

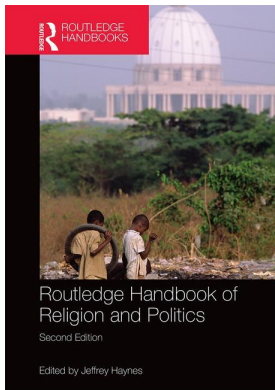
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6

SUNNI ISLAM AND ISLAMISM¹

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Introduction

One of the most common misunderstandings about Islam is that it contains some kind of essential ‘core’ which dictates the fundamental nature of political movements adopting its banner. Such misunderstandings are nowhere more obvious than in Western reactions to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and to Khomeini’s followers, who eventually dominated the post-revolutionary government, which saw frenzied talk of a ‘Green Peril’ rising in the East, describing the Islamic Republic and its regional sympathisers as a new and unprecedentedly dangerous ‘Pan-Islamic’ revolutionary movement, ‘state terrorism’ without boundaries, which was somehow quintessentially ‘Islamic’. However, during the revolution, slogans such as ‘neither East nor West, [only] an Islamic Republic’, or the adoption of religious symbols such as veiling, were simply straightforward and highly visible ways of protesting against the US-backed Shah’s policies and the Superpowers’ twin attempts at ‘imperialist’ influence. Moreover, religion as the hijacked banner for politics was not a new phenomenon, even then. In its ‘modern’ guise, it has its roots at least a century earlier, at the peak of European imperial influence, when, throughout the Ottoman Empire, debates raged about whether religion could provide a solution to the Empire’s weakness. In the twentieth century, religion provided a rallying point for opponents of authoritarian regimes, both monarchic and ‘secular’ nationalist. The Iranian Revolution simply thrust these movements to the forefront of the West’s political attention.

These kinds of misunderstandings arise in relation to both Sunni and Shi’a Islam, so although this chapter looks at key theological and legal aspects of Islam, and to its practical historical manifestations, with a particular focus on Sunni Islam, a similar analysis can be carried out in relation to the Shi’a world (see Mohammad Nafissi’s chapter in this volume: ‘Shiism and politics’). The idea that Islam – whether Sunni or Shi’a – is somehow inherently political, and perhaps inherently violent, has been central to Western debates about Middle Eastern politics, and more recently also to Western states’ domestic politics. An overview of the connection between ‘Islamist’ movements and the political context within which they emerge, however, shows that the nature of these movements has little to do with religion in itself. Rather, it reflects a politicisation of religion by which Islamist movements oppose a *status quo* which adherents believe is inherently unjust.

Principles of Islam

Islam is one of the three ‘Abrahamic’ religions, along with Judaism and Christianity. While Christianity sees itself as a ‘refinement’ of Judaism, Islam sees itself as the final revelation in that line. For Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad is the ‘Seal’ of a long line of prophets starting with Adam and including most of those recognised by Judaism and by Christianity. Beliefs and rules of behaviour in Islam are based on three sources: holy scripture (Qur’an), stories (*hadith*) about the Prophet’s life (which, combined, constitute the *Sunna*), and the extensive body of Islamic legal scholarship (*shari’a*). The fundamental elements of the faith, known as the ‘Five Pillars’, are:

1. *Shahada*: recognising the oneness of God, and that Muhammad is His Prophet;
2. *Salat*: prayer five times a day;
3. *Zakat*: an ‘alms tax’ to care for the poor;
4. *Hajj*: pilgrimage to Makkah once in one’s lifetime, if possible;
5. *Ramadan*: daytime fasting and spiritual reflection during this holy month.

Beyond this, however, Islam’s principles have been interpreted in widely different ways, and the practices carried out by Muslims themselves have varied just as much as those of any other ‘world religion’. Indeed, shortly after the Prophet’s death (632 CE), a schism occurred between two groups, Sunni and Shi’a, over who should be his rightful successor – Abu Bakr (Muhammad’s father-in-law) or ‘Ali (his son-in-law) – and how succession should be determined (by consultation or by family line). Today, Sunnis are the majority in North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, most of the Arabian Peninsula, and in Asia, while there are Shi’a majorities in Iran, parts of Central Asia and in some Sunni-ruled Gulf states. Within Sunni Islam, there are four major theological and legal schools – Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, Shafii – alongside which Sufism (mysticism) must also be mentioned.

One of the many poorly understood aspects of Islam is its jurisprudence. *Shari’a* is a body of scholarship on the basis of which legal codes can be drawn up. *Shari’a* is therefore *not* a specific legal code; it is if anything ‘Islamic legal studies’. For most Sunnis, *shari’a* is based on the Qur’an and *hadith*: through *qiyas* (analogy) and *ijma* (consensus) the body of Muslim scholars (*ulama*) arrives at the principles which any law must respect. *Ijtihad* (interpretation) is the exercise of judgement necessary to apply principles and precedents to new cases. After the rule of the Prophet’s Companions, the ‘Rightly-Guided Caliphs’, as the community of Muslims moved farther away from the spirit of those times, the ‘door of *ijtihad*’ was closed, theoretically preventing ‘innovation’ in Islamic jurisprudence. This has remained, however, a highly controversial issue, with some Sunni and mostly Shia Ulama claiming the legal possibility of *ijtihad* following the rule of the Prophet’s Companions.

Box 6.1 Practices

While the main beliefs in Islam – the Five Pillars – have remained constant, legal and theological interpretations, as well as practices, have varied across regions/states and over time. Saint-worship, for example, is associated with traditional popular Islam, but was challenged by modernist Salafism (the label for radical reformism) in early-twentieth-century North Africa.

- *Purdah* (modesty): dress in public should be ‘modest’ (for both men and women). For women, this has taken various forms: loose scarves of the Sudan; *chador* in Iran; *burqa* in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan; in Turkey, non-provocative dress but no *hijab*.

- There is no Qur’anic injunction specifying how women should dress. What ‘modesty’ entails has been interpreted differently over time and in different places (e.g. urban/rural, Gulf/Levant).
- *Marriage*: technically, men can take up to four wives. This was a provision related to a specific historical context in which there were many widows (largely legally unprotected before Islam), a paucity of men, and no means for most women to earn a living. Given women’s weak position at the time, it was useful for them to be protected in this way. Most Muslims today see this as arcane. Moreover, this right is legally subject to men being able to look after all wives *equally* – but, as the Qur’an itself points out, this equality is impossible to achieve in practice.

