

Political Islam: More than Islamism

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Political Islam and Islamism are terms used interchangeably to describe Islamic parties and movements that have risen to preeminence since the 1960s in opposition to “secular” states. The bulk of the scholarship discusses the democratic dimension of these parties, their capacity of insertion into the mainstream political system, and their proclivity to violence for political purposes both nationally and internationally. The plethora of literature on the Muslim Brotherhood in different national contexts is paradigmatic of this dominant perception of Islamism. Interestingly, there are also studies about the interactions between state and Islam (Fox 2019; Driessen 2014; Henne 2012), which are neither defined nor perceived as political forms of Islam, nor even connected to the presence of Islamically based political groups, as if the two were operating in completely separate realms.

This special issue on “Political Islam in World Politics” is an attempt to offer a synthesis of the several decades of research on Islamism and open new venues for the broadening of political Islam beyond Islamism.

According to the doxa in the field, synthesized in the article of Nader Hashemi, Islamism emerged in response to the decline of “Muslim civilization” and was developed around a political theory of a just society based on Islamic authenticity and criticism of secularism. It was an opposition movement to the “secular” state, and therefore, was able to hold the moral high ground. However, in the last four decades, as scholars have observed, Islamism has become part of political power, from Iran to Morocco and Tunisia. This has eroded its political credibility, especially where state power was gained through force or violence (such as in Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan), not to mention the detestable reputation given by ISIS to the claim for an “Islamic State”. To that point, some Islamists such as Rashed Ghanoushi in Tunisia prefer to consider their project as the search for a “civil state”. Overall, Islamic parties show poor performance in state power, a situation discussed at length by scholars who look for structural barriers to explain such a failure from the persistence of the deep state power or the level of corruption and dysfunction of state institutions. The human rights abuses and authoritarianism within countries such as Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan have further undermined the reputation of Islamists.

By contrast, Islamists who gained power through elections have greater legitimacy, but still face similar structural challenges and see an erosion of their popular support, as the situations in Turkey, Tunisia and Egypt show. The academic consensus is that popular support for Islamism is currently at its peak and is unlikely to increase any further according to opinion surveys that express a significant decline in support for religious parties and leaders, most of them conducted in Arab countries.

The second piecemeal of studies on Islamism concerns the relationship between Islam and political violence, and carries serious limitations and assumptions such as the “gateway drug” thesis. It posits that the Muslim Brotherhood acts as a gateway to radical fundamentalism, despite the fact that the organization has rejected violence as a means of political power. Because this so-called “thesis” is politically influential, it obliges scholars to mobilize their expertise to invalidate it. This explicit or implicit wrestling with an “ideological opponent” is a serious limitation to the overall scholarship



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on Islamism/political Islam since it often turns into apologetic or hostility to the topics or subjects under study.

The empirical reality is that Islamism is multivocal and can be a gateway to a more democratic and pluralist worldview as much as it can be a gateway to radicalism.

As for any other political context, the relationship between political Islam and violence is largely the result of structural conditions that are often ignored. As a result, the false narrative that political Islam leads to violence and extremism has not been put to rest yet.

Overall, the overview of the orthodox literature reveals significant blind spots and dead ends. First, whether it is violence or democratization, the explanations too often focus on the Islamic movements or parties themselves and their internal dynamics: ideology, strategy, leadership... and do not pay attention to the religious aspects of the authoritarian and political contexts in which they operate. Second, most of this literature again and again reassess the failure or success of Islamism/political Islam at each major historical turn: the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the rise of Al Qaeda, the Arab Spring, ISIS, post-ISIS, etc., and there is no shortage of predictions about its failure or disappearance, which up to now have not been fulfilled. Third, the never-ending debate on the Islamic or religious nature of these multifaceted movements is another dead end. Although rich monographs abound, especially on countries such as Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Indonesia and Tunisia, ultimately it is not easy to obtain a broad understanding of this multifaceted phenomenon since no strong overarching explanation has emerged that can help us explain the variations of success and strategy of political Islam across time and countries.

