

Editorial

# Introduction—Issues and Debates on Religion and International Relations in the Middle East

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Received: 18 April 2020; Accepted: 19 May 2020; Published: 21 May 2020



**Abstract:** By the end of the 20th century, after great political upheavals, two world wars, the decolonization process and political, social and scientific revolutions, it is hard to miss that the world is in a deep de-secularization process. In the Middle East, this process has taken multiple trajectories and has made geopolitics of religion central in reshaping regional issues and in restructuring modes of international politics and international system's intervention in the Middle East.

**Keywords:** religion; international relations; Middle East; Islam; foreign policy regional politics; non-state actors; global order

## 1. The Role of Religion in International Politics

International Relations theories have been based on the argument that the Westphalian Treaty excluded religion from international politics, pushing it outside of the public sphere. Religion belonged, according to this argument, to the sphere of individual and of the irrational, and as such could not be considered in analyzing international politics. Cold War international relations saw in religion a mere ideological tool, despite that the Irish issue, the India–Pakistan conflict and the Iran–Iraq war had an inherent religious element. Political science theories had, for analytical purposes, reduced religions to institutions and handily categorized them as non-government or transnational organizations, mere elements of the civil society acting in accordance with rational choice theory. What stays out of scope in such definitions is the experience of the communion with God, the spiritual life of religious communities (Kubáľková 2000, pp. 682–83).

Since the Enlightenment, among political and social thinkers and scientists prevailed the view that religion constitutes a relic system of ideas of pre-modern societies of the past, and that technological progress and the development of modern political institutions would minimize its role in society (Roussos 2015, p. 54). Central in this exclusion of religion from international relations is the theory of secularization in modern societies, understood either as a decline in people's religiosity and/or as a process of withdrawal of religion from the public to the private (Fox 2001, p. 56).

Following the secularization theory, the modernization processes not only would reduce religion to the private sphere, but they also would eliminate religious influence on the society. This approach overlooks, however, several issues that place religion at the center of the public sphere even during periods of modernization. First, the decline of the role of religion was never lineal; instead we observe several moments of religious revival in the midst of rapid modernization. The nineteenth century, an era of intense globalized modernization was also an era of tremendous reach of world religions and of their missionary, educational, publishing and cultural impact (Bayly 2004, p. 325). Pankaj Mishra focuses on two great late 19th century Asian intellectuals, al-Afghani and Liang Qichao, who tried to reconsider their religious tradition in order to bring it in harmony with an onward modern intellectual movement (Mishra 2012).

In the early twentieth century the Irish national movement enlisted the structural rigor and the spiritual influence of the Catholic Church (English 2008). The Algerian anticolonial movement, in the interwar period, was based mainly on the dichotomy between French and Muslims (Zack 2002, p. 80). Hindu and American Christian fundamentalisms were formed in the late 1920s.

Secularization theory treats all religions as monolithic, static and uniform. It also refers to a certain episode or episodes and historical periods and not to a wider circle of decline and reassertion of religion. Nationalism has been seen as a secular ideology but in fact it has integrated religion by nationalizing it. Greek, Hindu, Jewish and Irish nationalisms have been largely defined by religion, while Britain and the Netherlands were long considered Protestant nations before including the Catholics in the nation-state (van der Veer 2015, pp. 9–10). Two centuries after the Westphalian Treaty, religion had re-asserted its role in the public sphere, impacting considerably on the global order. In the early 19th century, religious leaders played a decisive role in the abolition of slavery in the British Empire and the Second and Third Great Religious Awakenings influenced modern American social culture and activism. Ibn Taimiyya, a 13th century Muslim thinker, influenced Islamist movements in the 20th century.

At the end of the 19th century, after two industrial revolutions and the most expansive globalization in human history, the world experienced a re-emergence of “world religions” at a pace unthinkable until then. Likewise, by the end of the 20th century, after great political upheavals, two world wars, the decolonization process and all the political, social and most importantly scientific revolutions, it is hard to miss that the de-secularization process has taken multiple trajectories and has made geopolitics of religion central in reshaping regional issues and in restructuring modes of international politics and international system’s intervention particularly in the Middle East.

Religion influences international politics through decision-makers in various states as well as through the power of the voters who have strong religious affiliation. The evangelical communities influence on American foreign policy in the era of Reagan, Bush Jr. and Trump are cases in point. Religion is also a source of legitimation of authority and of support or opposition to certain state policies at national and international levels. By the end of the 20th century, more and more religious conflicts were becoming international issues (Fox 2001, p. 59) such as the Sunni–Shia divide in the Middle East, the conflict in Caucasus and the ascent of Jihadism in West Africa.