Overall, diversity of interpretations of Islam and its real-world practices induce a scepticism regarding suggestions that there is but one unique or unchanging ‘essence’ of Islam. Just how much Islamic discourses and practices in politics have changed over time becomes evident in an overview of its political history.

Traditional concepts constituting the Islamic heritage have often been reformulated to legitimise change and present political aspirations. For instance, the Ottomans reinvented the tradition of the caliphate, promoting the myth of a formal passage from the last descendant of the Abbasids to the Ottomans in the sixteenth century.² Other debates – which became particularly important during the nineteenth century – centred on traditional concepts such as *dhimma*, *shura* and *ijtihad*.

Caliph, from the Arab *khilaf* is the ‘successor’ of the Prophet Muhammad and the leader of the entire Muslim community. Although endowed with religious credentials, as the supreme ecclesiastic dignity of Islam, the Caliph is mostly a political figure and the guarantor of Muslim unity. As the absolute authority in the religious and the political domain, the caliphate, however, underwent periods of more and less cogency, facing increasing dwindling in its effective and symbolic power following the decline of Arabs after the Abbasid age (750–1258 CE) until its abolition in 1924.

Dhimma is a formulation allowing non-Muslim ‘people of the Book’ (Jews, Christians, Sabaeans and Zoroastrians) to live freely in Muslim states in their own communities, governed by their own laws, by paying a small tax. This system, known as *millet* under the Ottomans, allowed the peaceful coexistence of different faiths on the same land. For Sunnis, *shura* (consultation) is an important principle in selecting a leader: the community as a whole should agree on a choice. *Shura* was particularly emphasised in response to the need, felt by some, to lessen the absolutism of the Ottoman Empire. Finally, some argued that the problems of the time were unprecedented and therefore not covered by the existing body of jurisprudence, thus requiring the elaboration of new rules for this new era. But re-opening ‘the door of *ijtihad*’ generated understandable controversy.

Early history and expansion

In 610 CE, Muhammad received his first revelation, and in 622 CE started public preaching. Gradually, Islam became a political force, and, after encountering opposition in Makkah, the first community undertook the *hijra* (‘emigration’) to Medina in 627/28 CE where it achieved political power through an alliance with the local Jewish majority. The so-called ‘Constitution

of Medina', which regulated relations between religious communities, is the first written historical document of Islam, and still remains central to many contemporary debates. One such debate concerns under what conditions Muslims may live under non-Muslim authority, and the fact that the Constitution of Medina did not establish a theocracy but a religiously pluralist city-state is highly significant.

The period going from the classical age of Arab expansion under the Umayyad (661–750 CE) and Abbasid (750–1258 CE) caliphates to the intervention of European forces in the eighteenth century saw various ethnic groups assuming the lead and expansion of 'Islamic' empires, emphasising their inclusive, universal character. In addition, different ethnic groups found themselves leading parts of the Islamic world through different dynasties, including Turks, Berbers, Iranians, and Mongols. This produced various dynasties, such as the Seljuks, Almoravids, Ayyubids, and Mamlukes. Between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Muslim world found itself divided into various empires: the Sunni Ottoman Empire (Middle East, Balkans, and Northern Africa); the Shi'a Safavid Empire in the Caucasus and West Asia; and the Mughul Empire, occupying most of the Indian subcontinent. This range of different ethnic groups and dynasties was mirrored in a great diversity of cultural expressions, including: Hellenistic traditions, Persian (Indo-Iranian) culture, and Turkish influences. This contributed to development of highly refined literatures, artistic expressions, architectures, philosophy, and sciences (e.g. Moorish Spain, or Safavid Isfahan). It was through this heritage that many classical Greek texts were later 'rediscovered' in Europe during the Renaissance.

Moreover, throughout the Empire's expansion, Islamic jurisprudence recognised the legitimacy of various kinds of political system. It is important to stress that since its earliest times, Islam has been used by 'temporal power' to consolidate itself. This affected both theology and jurisprudence: scholars close to the Empire developed theories of 'jihad' which allowed the political leadership to justify expansion into richer lands to the north of Arabia.

The political and cultural climate subsequent to the early conquests favoured the emergence of legal interpretations which provided key examples of religious and ethnic pluralism, often by drawing on the notion of *dhimma*. The closest comparison in Europe was Frederick II's Sicily, itself largely based on the model of the island's earlier Muslim rulers.

Next, our discussion focuses on the period following the encounter with European colonial powers in the nineteenth century in the Sunni Arabophone Middle East since it provides major paradigms explaining further developments in the history of Muslim countries.

Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century political debates

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire's economic and military weakness in relation to Europe became increasingly clear. This strongly coloured political debate within the Empire, eliciting two kinds of responses: first, some argued that the Islamic community – which is what, after all, the Ottoman Empire at least nominally claimed to be the Sunni incarnation of – had weakened because it had abandoned its original spirit, and that therefore it should rediscover that spirit by going back to the original purity of Islam. The second response was that the Empire was faced with an unprecedented threat, which should be dealt with at least partly by adapting technical knowledge and institutions from Europe. This led to the Ottoman *tanzimat* (reform) laws, and other local reforms within the Empire (notably in Egypt). Three religious scholars, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida, are the central figures of late-nineteenth-century debates over the reform of (Sunni) Islamic law

to meet the challenge of European imperialism, the ‘fathers of Islam’ (reform) to whom both moderates and radicals today trace their intellectual roots, and whose heritage they claim.

Al-Afghani (1838–1897) dreamt of a reinvigorated caliphate unifying the entire Muslim world under one political and spiritual leadership. Despite his very limited political success, he is important, firstly, for his influence on later figures like Rashid Rida and Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Islamist movement ‘Muslim Brotherhood’ (Ikhwan al-Muslimun); secondly, because he was the first major intellectual to react against European penetration by formulating a political opposition based on innovative religious grounds; and finally, because to do so he looked back to a supposed ‘Golden Age’ of early Islam – a move which, albeit historical rather ‘creative’, has since then marked virtually all attempts to think about burning issues such as the relationship between Muslim communities and secular states.

Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905) came from a wealthy family, and taught at Cairo’s prestigious al-Azhar University. He was a gradualist reformer, advocating adaptation of some European institutions. Supporting the need for consultative government, ‘Abduh argued that rather than ‘importing’ from Europe, Muslims should rediscover *shura*. He also called for re-opening the ‘door of *ijtihad*’ in order to meet the unprecedented challenges of European imperialism.