The main goal of this issue is to suggest such a broader perspective by distinguishing political Islam from Islamism and addressing the former as more encompassing and longstanding than the latter. Political Islam is better defined as a political culture that is the outcome of the dual processes of nationalization and reformation of the Islamic tradition. From this perspective, because it has been central to the politicization of Islam, the nation-state cannot be neglected or dismissed as “secular” as is the case in the mainstream literature. We are therefore better off considering political Islam as governmentality and Islamism as the religiously based form of political mobilization which is one of the many outcomes of this governmentality.

The concept of governmentality forged by Michel Foucault ([Foucault 2009](#); [Foucault 2010](#)) refers to different procedures for regulating human behaviors and is not limited to state actions or policies. In fact, state actions are not decipherable outside the ingrained acceptance by citizens of these procedures, or what Norbert Elias calls habitus ([Elias 1994](#)). Therefore, policies cannot be explained without analyzing the sets of acquired ideas, emotions, codes of behavior, and social etiquette that people in a given territory associate with political power. Under these conditions, religion becomes a significant mode of power. Analyzing the politicization of religion in general, as well as of Islam in particular, therefore means paying attention not only to specific governmental apparatuses but also to other domains such as religious activities, cultural production, and bodies of knowledge.

From this perspective, political Islam emerged as a modern technique of governmentality, linked to the adoption of the nation-state. 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” ([Friedland 2002](#)). 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. From this perspective, political Islam is a mode of coercion and “disciplinization” exacted by the state on a given territory and population, creating cultural identities in which national and Islamic belongings become intertwined.

One of the obvious benefits of broadening the concept of political Islam is that it allows for a more complex study of the religious dimension of nation-building in the majority of Muslim countries, instead of assuming the neutral stance of the “secular” state. By relocating Islamist political expressions in this broader context, it is then possible to

explain the variation in the respective repertoires, strategies and successes of Islamist movements and parties. The variations are not caused by Islam as such but by the political and institutional landscape in which these movements operate: authoritarian regimes, nationalism, pan-Arabism.

A step in this direction is the work of Aaron Rock-Singer which focuses on social practices to relocate Islamism within the fabrics of their social communities. The Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyah movement, which is the case study of his article, was created in Egypt in 1926 with an initial focus on rituals within mosques, training preachers, and establishing institutes for Quranic recitation. However, its goals changed in the latter half of the 20th century, when the movement started spearheading four main social practices: praying in shoes, gender segregation, a specific model for facial hair, and the prohibition of full-length pants. These social practices distinguished the followers of this Salafi group from other Islamic movements (i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood). It survived the repression of successive authoritarian regimes by staying away from “formal” politics and building on the social significance of Islam through social activities that did not require political infrastructure or institutions. These social practices allowed them to project their religious vision into the public space and adapt to the evolving political environment (e.g., wearing shorter beards to distance themselves from the terrorists who were multiplying attacks in Cairo in the 1980s). In sum, to understand the political variations between the Ansar al-Sunna and other Islamist groups in Egypt, deciphering the status of Islam in the Egyptian political culture is key, hence adopting a more encompassing definition of political Islam, distinct from the Islamic parties (or Islamism).

In these conditions, the modern politicization of Islam is the outcome of the decisive sequence opened by Western imperialism and the ensuing adoption of the nation-state as “the” political community.

The primary role of the state is to regulate social behaviors within the national community. Such regulation may interfere with alternative collective identities since people are not only citizens, but also part of cultural, ethnic, and religious groups. As a result, conflicts can arise when their “other” collective identities challenge or do not fit within the acceptable social behaviors sanctioned by the state in the national community. On the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the building of nation-states in Muslim lands led to an unprecedented tension between Islamic belonging and national belonging, hence making the nationalization of Islam a never-ending political issue while establishing the state as a major agent of Muslimness.¹

In most Muslim countries, national identity was forged by state leaders through different procedures and religious choices, to the extent that it is more relevant to speak of a “state-nation” rather than “nation-state” (Stepan et al. 2011). The preeminence of the state can be observed throughout all nation-building processes, as well as the extremely rapid changes initiated by the ruling elites. Case in point: there was no Turkish or Pakistani nation before their independence; they were literally created “overnight”. New identities were forged in less than two generations and irremediably altered the relation of the “new” Turks or Egyptians to Islam.