Furthermore, the tendency of secular policymakers to disregard the role of religion and religious institutions in contemporary affairs hinders our ability to respond to current challenges in international politics. Contrary to the notion that religion and religious grievances are fueling conflicts, religious actors have contributed most effectively in conflict resolution (Schewel 2014, pp. 57–58). Religion can be influential in shaping leadership style and re-directing leadership attention. It can also frame the socio-cultural context in which foreign policy is conducted. Such socio-cultural context may set the criteria of who is the enemy of the state or the enemy of the religion and the faithful, and it affects the role of the self and the other in regional politics (Warner and Walker 2010).

According to Elizabeth Hurd Shakman, religion cannot be neglected in the study of international politics for three main reasons. First, the United States and the rest of the Western world failed in imposing their model of secular democracy on the rest of the world. Second, superpower’s foreign policy under Bush Jr., though nominally secular, was largely influenced by religious communities and ideologies. Third, there is a significant increase of religious movements and organizations of transnational character and international activism and outreach (Hurd Shakman 2008, p. 134).

The resurgence of religion in international politics is closely related to the crisis of modernity and the failure of the secular state to advance democracy and development in the less developed world. Scott M. Thomas argued that this religious resurgence is connected to a search for authentic identity and just development in the non-western world, and in this way it can be seen as a revolution against the West (Thomas 2000, pp. 816–17).

In the case of identity groups (nations), it is smaller groups that determine the threats to identity groups’ right of survival, and they reserve the right to speak and act on its behalf (Wæver 1996,

pp. 107–9). In states where religious and national identity are tightly intertwined, religion can play a decisive role in determining security threats and generating collective fear. Religious groups can thus be more influential than political ones, claiming that they speak and act on behalf of the nation. They religionize foreign and security policy by setting security threats in a sacred context (Juergensmeyer 2001, p. 468).

Religious activism can take a violent turn. Theories of social movements, fundamentalism and apocalyptic warriors can, according to Gregg, explain the circumstances under which religious activism uses violent means. Religion may mobilize pre-existing groups, networks and resources forming social movements in new moral frameworks, where their members can find common meaning and purpose. Grassroots networks and alliances are united by their shared view of “just order” found on submission to God’s sovereignty. With their political opportunities blocked or their aspirations frustrated these movements can resort to violence. According to fundamentalism theory, various religious groups are fighting to bring the societies back to the straight path of the true faith. They may choose violence when they perceive political authority or current international order as the main promoter of secularism and moral decay. Last, apocalyptic groups aim at violently “intervening” in human history bringing closer the End of the Days (Gregg 2016).

## 2. Alternative Perspectives in Global Governance

After the collapse of the bi-polar world in the 1990s, there was a tendency to a post-democratic era and the transformation of what we knew as liberal democracy. The ideological basis of this tendency is that all individuals in the planet possess human rights. Transnational frameworks, norms, international institutions and international NGOs, claiming to represent a global civil society, are anchoring on the human rights basis, questioning representative majority-rule democracy and the nation-state’s credibility, sometimes reducing its sovereignty. Around this project of a global civil society, a new transnational elite has been built with “corporate” interests in its success.

At the same time, we experience the ascent of another tendency within mainly Muslim societies and Muslim communities in the West, which seeks a new post-democratic world based not on human rights but on “just order”. This “just order” is not founded on ideological, egalitarian, class-structured premises but on absolute submission to God’s sovereignty, transcending and sometimes questioning the nation-state’s sovereignty or any other human-built structure. Around this project huge networks of violent and non-violent disposition have been built with millions of members, who also pursue an alternative global governance scheme, the global Ummah.

“Just order” in Islam means the merger of faith and law in the individual’s life. According to Abdulaziz Sachedina, a rather modernist Muslim thinker, such a merger creates a sense of security and integrity in the individual and in the collective life of the community and leads to social harmony (Sachedina 2006, p. 8). The separation between law and faith results in chaos, confusion and violence and thus destroys the community of the faithful. Ultimately, submission to an all-encompassing God is the only condition for the creation and maintenance of justice in the society and equity on earth. Particularly for political Islam (Islamists), there is no other sovereignty than God’s, and there is no differentiation between the public sphere and the individual. Islam is a religion first and foremost of the public realm.

