement, now headed by the military leader Mustafa Kemal (who became known as Atatürk), created the modern Turkish republic. He worked to remove Islamic influence from social and public life, but also nationalized the dominant Sunni school of Islam, putting its endowments and clerics under state control.

Similarly, during the second half of the nineteenth century in Tunisia, after France became the official protector of the country, pan-Islamist ideals stirred continuous unrest against the Westernized urban elites. In the wake of World War I, a sense of transcontinental Islamic solidarity, stemming from the Ottoman legacy, gave rise to the Destour Party. The party's membership drew on an educated elite that was fluent in Islamic and Arabic cultures but stood apart from the Western-oriented elite.

This was the predecessor to the Neo-Destour Party that arose in 1934 and spearheaded the nationalist movement, led by Habib Bourguiba, who would be Tunisia's president from 1957 to 1987. Bourguiba relied on Islamic institutions and symbols to mobilize the masses for anticolonial jihad. His party held meetings in mosques and *zawiyas* (Sufi meeting places), and urged the public to pray five times a day for nationalist martyrs.

Bourguiba's policy after independence in 1956, however, emphasized Tunisia's French influences and secular-nationalist identity over its Islamic identity. Much like Atatürk, Bourguiba created a new Tunisian form of Islam by absorbing religious institutions under state control and rooting out Islamic social and cultural influences. The Personal Status Law of 1957 abolished sharia courts, banned the hijab, and restricted polygamy. Islam had been an important part of anticolonial rhetoric, but after independence the faith was portrayed as a symbol of the past; Westernization was associated with the future.

NATIONALIZED RELIGION

The architects of these new states all co-opted Islamic educational and charitable institutions and clerical authorities to gain popular legitimacy and counter pan-Islamist threats. They nationalized endowments and created ministries of religious affairs. They also made concessions to their nations' "Islamic" character by including Islam in the constitution as a key source of the state's legal and social roles.

This incorporation of Islam within state institutions nationalized religious authorities and teachings, giving rise to a hegemonic version of the faith. While most legal codes were based on European models, the primacy of sharia in the sphere of family law was retained. Dominant forms of Islam received legal privileges, which made the status of minorities precarious. Adherents of religions not recognized as legitimate Islamic sects, such as the Bahai in Egypt and the Alevi in Turkey, were either required to conform with the Muslim majority or rejected as heretics and sometimes subjected to persecution. Whether or not Islam was enshrined as the state religion, Islamic institutions became part of the administrative system and national identity.

This hegemonic Islam characterizes the majority of Muslim countries today (except for Lebanon, Senegal, and Indonesia). It would be misleading, however, to conclude that it reflects the nature of the Islamic faith. In fact, this kind of hegemonic religion appears in other, non-Muslim countries such as Bhutan, the Dominican Republic, and Sri Lanka.

In my research, I have found that three defining traits of hegemonic religion—nationalization of

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religious institutions, a central role for the nationalized religion in the educational system, and the inclusion of some of its prescriptions in secular law—correlate with political violence and social hostility toward religious minorities and nonreligious forms of expression. Such results call into question the late political scientist Samuel Huntington's controversial "clash of civilizations" thesis, which regards the content of the religious tradition rather than the nature of interactions between state and religion as the main cause of conflict.

This type of religious nationalism is the ground on which Islamic movements and parties thrive. They can position themselves as a legitimate and resilient political force not only because an authoritarian regime has crushed all forms of secular opposition, but also because they operate comfortably within the set of symbolic associations their national cultures are built on, linking Islam, citizenship, and collective identity.

Explaining political Islam therefore necessitates a broad discussion of the interactions among state, religion, and society. These dynamics are more complex than the divide between religion and politics or secular and religious worldviews. State-religion interactions do not directly shape transitions from authoritarianism to democratization, but they do influence the level of democracy in the domain of civil liberties, individual rights, and minority group rights.

GENDER AGENDA

In countries where the state defined modern Islam as a code of public morality, the issue of women's rights became a prime concern for a range of political actors, from secularists to Islamists. State policy vis-à-vis Islam and sharia was accompanied by a modernization effort to bring about gender equality in education and in economic and political rights. When adopted, such policies had positive consequences for the advancement of women's education and social conditions in general. The World Economic Forum's annual Global Gender Gap Report documents an interesting nuance with regard to wage equality: in comparison with some Muslim countries like Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia, Western countries including France and the United States have greater gaps in pay between men and women doing the same work.

State actors in postindependence Muslim countries presented themselves to women as champions of individual rights, as long as the rights did not threaten the stability of the family—and through it, the nation. The category of women's rights fragmented into different sets of rights, which I call individual rights (relating to education, work, and politics) and rights of the self (in sexuality and family matters). The latter are the most at odds with Islamic norms and values. For this reason, legislation on family matters has been central in the agendas of Islamist movements and their visions of an Islamic state.

The state's patronization of women's rights went hand in hand with the control and reform of Islam. By founding civil law on Islamic prescriptions, the state contributed to the redefinition of Islamic law and its interpretation. These political and institutional contexts have shaped the nature and content of religious debates on women's rights and other sensitive questions concerning blasphemy, human rights, and tolerance.

A review of the evolution of family law in Muslim countries since independence reveals that secular national rulers—influenced and sometimes limited by established customs of kinship and rural groups—built a hybrid family law, combining traditional religious views of family with some concern for gender equality. In this regard, the state's capacity to reform traditional family law depends on the political importance of kinship and communal divisions, which are specific to each country. That is why women in Egypt and Algeria do not have equal access to divorce, unlike women in Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco, and Indonesia.

By nationalizing Islam, the state took a central role in the process of redefining religious law and orthodoxy, leading to a reshaping of Islamic norms. These state-centered Islamic norms are part of the public cultures shared by secular and Islamic actors alike, even when they disagree on their influence or extension. This is why Islamists want to conquer the national state and make it more Islamic—or, more radically, create a new state that they can call a caliphate, even though such claims would be unthinkable to traditional Muslims. ■

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