Nation-building in Muslim countries resulted in the decisive reorganization of the religious community–political power interaction that had no equivalent in premodern times since, under the Caliphates, Islamic institutions and clerics were not subordinated to political power. This means that the latter were financially and intellectually independent from the former (Enayat 1982; Lapidus 1988). The Caliphs also acknowledged the cultural and religious diversity of the population, although this did not translate into an egalitarian legal and political status for all religions and ethnicities. The Ummah was at the time defined as the sum of the territories and populations under the Caliphate rule, hence encompassing an extensive distribution of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups, including to name just a few: Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Baha’is, and Druze. Even though the Caliphate represented the original community which follows the message of the Prophet Mohammad, in reality, its power was transformed by geography and

historically evolved into a political dynasty overseeing multiple ethnic and religious groups (Hourani 1962).

The emergence of the state as the central political institution went hand-in-hand with the homogenization of the populations inhabiting the nation's territory. That is why nation-building systematically omitted and sometimes eradicated particular ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups in order to create one nation defined by one religion and one language. This homogenization process led to a politicized narrative of religion, that I have called political Islam. With the rise of the nation-state, a congruence was created between Muslims of a certain religious obedience (for example, in the Sunni groups, Maleki, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Hanafi schools) and bounded territory. In other words, although the Westernized elites from Turkey to Iraq or Tunisia, were not always religious believers, they understood that they could not build a nation without including the belonging to Islam. In this building process, they channeled into policy, making new meanings of traditional concepts such as Ummah or Shari'a.

The modern conception of the Ummah is far removed from the caliphal definition and reflects the new consensus that it is the global community of Muslim believers which operates as a supranational reference. This definition is invoked today by all protagonists independently of their religious or political affiliations. In the same vein, Shari'a, previously the monopoly of the *ulama*, was reshaped as state law and secularized with the introduction of French or British legal procedures. Shari'a courts were abolished and replaced by secular court systems. Shari'a was reduced to family law (marriage, divorce, custody of children, and inheritance). Because of the lasting role of Islam in regulating these particular societal dimensions, they are nowadays the most acutely disputed issues between secular and religious actors. In other words, the *ulama* lost their influence on the regulation of most mundane affairs and were relegated into the management of "souls" or family affairs.

It is worth noticing that despite their pan-Islamist origin and initial opposition to nationalism, all Islamically based political movements have adjusted to the national frame, especially after decolonization, when the nation became the "natural" political space, instead of being perceived as "foreign" or Western. Thus, Islamist movements gradually used Islam more as an alternative to the secular nationalism promoted by state elites, and less as a way to promote the return of the Caliphate. Even the global forms of political Islam such as Al Qaeda and ISIS operate on the modern homogenized concepts of Ummah and Shari'a that they carry beyond territorial borders (Cesari 2018b).

Generally speaking, the major shift brought by the modern political order has deeply transformed theological debates and doctrines. The Islamic tradition has seen not only its societal influence reordered by the nation-state, but also its doctrinal content redefined to make room for state sovereignty over mundane matters. Evidently, these transformations have not generated a stable consensus and are in fact a significant factor in the rise of Islamism or political movements based on Islam.