What is more, contrary to the western liberal paradigm, Muslim just order reasons about political matters in religious terms, debating whether the Qur’an allows loyalty to the state, support for democratic institutions, political participation, equal rights for women or participation in a particular war. In these and other ways Islamists introduce a theological form of political reasoning in which others cannot participate but by whose outcome they are deeply affected. Some of them even consider democracy as a sort of polytheism since sovereignty rests on people and not on a unitary and all-encompassing God. This does not mean that the Islamists do not participate in electoral procedures and other functions of liberal democracies, but they are doing so on a contractual manner, or by using norms and institutions for promoting the Muslim community and faith.

For various reasons, and out of multiple developments, such views have a growing impact in Muslim communities. These now exceed 1.8 billion individuals, they have high birth rates and they are the majority in 55 states, one of them a nuclear power, with more than 60% of the planet's energy resources (SESRIC 2012) and, for the first time in history, large communities in non-Muslim states, particularly in Europe (Lipka and Hackett 2017).

As has been noted by Bikhu Parekh, "international events played an important part in reinforcing the consciousness of Islamic identity". The Iranian revolution, the Afghan Mujahidin resistance to Soviet occupation and the Muslim struggle against injustices and oppression in different parts of the world gave Muslims common global causes and sharpened the awareness of the Ummah or the global Muslim community. The growing influence of religious institutions generously funded by the oil-rich Muslim countries, especially Saudi Arabia, reinforced this trend (Parekh 2008, pp. 8–9).

The Islamic Ummah can be seen as a macro level ideological structure, with geopolitical, institutional underpinnings and political structures comparable to the ideological structure of global liberalism, which today dominates notions of global governance (Adamson 2005, p. 548). In the field of finance and economy, there is a fast-growing development of an Islamic model, in compliance with Shari'a law entrepreneurship. Islamic financial and banking activities reached an impressive size of around USD 2 trillion in 2014 (The Economist 2014). During the last few years, expansion of Islamic financial instruments has also embraced a huge variety of modalities. The Islamic social finance offers an alternative view on finance which includes Zakat (almsgiving), Waqf (endowments), Sadaqah (charity) as well as Qardh al-hasan (interest-free loans) and focuses on socially beneficial activities. The total amount of Islamic social finance exceeded, in 2018, the USD 2.5 trillion assets of the commercial Islamic finance sector, with Zakat alone reaching USD 1 trillion per year (Rehman 2019).

A wide network of satellite TV and internet sites have been mushrooming, creating a sort of imagined Ummah, in a way parallel to that of publishing in the formation of modern European identities. Moreover, there is a growing number of varying organisations that promote the Islamic faith and Islamic way of living. Some analysts tend to admit that the Islamic organisations, be it political, educational, violent or non-violent, have used the internet and the information age more efficiently than the political structures of global liberalism. Muslim youth in Britain and Muslim girls in France led the battle for Islam, quite often against the wishes of their parents, and demanded that the state should recognize, respect and make public space for it. By the late 1980s, Islam became a powerful political presence in Europe, its power deriving from its number, militancy, firm sense of identity, and global connections. Moreover, organisations of mixed political, social and preaching purposes are dominating Muslim communities and societies, and recruit thousands of members. Hizb-ut-Tahrir, perhaps the most globalised of them, is currently active in over forty countries. One of its main websites has seven languages listed: Arabic, Turkish, Russian, English, German, Urdu and Danish.

Features of Islamic Ummah can connect the local with the global, questioning at the same time the Western definitions for the state. Saudi authors of jihadist texts adopted the idea that the first state of Saudi Arabia in the late 18th century was "a political entity unbounded by defined territorial boundaries, unrecognized by the international community, and uncontaminated by international treaties and legal obligations. The first state is a local political configuration that defied regional and international contexts and promised to make true Islam hegemonic. They regard this state as a revival of the state of prophecy where the community was subject to divine law. Membership was determined not by recognized frontiers but by submission to the rightful Imam, whose authority over distant territory was recognized by paying zakat, receiving his judges, and performing jihad under his banner" (Al-Raseed 2008). Hence, since the present Saudi state cannot represent the model, as according to the same narrative it is corrupted and dependent on infidel powers, then the true Islamic identity should be sought not in local concepts but in global ones, in a reterritorialized utopia, which is again unbound by external constraints, the global Muslim Ummah.