Rashid Rida (1865–1935), who was a student of both ‘Abduh and al-Afghani, and edited the political magazine *al-Manar*, marks a turning point in Islamist thought and in the attitudes of intellectuals towards Europe. Writing during the British occupation of Egypt (1882–1922), he advocated *active resistance* to imperialist encroachment by arguing that (defensive) jihad should be widened to include defence against political as well as religious oppression, its more conventional understanding.

To understand why these developments took place at this particular time, it is necessary to note that in Egypt at the time the main political problem was – and, until 1952, remained – independence from British occupation. Following Egypt’s declaration of bankruptcy, Viceroy Ismail was deposed in 1875 and the ‘Dual Control’ – a sort of *ante diem* International Monetary Fund – established. After Ismail, Egyptian rulers were mostly compliant to British interests. Like the British, they felt threatened by nationalist opposition, and co-operated with the former in curtailing nationalists’ access to power. Following a coup in 1880 by a nationalist – Colonel ‘Urabi – the British invaded, heralding seventy years of military and political presence. Other features, such as parallel courts for Egyptians and for foreigners, gradually established a system of discrimination which contributed to radicalising both nationalist and religious opposition.

From peaceful reform to armed resistance in early-twentieth-century Egypt

In a highly destabilised context marked by colonialism, among the utmost factors of the weakening of Muslim settings in the early twentieth century, the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the dissemination of nationalist discourses in the form of local nationalisms, pan-Arabism and Kemalism, and the ultimate abolition of the caliphate in 1924, played a crucial role. The ending of the caliphate denoted the traumatic penetration of nationalistic discourses into the Islamic land, with the traditional ethos of Islamic universalism now irremediably challenged by local and racialised representations of space and community. Although a certain fluid and creative use of tradition had long marked the institution of the caliphate, its symbolic role had been central over the centuries, guaranteeing and symbolising Muslim unity and functioning as the ultimate reference of political legitimation. It is therefore not surprising that a strong sense of anxiety spread in the Muslim world when the caliphate was abolished in

1924 following the replacement of the Ottoman Empire with the ‘modern’ republic of Turkey. A number of unsuccessful international conferences in the following decades aimed at re-establishing this institution outside Turkey, reflecting the sense of lost identity that the abolition of the caliphate enacted in Muslim settings, from India to Egypt.

In Egypt, the continued presence of the British helped to radicalise political ideologies and practices across the political spectrum. Two events epitomised the impact of British imperialism: declaration of a British Protectorate over Egypt during World War I, effectively allowing the former to occupy the country; and the refusal to admit an Egyptian delegation demanding national independence to the post-World War I peace negotiations at Versailles. The establishment of a Mandate following the war reflected a further Western betrayal of the ‘democratic nationalism’ which was supposed to inform the Versailles settlements. Even when, in 1922, after three years of unrest, the British unilaterally recognised Egyptian ‘independence’, they retained control over areas such as foreign policy and the right to a military presence and to political intervention, which effectively emptied ‘independence’ of any meaning: Egypt remained a *de facto* colony.

Paralleling trends in Europe, the 1920s and 1930s saw the emergence of extremist politics across the entire political spectrum, from socialist and communist movements, to Islamism and radical Egyptian nationalism. Meantime, although the popular nationalist Wafd was regularly voted into power, the British collaborated with the Egyptian king – as they did with the Hashemite monarchs in Syria, Iraq and Arabia – in consistent attempts to discredit the opposition. In practice, this helped undermine Egyptian nationalism, creating the context for alternative ideologies – e.g. Islamist, Arabist, and Socialist – to challenge the Wafd’s ‘liberal nationalism’, and facilitating a generalised political radicalisation.

In this context schoolmaster Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949) established the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 as an organisation providing welfare services, aiming to encourage and defend morality, Islamising society ‘from below’, rather than through revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood was soon drawn into politics, developing explicit political goals. The increasingly troubled political context favoured the radicalisation of the Brotherhood’s political philosophy and tactics – just like its ‘secular’ counterparts – and, like these, the Brotherhood soon developed an armed wing. However, its main focus remained education from below and the infiltration of political and social institutions. The combination of its welfare services, its religious credentials, the government’s increasing authoritarianism, and the progressive discrediting of the Wafd, soon made the Muslim Brotherhood Egypt’s largest political organisation.

It is important to understand that the Brotherhood, despite its own rhetoric, was not a manifestation of traditional Islamism. On the contrary, it was a prime example of a *modern* political organisation: mass-based, populist, supported mainly by the urban middle and lower classes, using a cell-based structure, and embracing religious reformism. Finally, the Brotherhood prioritised Egypt: it wished to reform primarily *Egyptian* politics, not the universal Islamic community, struggling first and foremost for Egyptian independence. Like the nationalists, it wanted ‘Egypt for the Egyptians’.

The radicalisation of Islamism in the Sunni world

Sayyid al-Mawdudi (1903–1979) was an influential Islamic thinker and the founder of the Sunni Islamic political movement Jamaat-e-Islami. He elaborated most of his radical theories during the political turmoil preceding the separation of Hindu-majority India, and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Al-Mawdudi thought Islam was *inseparably* faith and state (*din wa dawla*), arguing sovereignty cannot rest with the people but only with God, and that a religious state

cannot simply be Muslim-majority, it must be governed not only according to his vision of 'true Islam' but also only by 'true Muslims'.

Another separate and distinctive approach – Wahhabism – also emerged as a conservative movement based on normative and literalist approaches to scripture. As for many such movements of its time, in Wahhabism, tradition is perceived as a fixed set of values that must be protected from the assaults of religious innovations (*bid'ah*). Wahhabi clergy had – both doctrinally and politically – supported the ruling family of Saudi Arabia in their rise to power during the eighteenth century. During the rejuvenation of Islamism in the 1970s, Wahhabism provided the Saudi family with an alternative ideological platform to spread its 'political' influence, in concurrence with the great international resonance of the (Shi'a) Islamist Iranian Republic.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood took a radical turn. Having helped Nasser come to power and consolidate his rule, under him the Brotherhood was not only heavily repressed by the state but also marginalised politically by Arab nationalism. Nasser's single party co-opted, marginalised or repressed his main rivals: the Brotherhood, large-land-owners, and the Communists. This radicalised the Brotherhood, as evidenced by the history of the involvement of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), who had joined the Brotherhood in 1951. Arrested in 1954 under Nasser and executed in 1965, while in prison Qutb personally experienced the harshness of Nasser's repression. There, he wrote his most important tract, *Milestones*. For Qutb, the depth of contemporary corruption was such that society should be regarded as being in a state of *jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic ignorance), and therefore be rejected in its entirety, requiring a radical overhaul to be imposed 'from above'.