From the foundational historical sequence of state- and nation-building, three main forms of political Islam have developed: hegemonic, civil, and transnational (Cesari 2018b). Religious hegemony defines the majority of Muslim countries and occurs when Islamic institutions and religious authorities are absorbed into the state system, which makes Islam central to national identity but also to ideological competition. As a result, Islamism as discussed in Nader Hashemi's paper has occurred as a reaction to state control of the hegemonic religion, often with the goal to expand the scope of the religious hegemon rather than getting rid of it. In fact, with few exceptions (such as Ennahda), the claims of Islamism movements aim at strengthening the Islamic features of the state (through law and policies). By contrast, in countries such as Indonesia or Senegal, where there is no foundational fusion between state, Islam, and nation, a civil version of Muslim nationalism has appeared. Rather than having a state-centered political influence (as hegemonic Islam does), civil Islam has a socially centered influence. Its two main features are (1) the distinction between the state system and religious establishment and (2) the acknowledgment of religious diversity at the foundation of the national identity. That is one of the reasons why in

this context, most Islamic parties do not win elections while being strongly anchored in civil society. Finally, the concepts that were originally framed within nations have spread beyond national boundaries to give rise to transnational forms of Islamism that can also be radical such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Both are far from trying to recreate the multicultural and religious caliphates but promote instead the ideal of a homogenous Islamic community in opposition to the secular political communities.

Hegemonic, civil, and global political Islam are evolving categories that continuously interact and compete with each other, both nationally and internationally. All are the direct outcome of nation-building processes. The papers in this issue address the hegemonic forms of Islam since it is the dominant embodiment of political Islam.

In order to adapt exterior norms into local contexts, state actors used both grafting and pruning, legitimizing external norms by infusing “traditional” concepts with new meanings. The pruning and grafting of Islam onto national identities and state institutions was enabled through three main processes: (1) the nationalization of Islamic institutions, clerics, and places of worship of one particular trend of Islam (for example, Sunni over Shia); (2) the redefinition and adjustment of Shari’a to the modern legal system as well as the inclusion of Islamic references into civil law (marriage/divorce), criminal law, and as restriction of freedom of speech (blasphemy/apostasy), based on the prescriptions of that particular brand of Islam; and (3) the insertion of the doctrine of that religion into the public school curriculum beyond religious instruction that is in national history textbooks and civic education. All Muslim states have put some elements of Islamic law in the secular state and have adopted Islam as the main regulator of national identity (except Indonesia, Senegal, and Tunisia post-Jasmine Revolution). It is the combination of at least two of these features or the three together that I have called hegemonic Islam (Cesari 2018b). This form of Islam cannot be explained by the instrumentalization of clerics or theology by the caliphs during the time of the Muslim empires. None of the past empires were founded on the equality of citizens, sovereignty of people, and homogenization. These three features have driven the building of modern political communities through unprecedented techniques of centralization and regulation, hence granting to the modern political power a capacity of interference with clerics, religious education, thinking and institutions that have no equivalent in the premodern periods. Even when equality and people’s sovereignty are not implemented by law in authoritarian regimes, they nevertheless have become the norms by which the political power either legitimizes itself or is disputed.

In sum, hegemonic Islam as a form of governmentality is defined by three main features: (1) the conflation of Islamic belonging and national belonging and its implementation in various degrees through state laws; (2) religious differences among Muslims and between Muslims and other religious groups are erased or discounted in order to build a homogenous nation; (3) by becoming the arbitrator of the personal behaviors of citizens, the state has taken the upper hand and profoundly transformed the moral power of the Islamic tradition. It is therefore not surprising that Islamically based political movements have emerged to claim an “Islamic state”, which is the expansion of the “secular” state, by demanding more Islamic prescriptions within the state laws (penal law, women rights, minorities rights).

For these reasons, much more work is needed on the ways states have disciplined Islam and on the status of Islam within political cultures that are shared by both secular and Islamic actors. Towards this goal, Annelle Sheline in her paper for this Special Issue, analyzes how, since the 9/11 attacks, many Muslim-majority states have attempted to shift the content of their state-sanctioned religious messaging (also known as “official Islam” or *al-islam al-rasmi*) to prevent violent extremism. The official Islam category is narrower than hegemonic Islam and focuses on state policies that explicitly target Islamic activities (worship, education, fatwas) and institutions (universities) in the fight against terrorism. Despite the dominant assumption that official Islam is not effective because of the state’s deficit of legitimacy, the case studies discussed by Sheline show that states can control

some aspects of common knowledge in order to create an official Islam that resonates with citizens domestically while also targeting the whole Ummah.