### 3. The Challenges to the Global and Regional Order

In the dawn of the third decade of the 21st century, there are three challenges that transform the global order and regional politics in the Middle East. First, there is a serious challenge to the nation-state. The formation of nation-states in the Middle East was based on the uprooting of local cognitive traditions and the imposition of western secular “rational” norms and bureaucratic frameworks. They exerted high pressure on religion in order to move it to the private sphere and placed religious institutions under strict state control. National liberation movements tried to reconstruct religious traditions in order to fit to their secular ideology instead of enriching their ideological repertoire with these traditions. The failure of these states to establish a credible social contract, their rampant corruption, cruel coercive mechanisms and inability to solve chronic socio-economic problems and their failure, particularly in Syria and Iraq, to unite different ethnoreligious groups under the banner of a cohesive national project led to a complete de-legitimization of the secular nation-state and its “rational” underpinnings. As a result, various Islamic movements and hybrid political entities tried to resist against or substitute for the failed secular model.

The conflicts of Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya led to the fragmentation of these countries to alternate layers of hybrid politico-military entities which connect to each other by religious, ethnic/tribal or local bonds. The challenge in these cases is much more intense, more so since Syria and Iraq belonged to the core of the Arab order and were characterized by an almighty and ideologically consolidated domestic sovereignty. Even Egypt faced a threatening jihadist insurgency in the Sinai, something rather unimaginable for the strong Egyptian state two decades ago.

Second, there is a challenge to global order. We are in the midst of widespread “disruption” or incoherence of what we know as global order. Hardt and Negri have argued that the “planetary networks of social production and reproduction and the constitution of global governance are increasingly out of sync.” (Hardt and Negri 2019, pp. 68–69). Regional powers are not ready to acquiesce to the hegemonic role of the superpower in their region. Powers such as China, Russia, India, Iran, and Turkey act with a large degree of autonomy, without, however, challenging the superpower’s preponderance in the global scale.

There was a sharp increase of the occurrences of civil war in the last two decades, reaching fifty-two instances in 2015, the highest number of civil conflicts in the modern era. These conflicts have a high degree of internationalization as they are transformed into regional conflicts with the participation of regional and global powers. At the same time these conflicts are not waged in delimited areas as it was the case with national liberation movements, but they are scattered in many areas beyond certain borders (Fearon 2004). In such fragmented international and regional environments politico-military, non-state actors have become the third challenge to global and regional order. State-like actors like the Kurdish entities in Iraq and Syria and Hamas in Gaza, states-within-states like Hezbollah and hybrid states such as the “Islamic State” have been shaping regional order in the last decade. Particularly religious politico-military non state actors have worked as mechanisms of inclusion into a privileged collective self and of the exclusion of “others”.

The ascent of the “Islamic State” and its consolidation through hybrid state structures for a considerable period of time has been the most serious challenge to the Middle East nation-state. It is the first time that a state was set up by a multiethnic body politic without a dominant ethnic group. The “Islamic State” fostered a neo-medieval global order regarding borders and divine sovereignty and it transcended nation-state’s constants, appropriating at the same time functions of the secular state (Eleftheriadou and Roussos 2018). The “Islamic State” was fast to outline what it has to offer to its “citizens”, reminiscing and echoing previous social contracts (employment, welfare and health services) between the regimes and their citizens in the 20th century. These benefits and services provided an attractive alternative to the Sunni communities under “Islamic State’s” control, especially in Iraq, given their marginalization and absence from the political and military scene as well as unemployment. The insecure Sunni communities that demonstrate a regression in human development had not any choice to opt out of its “benefits and services”.



After the eruption of civil strife in Syria and Iraq, widespread violence and harassment, mainly by jihadist groups, came to substantiate fears for extinction of the Christians and other minorities in the region (CRPME 2016). Various jihadist groups have perpetrated ongoing ethnic cleansing. Regional antagonism in both Syria and Iraq has further exacerbated the conflicts, ignoring the dangers for non-Muslim communities. The churches' leadership initially tried to balance between its past co-optation policy with the regime and the growing instability and insecurity on the ground, more so since their faithful is territorially dispersed and the control on the ground is shifting. Middle Eastern churches are becoming increasingly diasporic instead of regional. Large numbers of Middle Eastern migrants and exiles in the Americas, Europe and Australia have been the basis of flourishing Eastern churches' parishes and bishoprics overseas. This means that Middle Eastern Christianity is linked to a world religious tradition.