What links the ideas of all these movements is not theoretical unity or even agreement about goals and methods of political struggle, but the simple fact that the radicalisation of Islamist discourse and practices (in our case Sunni) occurred as a response to a specific political context, namely the combination of internal repression and growing 'Western' interference.

The question of jihad

The notion of jihad is central both to the political theory of radical Islamists, and to many Western (mis)representations of Islam.

In mainstream Islamic thought, conventional interpretations of jihad are far from its common – and erroneous – translation, especially in the West, as 'holy war'. Jihad translates as 'striving', but the historical theorisation of this struggle, still by far the most dominant today, could hardly be farther from that of a 'holy war'. Nor is jihad central to Islamic political theory, as is often claimed. In the Qur'an, organised violence is referred to as *ghazwa* (raid), *harb* and *qital* (war) – not jihad – using terms with roots *qtl* and/or *hrb*, not *jhd*. Indeed, verses in which *jhd* appears rarely directly and exclusively link it to armed conflict, but *always* to personal effort (e.g. hence *ijtihad*, the effort of exegetic interpretation). Just how misleading interpretation can be is clear when considering verses containing the term jihad and substituting the two different meanings. Take for example: 'Fear God and attempt to move closer to Him and His religion, and fight on His path' (Qur'an V, 35). Here one finds *jhd*, not *hrb* or *qtl*, and replacing 'fight' with 'strive' changes the apparent meaning of the verse entirely.

So what *is* jihad? Conventional interpretations distinguish between at least two kinds of jihad: the 'greater jihad', entails striving against one's own negative inclinations, behaving piously. The 'lesser jihad', or 'jihad of the sword' permits the use of force to defend the faith only when Muslims are actively prevented from practising their religion (if there has been a *fatwa*, a legal opinion issued by legitimate religious authorities). This shows how marginal armed resistance, let alone aggression, is in conventional jurisprudence. The interpretation by modern radicals is

very different: exclusive, sometimes aggressive, and through a language of ‘defending the faith’ and ‘individual duty’, aims towards ‘Islamising’ state and society. It is also more central to modern radical theories, to the point that it is sometimes considered to be ‘the neglected duty’, the ‘Sixth Pillar’ of Islam (recall that the only imperative duties are the Five Pillars).

Such a stark difference between classical and contemporary radical notions, such a movement from a spiritual meaning to a duty of revolution, begs an explanation. The gradual evolution of the concept of jihad into an attempt to justify *armed* struggle against *political* oppression cannot be divorced from the historical context of 150 years or so of European (neo)imperial pressure: it is a response in both political discourse and in practices to (a) authoritarian governments at home, and (b) the impact of imperialism. The Egyptian case clearly illustrates a spiral of authoritarian governments, foreign interference, and radicalisation.

From armed struggle to elections: contemporary Islamism in Egypt before the Arab Spring

It should not be assumed that the only or indeed dominant translation of Islam into politics is violent. Indeed, in the Middle East and elsewhere Islamist groups have emerged to political prominence, even power, which are not violent or particularly radical. Turkey, Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt all provide cases in point. In Jordan and Morocco, Islamists have been co-opted into a political process dominated by an authoritarian monarchy; in Turkey an Islamist party was voted into power in 2002; while in Egypt Islamists have provided the only credible, mass-based opposition to authoritarian regimes since the 1970s.

The emergence of this complex range of Islamist politics is rooted in external political influence in the Middle East, in the failure of Arabism and of ‘developmental’ nationalism, and in the authoritarianism of regimes throughout the region. Again, Egypt’s experiences typify these trajectories.

Arab nationalism was severely damaged by its defeat in the ‘Six-Day War’ of 1967, shifting power towards the conservative and more pro-Western monarchies led by Saudi Arabia. However, it was Sadat’s negotiations with Israel after the October War of 1973, culminating in the Camp David Accords, which finally broke Arab nationalism’s back. After that, although Arab identity remained important, Islam has increasingly been used to justify government policy and to hold governments to account for failing to fulfil their promises, for protesting corruption, immorality, etc.

Sadat became President upon Nasser’s death in 1970, but no one expected his succession to last. This supposedly innocuous vice-president, however, oversaw a momentous shift in Egyptian politics which frames the relationship between regime and Islamist opposition to this day. A weak figure, Sadat consolidated his power by doing two things: first, he went to war with Israel. This brought them to the negotiating table, and Sadat won not only a public-opinion coup but also got the Sinai Peninsula and the Suez Canal back. It also allowed him to offer his allegiance to the US, as he disliked the Soviets. Secondly, he isolated Nasser’s single party, the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) by using the Muslim Brotherhood as a domestic counterweight.

This tactical choice had far-reaching strategic implications. The Brotherhood’s leadership had been radicalised by prison, some extreme sections splintering into groups like Gamaat al-Islamiyya or al-Jihad. The price of Sadat’s international realignment was a peace with Israel which left his Arab counterparts badly weakened, a personal trip to Israeli-occupied Jerusalem, and a speech to the Knesset for which he would never be forgiven. Economic liberalisation (*infatih*) required by the USA also badly hit the poor, causing extensive riots. Along with his

periodical crackdowns on opposition, his political and economic reforms proved his undoing: Sadat found he ultimately could not control the forces he had unleashed and was assassinated at a military parade in 1981.