Annelle Sheline describes how some state policies make use of Islamic themes or activities to solidify citizens' loyalty and/or forge a credible international reputation of fighting terrorism. For example, the Omani state promotes a narrative of toleration linked to the Ibādī school dominant in the country.² The state has consistently advocated toleration to avoid conflicts between the Ibādī and Sunni Muslims of Oman. The religious policy has mostly been domestically focused due to the fact that Ibādī Islam is a minority compared to Sunni or Shia groups. Omani official Islam is successful because its message and actions resonate with (and are perpetuated) by its citizens and its bureaucratic elites, emphasizing a religious heritage of toleration and promoting support for Sultan Qaboo. By contrast, official Islam in Jordan is less efficient because it is inconsistent and externally directed. The Jordanian state started emphasizing toleration only after 9/11, and since then, its action has been directed to the international Muslim audience rather than Jordanians themselves. The result is that individual views of Islam on the part of members of the bureaucracy and citizens do not always match the state's concept of official Islam. While the Jordanian state propagates an image of moderate Islam as the "true Islam", criticism from religious bureaucrats, educators, and students focuses on the fact that the state does not adhere to Islamic principles, which therefore undermines the legitimacy of the moderate Islam it encourages. There is also criticism that it is not always clear what the state means by "moderate Islam": for instance, preachers promote tolerance one week but then attack Shia Muslims another week, while the state seems to endorse only those elements of moderate Islam that it finds beneficial. Furthermore, corruption and attempts to monopolize religious discourse (e.g., taking power away from local imams) have also undermined the legitimacy of the Jordanian official Islam. As a result, there is no comprehensive definition of Jordanian moderate Islam and many Jordanians turn to alternate external sources (such as Saudi Arabia) for Islamic guidance, therefore creating a disconnect between national and religious identity.

Morocco is an intermediary case between Oman and Jordan in that it manages to have consistency, but not sufficient internal leverage. The Monarchy makes reference to its past as a political entity independent from the Caliphates which serves its promotion of an authentic Moroccan Islam that is independent of external influence. Furthermore, religious bureaucrats and educators support this official Islam, giving it more credibility within Moroccan society. However, the messages of toleration have been directed towards building a reputation of moderation abroad as much as they have been directed towards Morocco's domestic audience, which has undermined the effectiveness of this rhetoric.

Along the same lines, despite the fact that Turkey officially separated Islam from state affairs in 1937, Ahmet Ozturk analyzes in this issue how the Turkish state has utilized Islam as both an end and means within its foreign and domestic policy since the 1970s. Although Turkey is often presented as the most "secular" Muslim country, the engineering of Islam by the state is also an exemplary case of hegemonic Islam. Kamal Atatürk (1881–1938) believed Islam should be adjusted to the national community through reforms and Westernization. Islam became a "major resource for the rulers to educate and socialize new 'Turks' according to the needs of the Republic" and therefore, Turkish secularization "never meant autonomy of religion" (Cesari 2018a, p. 6). This secularization was viewed by Atatürk as a de-politicization of Islam since the social influence of Islamic rituals and leaders was weakened. However, belonging to Islam was crucial to the Turkish collective identity. The creation of the *Diyanet*, or Ministry of Religious Affairs, ensured the absorption of Sunni Hanafi religious institutions within the state system while those belonging to non-Sunni groups, such as Shiites and Alevis, are not granted recognition at all.³ In other words, being a Sunni Muslim and being a Turkish national were two sides of the same coin. By the same token, Islamic signs and practices were privatized in order to build a secular public space. As a consequence, being a legitimate member of the political community depended on accepting the cultural and political meanings of Turkishness