Regional and global upheavals brought serious changes in the survival strategies of the Christian communities in the Middle East. First, Christians in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iraq, are facing a great danger of extinction resembling the genocides and mass exodus of Christians in the region during the First World War, and are bound to radically re-consider their survival strategies. Second, this might be the time the state in both Syria and Iraq is to rebuild in a federal and decentralized form. Third, the role and position of minorities, of the Christians in particular, in this state-rebuilding process would be the real test on what direction this process would take: towards a more decentralized and open to the world state, or towards autocratic federal states, where strong ethno-religious communities would reign over smaller groups. These questions will certainly be at the center of the debates for the future Middle East in the coming decade and attract the interest of global church actors, the Catholic and the Russian Orthodox Church.

#### 4. Studying Religion and International Relations in the Middle East

This Special Issue falls into the fields of "Area Studies" and of "Religion and Politics". As A. Acharya and B. Buzan pointed out "Area Studies should be a main location for sub-systemic theorizing", that is, to produce new knowledge (Acharya and Buzan 2007, p. 291). Today's Area Studies should produce patterns of theorization that consider non-Western International Relations perspectives (Katzenstein 2001, pp. 789–91).

The chapters are divided into three parts. The first includes two articles that deal with the contribution of religion to a post-Western turn in international relations in the Middle East and beyond. Mariano Barbato argues that an expansion of the post secular approach to a power politics of becoming would allow to grasp important trends that strive to integrate the plurality of the region beyond the exclusivist closures of secularist Pan-Arabism or religious Political Islam. The article discusses the post secular conceptual framework of Jürgen Habermas and William Connolly in order to expand their approaches to the analysis of the Middle East. Anna Solarz addresses the search for religion's "suitable place" within IR, taking as a starting point the social changes in the world and the postulated "Mesopotamian turn" in IR. She suggests that, through comparison and contrast with life in societies of the Middle East as it is in practice, religion has been incorporated quite naturally into IR, undermining, at the same time, the "Westphalian presumption".

The second part focuses on the role of state-like non-state actors (ISIS). Marina Eleftheriadou explores the implications of 'Islamic State's' (IS) rise on the international order and the salafi-jihadi movement. She argues that, in its capacity as a de facto revolutionary state, IS challenged the international order because, contrary to revolutionary states in the past, it negates the foundations of the Westphalian system. At the same time, the rise of IS had a tremendous impact on the jihadi (sub)system, as it initiated a period of fragmentation and alliance-building.

The third part focuses on the impact of religion on foreign and security policy (Israel, UAE, UK, Saudi Arabia). Panos Kourgiotis studies the ideological use of religion in the international relations of the United Arab Emirates during the Arab Spring and beyond. His essay examines the politics of 'moderate Islam' and argues that even though 'moderate Islam' has been devised for creating 'soft

power', it serves 'sharp power' as well. Moria Bar-Maoz explores how religion has been shaping each of the stages of the decision-making process in which Israeli decision makers have been formulating national security policies since the beginning of the 21st century, focusing on two security issues: terrorism and nuclear weapons. The paper argues that the stage in which decision makers identify and assess a threat to national interest has been greatly influenced by Israeli policymakers' operational perceptions on the relations between religion and security. Ihab Shabana studies Britain's encounter with the rise of political Islam in the Middle East and North Africa region and the way(s) that this phenomenon was (were) deciphered. He argues that British officials adopted four analytical schemas that concentrated on the rise of sectarian politics in MENA, the gradual accommodation of non-state actors and organizations in the political analysis, the prospect of an alliance between Islamist and communist forces and last, the prevalence of the idea of Islamic solidarity and Islamic exceptionalism in exerting international politics. Stella Athanassoulia explores the position that religion holds in the Saudi perceptions of stability in the post-2011 era, where safeguarding the status quo remained the priority, while the new administration responded to pressure by shifting towards a 'hard power' foreign policy with questionable results. At a second stage, the paper explores the links between foreign policy choices and internal challenges, namely the promotion of a new, modern image for the kingdom where the notion of 'moderate Islam' has been instrumentalized in order to support the 'Vision 2030' reform program.

This Special Issue explores the contribution of religion in reshaping modernity's contour of International Relations theories in the Middle East and beyond. Hence, it has a twofold purpose: first, to question main presuppositions and perceptions regarding religion and international politics in the Middle East and, second, to reflect on the role(s) of religion in the regional order.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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