Hosni Mubarak, who also 'inherited' the presidency, continued the alternating cycles of liberalisation and repression his predecessor used to manipulate domestic politics. He immediately declared a state of emergency which has been renewed to this day, and while he allowed elections, he made sure the National Democratic Party (NDP) stayed in power, thereby guaranteeing his presidency. He maintained the ban on the Muslim Brotherhood, preventing their participation in elections, and met armed resistance with brutal repression. The Brotherhood, however, engaged in innovative political strategies: they entered into electoral alliance with weakened secular parties, allowing Brothers to run for office. By the late 1990s, Brotherhood candidates were standing as 'independents', and rapidly became the largest opposition 'party' in parliament. Moreover, migrant labour returning from the Gulf brought back more conservative social attitudes, Brotherhood supporters rose through the ranks of professional associations, and the state's continued weakness as a welfare provider contrasted starkly with the array of social services provided by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Political Islam and the changing conditions of the Middle East

The pattern noted in the section above – Islamists adapting to government oppression while developing ability to build and consolidate mass support – provides important indications not only regarding political developments throughout the Middle East generally but also in relation to Islamism. Since the 1970s, the economic and political crisis of postcolonial development projects stimulated the growth of a diverse political opposition. The oil-related economic slump of the mid-1980s increased pressure on the already struggling economies of non-oil-producing states, highlighting their economic difficulties and – given their general crackdowns on opposition – just how thin the veil of 'democracy' covering these regimes was. The 1990s increased such pressures, as the end of the Cold War on the one hand undermined the need for limited liberalisation to combat Soviet influence (as well as US aid), while on the other democratic discourse became unassailably central to international politics. The first Gulf War, following the breaking of another Arab nationalist taboo, the invasion of one Arab state (Kuwait) by another (Iraq), also stoked the embers of anti-Americanism as it was widely perceived to be a 'war for oil'. This weakened Washington's allies' domestic position, with opposition movements accusing them – with more than some justification – not only of being in Washington and Riyadh's pockets, but also of not practising the democracy they preached.

Some have argued that 'political Islam' has failed to produce successful revolutions, where it would have lived up to its supposed universalist ideals, or indeed modernising reforms.³ This underestimates the influence, either directly in government or indirectly in opposition, which increasingly popular Islamist movements have had. Some parties have been allowed to contest elections, and, as in Turkey or Palestine, have won the election. In other cases, governments have tried to pre-empt such electoral success through a combination of police harassment (e.g. Egypt, or the Algerian extreme of an Army coup suspending elections, leading to a bloody civil war), legislative obstacles, and an at least superficial pandering to a conservative Islamic agenda.

Islam and revolution?

Can we say that there is a link between 'Islam' and revolution or political violence generally? This question has often been raised, particularly since the Iranian Revolution. It should

be clear that the answer is negative. The Iranian Revolution provides a case in point: this was not, as many incorrectly state, an 'Islamic' revolution, but an uprising by a wide range of forces across all Iranian society – from the Shi'a clergy to the Communists to the Kurds – reacting to an authoritarian monarchy which was perceived as being 'in the pocket of the USA', and whose imbalanced 'modernisation' project placed enormous strain on society. Only afterwards did Islamists gain primacy among other factions. The role of Islam during the revolution was that of a symbol of opposition to arbitrary 'modernisation', which felt too much like a wholesale abdication of a proud millennia-long identity in favour of narrow materialism, consumerism, and subjection to foreign interests. The Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989), religious authority and political leader of the Iranian Revolution, significantly called this 'Westoxification', and, again significantly, one of the Islamists' slogans was 'Neither East nor West, [only] an Islamic Republic' – a token of how oppressively the super-powers' presence was felt during the Cold War.

Thus, *religious principles* did not bring about revolution: political oppression and enormous inequalities clashed with a discourse of development and democracy – these were the motors of the Revolution. 'Islam' was simply its banner. So much so, that the significance of the revolution was felt across the Sunni/Shi'a and Arab/Persian divides. Iran became a model not for doctrinal reasons, but because for the first time it demonstrated the feasibility not only of a revolution, but of a culturally 'authentic' political system: it appeared to throw off the yoke of imperialism, both material and cultural, completely and definitively.

Islamist nationalist movements such as Hizballah and Hamas provide analogous cases: for these movements, the independence of a national community is even more important than the 'Islamisation' of society. Indeed, both happen to be responses to the Israeli presence in South Lebanon and in the Occupied Territories respectively. It is also no coincidence that these movements rose to prominence once their earlier 'secular' counterparts were perceived to be failing.

Islam(ism) and democracy

Another supposed 'failure' of Islam in its relation to politics is Huntington's (1993) argument that Islam in its 'essence' constitutes a 'civilisation' inherently different from, and more violent than, any other. This supposedly explains why the Middle East did not democratise after the end of the Cold War, as did Eastern Europe. This argument, however tempting such simple answers might be, ignores the causes of the emergence of radical ideologies and violent practices and the relationship between political oppression and radical politics generally (not just religious radicalism). In the Middle East, it is clear that what has radicalised the opposition is the inability and/or unwillingness of local regimes and their international counterparts to accept the consequences of genuine pluralism.

In Western debates, questions about the relationship between Islam and violence are virtually symbiotic with doubts about its 'compatibility' with democracy. The argument is often heard that while democracy requires secularism, openness and the acceptance of non-religious state authority, Islam as a religion – and therefore any 'Islamist' politics – demands a theocratic state in which there can be no debate about right and wrong, or about appropriate social order, because its aim must be 'to bring about the rule of God'. It should be clear by now that this is historically and jurisprudentially wrong.

Nonetheless, there has been considerable debate about the scope for liberalising Middle Eastern politics. Salamè⁴ points out that, aside from a few notable examples, what 'democratisation' there has been in the Middle East has been largely cosmetic, putting in place institutions, but undermining their democratic potential by curtailing their remit or bypassing them

(e.g. skewing electoral law in favour of ruling parties, or rigging the results). Guazzone⁵ points to an apparent ‘Islamist Dilemma’: if allowed to run for elections, Islamists may win and cancel elections once in power, but preventing them from running undermines democracy. On the other hand, allowing real pluralism may give more moderate voices a chance to meet popular political demands, thus preventing wider socio-political marginalisation and radicalisation.

Such debates about the relationship between Islam and violence, democracy, etc. are significant not so much for their intellectual depth, but because they illustrate a certain way of thinking about Islam, particularly in the West. As Edward Said⁶ and others point out, much Western public discourse about the ‘Orient’ suggests a Manichean representation of the West as advanced, progressive, democratic, egalitarian, secular, rational, and peaceful, and of the East as backward, stagnant, authoritarian, discriminatory, religiously dogmatic, fanatical, and violent. This representation is supported by the histories of neither Western states nor Middle Eastern ones, but it has historically enabled policies such as colonialism, or the Mandate system, which would have been difficult to justify had non-Western cultures been accorded equal dignity to those of the West. Overall, recent Islamist political responses throughout the Middle East and North Africa are neither specifically *Sunni* nor even particularly *Islamic*. Instead, they are inherently *political* responses to authoritarian political systems and continuing foreign meddling.