introduced by Kemalism, hence turning any identity-based claims to citizenship (religious, linguistic, ethnic) into a matter of national security. Similarly, *laiklik* aimed to remove religious ideology from the public space while preserving the collective identity of Turks and Islam (Özpek and Yaşar 2018). The access to power of the Islamist party, AKP, did not displace the foundational conflation between Sunni Islam, *laiklik*, and the nation. It has added another dimension by emphasizing the social conservatism associated with the societal legitimacy of Islamic dress code and attempts to moralize the public space.

Within this specific political and religious context, Ahmet Ozturk focuses on the religious dimension of Turkish policy across both Kemalist and Islamist regimes. In the 1980s, domestic instability and economic issues prevented the Turkish state from developing foreign religious services (with the exception of the active policy toward the Turkish migration in Europe), hence creating an opportunity for the Gülen Movement⁴ to fill in the gap. This Islamist movement started to open schools and to support muftis outside Turkey, but did not provide religious services—though relations were established with religious institutions. Thus, while the *Diyanet* had created a space for itself in Western Europe, the Gülen Movement did so in the Balkans, and both succeeded in avoiding religious conflict with the nations in which they operated.

The dynamic of Turkey's foreign religious power changed during the AKP era. The AKP promoted the idea of a "Muslim Democracy" (different from the Islamic state claimed by most Islamist movements). As a consequence, it fueled the hopes that Islam could accommodate and even forge a new type of democracy, independent from the Western model. This hope has been undermined in recent years by the shift of Recep Tayyip Erdogan toward authoritarianism, not to mention his attempts to combine Islam and nationalism by legitimizing the headscarf in public space or tightening the presidential control over the *Diyanet*. These changes coincided with an increased influence of the *Diyanet* in both domestic and foreign policies. The rising hostility between the Gülen Movement and the AKP—a significant switch from their earlier respective positions—has prompted further utilization of religion in domestic and foreign politics. This strategy includes increased presence and activities of the *Diyanet* in foreign countries, as well as of state funding for Turkish Islamic organizations, often leading to resistance from the countries targeted by this policy.

Such an evolution has gone against the historically held perception of Turkey as a country with a "Western-style" of political power. For example, Ahmet Davutoglu, former Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009–2014) and former Prime Minister (2014–2016), has launched a more aggressive foreign policy based on the idea that Turkey must abandon its attempts to conform to Western civilization and instead fuse history, nationalism, and Islam into its own civilizational project. From this perspective, Islam has become a central element of the Turkish foreign policy, with a shift toward the *ummah* as a whole. Turkey has now entered the competition with other Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia or Iran for the leadership of the *ummah*.

Global political Islam, especially in its radical forms, is the result of the dissemination and alteration of the aforementioned hegemonic political cultures.

Political Islam originally resulted from the globalization of nationalism and the introduction of the nation-state framework in Muslim regions. Simultaneously, political globalization is the dissemination of concepts that were originally framed within nations but now have spread beyond national boundaries. Although Islamist movements such as Al-Qaeda have used Islam as an alternative to secular nationalism, it does not mean attempting to return to the historical Caliphates. The transnationalization of the Muslim Brotherhood ideology and strategy illustrates this apparent contradiction. Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, was not opposed to the nation-state, and since its inception, the Brotherhood had a distinctly national focus on Egypt. It did not mean, however, that nationalists and Islamists were able to cooperate to the fullest extent, and after al-Banna's death, the relationships between the Muslim Brotherhood and the state became conflictual. Therefore, the Brotherhood transitioned to opposing the

state, without giving up its nationalist foundation. This transition also led to divisions within the movement as to how the relationship with the state should be handled. The majority wanted to operate within the state-sanctioned political system, to focus on how the Brotherhood should be involved in Egyptian politics and what compromises should be made to that effect. The minority (influenced by the ideologue Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966)) wanted to destroy the state and left the Brotherhood because of this disagreement.

Jihad is an important element of global Islam. Qutb redefined jihad as the fight against the unjust ruler, and this jihadi definition combined with the Wahhabi doctrine of Saudi Arabia resulted in global jihad (or Salafi-jihadism) embodied in Al Qaeda and ISIS. This global Jihad was the outcome of the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet invasion. It is distinctly fundamentalist, literalist, and exclusivist, and brought the national form of Egyptian jihad into a global context. It is worth emphasizing that Qutb's definition of jihad contradicts the traditional one that emphasizes the efforts of the believer to implement the revelation-based community as defined by the message of Islam. This traditional conception can be compared to the just war tradition and lays out the proper "rules" for starting and conducting a war. From this perspective, jihad was a collective duty and a tool for the Caliph to preserve and expand his international authority. By contrast, the current global conception of jihad made first a tool for resistance against the colonial power, then against the secular nationalist rulers and finally, against all state powers (Peters 1979). The globalization of the modern jihad has also brought an emphasis on individualism, drawing on Qutb, who saw jihad as the religious obligation of the believer to fight against the unjust ruler. With the creation of Al-Qaeda, this redefinition has gone even further to define jihad as the use of indiscriminate violence against all enemies of Islam across national borders.

Transnational Islam and jihad also connect to the *ummah* and its various definitions and interpretations. At its inception, the *ummah* is defined as the human collective that uniquely received guidance from Allah through the revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad. Initially, it served as the political model for the successive caliphates, but their expansion across diverse populations, ethnicities, cultures and religions resulted in the plural understanding of the *Ummah* as the totality of territories under the rule of Islam, making it a multi religious, linguistic and cultural entity. However, a turning point came in the 19th century, when activists and ideologues reformed the Islamic tradition in order to address the challenges of political modernization brought by the encounters with Europe. From this moment onward, the *ummah* redefined by pan-Islamists such as Rashid Rida (1865–1935) and Afghani (1839–1897) came to designate an ideal political community of all Muslim believers under the rule of Islam, contrasted to the national community. At the same time, the loyalty to the *Ummah* was not in contradiction with the national allegiances and could in fact be channeled into national and state interests. For instance, Saddam Hussein's rhetoric during the first Gulf War (1990–1991) promoted the shared virtue of the Arab and Muslim community and the duty of the Muslims to defend the *ummah*. Hussein's rhetoric further highlighted the *ummah's* role as a political transnational project, based not simply on faith, but also on the resistance against the imperialist project of the West. The Islamist versions of the *Ummah* build on this modern understanding but turn it into a combatant community. For example, Qutb believed that true Muslims must see themselves as being in a permanent state of war against state and society, hence departing from the traditional definition of the *ummah* as Muslims and non-Muslims under the rule of the caliphate. This is even more so for global Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS that promote the *Ummah* as the community of jihadis across countries. This modern conception of a homogenous and political community also feeds into the Western rhetoric of the threat of Islam and its "deterritorialized community of Muslims".

In conclusion, the Islamic parties will fade, but the political relevance of Islam will not because it is central to the social and civic identity of people in within nation-states.

The nation-state has construed the rules of engagement between religion and politics not only in Muslim countries but everywhere, including in the West. In Muslim countries, the construction of Islam as national culture and public norm produced different outcomes.

More specifically, civic and national belonging became tied to religious belonging and hence, enforceable by law. It therefore undermines the religious and ethnic plurality of society, not because religious groups or ideas are resilient to modernity. It is, in fact, quite the opposite in the sense that modernization of religion and the building of the nation-state became intertwined. Religious references and norms were used by political elites to “localize” the nation-building process and legitimize state actors and policies.