The Arab Uprisings

The Arab Uprisings presented a powerful challenge to Orientalist notions about regional politics: where Orientalist representations see violent political culture(s) the Uprisings were largely peaceful; where stereotypes assumed Islam was inextricable from politics, in the Uprisings religious rhetoric was notable for its absence; where Islamist organisations were assumed to be the only ones capable of mobilising populations, mass popular protest took place often despite and against the directions of such organisations, which had to quickly catch up with popular action.⁷ Until the Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, most observers made the mistake of conflating regional regimes’ use of coercion as a sign of strength. The speed with which uprisings washed across the region suggests that those regimes ought to be seen as violent, fierce even, but brittle if not fragile. In particular, far from resulting in economic and then political liberalisation, IMF-mandated economic ‘reforms’ which had privatised state assets led to the polarisation of income and wealth, to the reinforcement of an oligarchic elite, and to unrest.⁸ In addition, the Uprisings powerfully demonstrated that Islam is not necessarily the (only) solution: well before Sisi’s renewed attempts to stigmatise it, for example, the Egyptian Brotherhood had been widely perceived as at best taking advantage of the revolution, if not badly out of step with it. Both the Egyptian Brotherhood and Tunisia’s Nahda Party convincingly won elections, despite not being at the forefront of the Uprisings. In this sense, it would be a mistake to attribute such success to ‘Islam’, or even to the putatively religious nature of their ideology. In fact, their success cannot be understood except in the context of a series of converging forces: the unwillingness of local regimes to soften economically and politically exploitative arrangements; the unwillingness of international powers – first and foremost the US and the EU – to seriously countenance such changes; the determination of regional powers (particularly Gulf States) to crush any possibility of popular mobilisation and government accountability; and of course the decades-long determination to crush any form of political alternative to either the regime or Islamist groups. While the (partial) success of the 1989 East European transitions to democracy was made possible by a permissive international environment, the ‘failure’ of the Uprisings and the advent of the so-called ‘Islamist winter’ are direct results of the determined opposition of local, regional, and international actors. In their

scramble to explain the Uprisings, many Western observers in both academia and government have emphasised factors such as the use of social media developed in the West; the supposedly unprecedented adoption of non-violent protest tactics derived from Western thinkers (particularly Gene Sharp); and US funding for the propagation of such approaches. These claims are Orientalist in that they share an inability and/or an unwillingness to acknowledge the possibility that local populations could recognise and act against the forces exploiting them without outside help. Such explanations also conveniently neglect precisely those dynamics of social, economic, and political marginalisation driving protest waves in European ‘liberal democracies’.

Radicalisation and extremism after the Arab Spring

Among the most important developments in the wake of the ‘Arab Spring’ is certainly the emergence of ISIS. The organisation stemmed from the regrouping of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which in turn amalgamated several groups that had been operating in Iraq since the US-led invasion of 2004, including al Qaeda. Led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a Sunni preacher claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad, the movement seized vast territories from northern Syria to central and northern Iraq, declaring the inclusion of these regions within the new ‘Islamic State of Iraq and Syria’, and demanding allegiance from other Islamist groups and Arab tribes. The Arabic denomination for the movement is Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham (DAIISH is therefore the group’s Arab acronym). It should be pointed out that the Islamic concept of *dawla*, although traditionally associated with the nation-state, presents important differences. Denoting a complex system of loyalty that blurs the fundamental distinction between the inside and the outside of the modern nation-state, it challenges the character of national sovereignty. While the ruler of the *dawla* is traditionally accountable internally towards a domestic constituency (the ‘subjects’ of the *dawla*), an outward accountability is also established externally with the Caliph representing the whole global Muslim community.⁹

Besides the establishment of an institutional platform and the provision of social services sustaining the image of a state, it is DAIISH media wing’s use of TV editing techniques for terror and propaganda videos, and successful military operations that have contributed to the movement’s sweeping expansion. Symbolic targets have been crucial in sustaining the victorious image of DAIISH, while also denoting a possible rejection of nationalist imaginary.¹⁰ DAIISH has been able to tap into Western fears, for example by efficiently disseminating videos of ferocious beheadings by broadcasting Hollywood-style trailers drawing on action-movie components such as slow-motion explosions, or cinema-like titles such as ‘Flames of War: Fighting Has Just Begun’, and through references to the internationally acclaimed TV series *Homeland*. By drawing on the same anxieties and unconscious fears Hollywood itself incarnates, these propaganda techniques create a splash between fiction and reality. Another major symbolic gesture has been to crash a bulldozer through the border boundary dividing Syria and Iraq, announcing that they were in fact destroying the ‘Sykes-Picot’ border, in reference to a 1916 Franco-British agreement that epitomised European imperialism in the region. Conversely, this event aimed to undermine the political order devised by European powers and symbolically reconnected with the idea of pre-colonial territoriality and the pan-Islamic imaginary of the caliphate.¹¹ Even more radical as a gesture – but also novel and controversial in the history of Islamist movements – was the group’s decision on 29 June, 2014, to supplement the declaration of the Islamic *dawla* with the proclaimed ‘restoration of caliphate’. While renouncing the reference to Iraq and Syria, with ‘Islamic State’ now remaining the only

denomination for the new entity, the celebration of a universalistic ideal has thus been fully realised, with the decision to declare Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the Caliph of all Muslims and the Prince of the Believers (*Amir al-Mu'minin*). Thus, they did what other groups and movements had never dared to attempt: they reinvented and revived the tradition of the caliphate, with all its incredible symbolic appeal, not as a promise for the future but as a living entity in the present, ending almost a century of discussions about the possible re-establishment of this political institution. Naturally, the restoration of the caliphate by DAIISH has not failed to attract harsh criticism. Prominent Muslim leaders and scholars across the Sunni Islamic spectrum, including Al-Azhar graduates, have rejected the Islamic State group's self-proclaimed caliphate as 'null' and 'deviant', and Islamist figures as the Qatar-based Egyptian religious leader Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the founder of the Tunisian al-Nahda Party, Rachid Ghannouchi, and Assem Barqawi, a supporter of the al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, have questioned the legitimacy of this operation.

Islamism in theory and in practice

It should be clear by now that Sunni 'Islamist' movements – much like their confessional counterparts – are primarily political phenomena, and that beyond the language they use to articulate their goals, they cannot be said to stem from some 'essence' of Islam. Islam is not Islamism. Not only is Islam's 'intrinsic nature' a historical myth, but both supporters and opponents use it for political purposes. The historical variety of 'political Islam' shows that many different phenomena fall under this label – a range within which violent extremism is a minority position. 'Islamism' is simply a set of political and social movements aiming to 'bring Islam back' into politics and society. Islamists aim for some kind of 'Islamisation' of the state and/or of society, meaning essentially a return to a more socially and morally just life. In contemporary political contexts, this translates into demands for changes in the law, changes in political leadership, and changes in foreign policy. In social terms, this means demands for a more conservative morality and for changes in education. But on specifics, there is little – if any – agreement between such movements, and indeed there is often acrimonious disagreement.

Whatever the political outcomes, Islamist groups have adapted to state pressure by innovative political tactics. In some cases, larger groups with greater popular support have been able to achieve a variety of goals, such as pushing for changes in the law to meet their interpretation of *shari'a*. Since the 1980s, these tactics have allowed their influence – whether in power or in opposition – to grow throughout the region (e.g. Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan). In several cases, for example, *shari'a* is acknowledged in constitutions as 'one', or even 'the' principal source of law. Also, religious courts have often been allowed to rule on 'personal status' issues (e.g. divorce or inheritance). Moreover, the restrictions on participation in electoral politics has often led Islamists on the one hand to promote precisely the democratic and pluralist discourse they are accused of wanting to undermine (e.g. Turkey), and on the other hand to attempt to infiltrate those professional associations which act both as access to, and channels of, patronage (e.g. lawyers' and judges' guilds, medical associations, etc.).

The role of Islamism as a way of articulating political demands is clear not only from Islamist movements, but also from states' reactions. Several states, notably Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt, have attempted to appropriate religious symbolism to legitimise their own rule. Egypt's Anwar Sadat portrayed himself as the 'Believer President', while Moroccan and Jordanian kings have used their lineage – which they trace back to the Prophet Muhammad's family – to legitimise their rule. Also, the Saudis and other ruling Gulf families combine traditional and religious symbols to legitimise their rule.

How important is 'Islam'?

Does Islam set the Middle East apart from other regions? If so, is this difference purely one of degree, or is it unique, utterly different? The answers to these questions are vital: answering in the affirmative raises the spectre of a 'clash of civilisations' between 'Islam and the West', while a negative answer sweeps away the very foundations upon which such arguments stand.

Islam is seen as 'more political' than other religions. Yet, other religions are also highly political, as even cursory overviews of the history of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, or Judaism show. Moreover, like others, Islam leaves room for interpretation concerning the relationship between religion and politics.

Islam has been used as a vehicle for conferring political legitimacy, and has been made to 'serve' authoritarianism, monarchy, and democracy. In this, it is in no way dissimilar to its counterparts, as clearly in most countries – Western as well as non-Western – religion plays an important part, both directly as a party-political force, and indirectly as an influence upon morals. Not all Western states, for example, have a strict separation of Church and politics (UK, Japan), and even in those which do – for example Spain, Germany, France, or Italy – clearly Christianity, its Churches, and the parties which subscribe to their values play a considerable role. In North America, most US Presidents have been active Christians, while Israel is an explicitly religious state.

Given the connection between authoritarianism and radical politics, it seems more plausible to explain the manifestation of extremism in relation to local authoritarian contexts. Moreover, while the most 'media-friendly' images are those conjured by violent extremism, the fact remains that most Muslims and most Islamist politics remain non-violent and desirous of more, not less, democracy.

Islam, globalisation and the Internet

The idea that in principle religion can and should be separated from politics, and that they are separate in fact, is a staple of political debate in the 'West' and of Western representations of itself. However, the lines of demarcation between such domains are neither precise nor self-evident, whether in historical contexts, in current practices of Western democracies, nor in the theories underpinning them, as evidenced by the debate on 'civil unions' in Spain and Italy or on the *hijab* in France or Britain. This demarcation is not clear in either the West or in the East, nor is it clear in Christianity, in Islam, or in other religions. Indeed, the notion of religion itself might vary significantly in different religious settings, challenging Western societies' 'commonsensical' beliefs about themselves and about their global counterparts.

In an Islamic setting, the debate about the role of religion in individual and social life has produced an enormous variety of opinions and practices combining religion and politics in different ways, sometimes overlapping through the notion of 'Islamic order' (*al-Nizam al-Islami*), other times maintaining separation of some sort. As noted above, Islamic jurisprudence legislates on a variety of topics (marriage, inherited property, social duties, etc.) which would, from a Western perspective, be generally considered non-religious, but which some Muslims perceive to be strictly religious affairs.

Others might be aware of and accept this distinction, but may choose to challenge society's specific arrangements of a given social institution – e.g. divorce or banking – through the language of a critique based on religious principles. Religious precepts thus provide a self-conscious way of articulating and pursuing political aims. Indeed, throughout the history of

Islam, religion has often helped legitimise what from a Western perspective may appear purely 'political' decisions.

The notion of two clearly distinct and separable domains, public/political and private/religious, is equally problematic: there are clearly a whole range of phenomena which inherently bridge these dimensions. Consider a wedding: whether in a Western or Middle Eastern setting, although technically a private event, it may acquire recognised public relevance, especially when speeches given during the celebration spread significantly via word of mouth or videotape.¹²

By further blurring these borders and hierarchies, by increasing possibilities of cross-cultural encounters, and by stimulating cross-border migration, globalisation has increased the number and 'visibility' of these hybrid spaces, accelerating and intensifying the degree of interconnection between the public and the private. These unprecedented cultural challenges, alongside mass education and the emergence of new media, have contributed to reshaping these supposedly independent spheres, redefining the space from which ideas on community and selfhood – Islamic, but not exclusively – are discussed.

These challenges have also eroded the privileged position of both traditional religious authorities and of political establishments, whose ability to control the elaboration and broadcast of ideas has decreased drastically.¹³ Significant in this sense has been the appearance of the Internet as a medium through which the monopoly over traditional religious interpretations has been challenged.

Traditional media such as the printed press, television, and radio, were based on a centralised, top-down model of communication in which the sender controlled the elaboration and diffusion of messages, while audiences passively received it. Audiences did attempt to bypass government control of such media through alternative vehicles of new ideas. In the Middle East, this led to the diffusion of audio and videotapes by which religious teachings and cultural forms of expression – including the politically subversive North African musical genre, *ra'i* – have bypassed strict state control.¹⁴

In this sense, the Internet represents the most important vehicle in the articulation and dissemination of alternative doctrinal, social, and political viewpoints about Islam. The net has been increasingly used in very different contexts and for very different purposes.