In other words, political Islam is the central element of modern political identities encased in the national communities. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the belief that Islam and the nation are connected and that politics must adhere to some rules influenced by Islam are shared by most citizens of Muslim countries across the secular/religious divide. A 2013 study from the Pew Research Center found that 74 percent of Egyptians believe Shari’a should be made the official law, with 74 percent agreeing it should apply to Muslims and non-Muslims alike (Wormald 2013). The study also found 72 percent of Indonesians believe Shari’a should be made the official law, and 50 percent agree it should apply to both Muslims and non-Muslims. In Senegal, 55 percent of people were in favor of making Shari’a the official law. The survey also showed that Muslims have varied interpretations of Shari’a, “including whether divorce and family planning are morally acceptable” (Wormald 2013). Many Muslims actually feel uncomfortable about the use of Shari’a punishments in criminal cases. This unease shows the rift between Islam as a political culture and Islam as an ideology: the breadth of Islamic Law is at the center of contentious politics such as those above.

This political culture, however, is not viewed as incompatible with democracy. In the Pew study mentioned previously, in 31 out of the 37 countries where the question was posed, at least half of Muslims believe that a democratic government can better address the problems in their country, as opposed to a leader with a strong hand. At least three-quarters of Muslims support democracy in Tunisia (75 percent) and Lebanon (81 percent), along with at least half in Egypt (55 percent), Iraq (54 percent), the Palestinian territories (55 percent), and Indonesia (61 percent) (Wormald 2013).

The simultaneous references to Shari’a and democracy cannot be simply dismissed as contradictory or irrational. From the more encompassing approach to political Islam offered in this Special Issue, these apparently incompatible political positions highlight this collective political consciousness inherited from nation-building that Islam is part of public norms. This collective consciousness is the bedrock on which state actions, Islamic political movements, and secular parties can unfold. Studies have also shown that hegemonic Islam has an influence on the democratic level of Muslim countries. In other words, the presence of hegemonic traits, such as religiously based laws, the financing of religion, and religious education policy, is strongly connected to a lack of democracy (Cesari and Fox 2016).

In the future, could Islamic political cultures transform into more inclusive forms of civil religion? Based on the surveys mentioned previously, a majority of Muslim citizens would believe so. Generally, it appears that the more independent religion is from the state, the higher the possibility for a more inclusive, pluralist approach to civil society. Nonetheless, in looking at current regional and international circumstances and increased concerns about security, states are pushed in the other direction, towards increased control and regulation of religion. This is another (if needed) compelling reason to stop looking at Islamism through the narrow lens of Islamic parties and to explore instead political Islam as governmentality.

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Notes

- ¹ This term refers to the ways believers identify to Islam in its social and collective components without limiting it to personal beliefs, but without making it a tool for political opposition to the state. Anthropologists prefer it to the term “post-Islamist” favored by political scientists. See White (2002).

- ² The Ibadi school derives its name from the figure of Abdu Ilah Ibn Ibad, who broke away from the Kariijite movement (the sect that rejected the outcome of the mediation of the 4th caliph Ali during the succession battle and rejected both the Sunni and Shia movements that emerged from this dispute). The Ibadi branch of Islam, also known as the “third branch”, was established over 1300 years ago, predating Islam’s split between Sunni and Shia after the Prophet Muhammad’s death.
- ³ The Diyanet, which stands for the Presidency of Religious Affairs, was founded on May 3rd, 1924 as part of the Turkish constitution. Its main objective is “to execute the works concerning the beliefs, worship, and ethics of Islam, enlighten the public about their religion, and administer the sacred worshiping places”. It is responsible for drafting sermons that are delivered in mosques both in Turkey and abroad. It trains imams and teaches children Quranic education. See the Diyanet website ([Presidency of the Republic 2020](#)).
- ⁴ The Gülen Movement (or Hizmet, in Turkish) was founded in 1969 by Fethullah Gülen. It is a cultural and educational movement whose basic principles stem from Islam’s universal values, including access to education, civil society, and peace. Although the Movement originally arose from Turkish Islam, it is now an international and transnational organization. See the Gülen Movement website.

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