As an instrument for political action, the methods and uses to which it has been put have varied. Unlike ten years ago, cyberattacks, cyberwars, and cyber terrorism, are no longer remote possibilities. Many websites discuss the implementation of e-jihad (jihad on/via the Internet); some provide military training and sometimes bomb-making instructions. 'Hacktivism', attacks carried out by hackers, require a level of sophistication which some Islamist groups now possess, as demonstrated recently in the hacking war between DAIISH and Anonymous, the latter a roughly organised international network of activist and hacktivist actors.

In some cases, movements from Muslim countries attempt to address the international community by providing information on local political contexts or by explaining their political objectives. Islamic organisations sometimes resort to websites in English and Arabic to address different audiences. For instance, while the Arabic-language website of the London-based Saudi Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) emphasises its Islamic dimension, its English-language version presents MIRA as an organisation fighting human-, civil-, and political-rights violations. Similarly, where the official websites of the Egyptian and Jordanian Muslim Brotherhoods focus on doctrinal issues to avoid censorship, unofficial English-language websites and newsletters openly level political criticism at their respective regimes.

The Internet also enables a much more immediate mass debate over the role of Islam, bypassing historical monopolies of state and *ulama*, and increasingly challenging the doctrinal

and socio-political role of classically trained religious scholars. Both the language and the scholarly traditions upon which many new ‘experts’ – often engineers or doctors – draw is much more popular (and populist) and finds inspiration in non-traditional areas such as science or popular culture.

A worldwide Islamic community (*ummah*) previously fractured into national, political, and doctrinal particularities seems to be increasingly replaced by a new, innovative, rich, and complex space in which voices and ideas bypass previous structural limits of geography, politics, and confession.¹⁵ For some, this promises a new age of global unity, a global ‘virtual *ummah*’ which will finally (re)unify the Muslim community.

Within the virtual *ummah*, complex networks of websites, chat forums, newsletters, and blogs give voice to an incredible exchange of opinions and information about every aspect of a Muslim’s life. Sharing information and community-building are two frequently and explicitly articulated aspirations. Participants may endeavour to build virtual communities of like-minded individuals sharing the same views on Islam and on the problems of living in the modern world. Sometimes the Internet is used simply to convey the difficulty of sharing communitarian feelings in real life. In Western countries this may be a consequence of Muslims being a minority within societies in which many of them do not feel fully integrated – indeed, many such European websites are based on a sense of religious and social solidarity, reducing Western Muslims’ sense of isolation, and reinforcing identities and self-confidence. This is true of both second- and third-generation Muslims, and of newly arrived and more obviously isolated migrants. Moreover, the very fact of living in Western countries stimulates discussions about the best way to reconcile religious precepts with a secular environment. This may also be true for Muslims living in ‘Islamic’ societies.

A common feature of Christianity and Islam in fact seems to be that of conceiving the religious community as a ‘minority’ in the face of a global scenario which is perceived as a secularised one. Discussing Islam in relation to a specific milieu entails that a certain degree of mutual criticism arises between traditional and new interpreters. Some of the most popular websites such as Islam Online,¹⁶ IslamiCity,¹⁷ and Fatwa-Online¹⁸ feature not only news and general information on Islam, health, culture, art, and many other topics, but also links to archives of fatwas issued by contemporary and historical scholars and ‘experts’.¹⁹ Where for instance Fatwa-Online reveals the influence of Saudi Arabian scholars, Islam Online has featured many fatwas issued by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian religious scholar whose modern style and alternative (not necessarily progressive) views on specific issues have encountered strong criticism by more traditional interpreters.

Another new and significant phenomenon is Internet use by young Muslims, who also express their views on Islam, debate issues from alternative viewpoints, and build virtual communitarian ties. Many claim the importance of Islam in their everyday life, yet its celebration is conducted in ‘progressive’ ways. Religion and politics come to be filtered by an alternative multidimensional vision of Islam which often radically rebels against traditional views on Islam. Blogs, chat forums, and social networks allow users to easily create an interactive, user-submitted network of friends. Groups discuss issues such as the defence of male and female homosexuality, women’s emancipation, youthful rebellion, distinctive fashion, DIY attitudes, and a variety of anti-establishment perspectives.

Blogs and social networks have also contributed to spreading and developing innovative cultural movements, such as Islamic hip hop and Islamic punk. Hip hop has been one of the most important forms of protest against social and political discrimination, racism, lack of education, and all sources of social disquiet over the last few decades. Spreading beyond its original African American context, Muslim rappers have been central to its evolution. Many

rappers, from Mos Def to JT the Bigga Figga, stress its importance in spreading the faith, bridging the gaps between Muslim Black communities, and creating a global hip hop *ummah*.

Hip hop's popularity as a vehicle for social reflection and protest is in part due to the immediacy of a rhyme scheme by which considerable amounts of information can be easily delivered and memorised.²⁰ The Internet's ability to popularise Muslim rappers' lyrics has been crucial in bringing it to a wider audience, in turn providing an Islamo-hip hop melting pot, with Islam being celebrated by new rappers like Vinnie Paz (an Italian-American convert), the European Muslims Aki Nawaz (Fun-Da-Mental, UK), Natacha Atlas (Transglobal Underground, UK), and Akhenaton (IAM, France), as well as the Egyptian MBS and Arabian Knightz, and the Algerian Intik, Hamma, and Le Micro Brise Le Silenc, etc. Nor has this phenomenon gone unnoticed by traditionalists: www.muslimhiphop.com, for example, criticises rebellion among Muslim rappers, offering a counter-selection of morally conservative artists.

'Islamopunk' is another trend encompassing punk, hard rock, and hip hop influences. Initially spreading particularly among American Asian Muslims, it was rapidly reflected by the publication of Michael Muhammad Knight's (2004) novel, *The Taqwacores*. The author, an American of Irish-Catholic descent who converted to Islam, proposes the adaptation of *taqwa*, an Islamic concept of love and fear of Allah, to Hardcore, a punk subgenre. In his view, what relates Islam to punk is that both 'smash idols' such as materialism and dogmatism, thereby also contesting conservative establishments.²¹ A wide range of intellectual activities and music groups inspired by Islamic punk and, partly, by this book, gave rise to several forums and blogs. Among the most popular groups – with MySpace profiles – are *Vote Hezbollah*, *Al-Thawra*, and above all, *The Kominas*, whose recent song 'Rumi Was a Homo' controversially attacks Siraj Wahhaj, a prominent Brooklyn imam accused of homophobia.

Finally, the creation of virtual worlds such as 'Second Life' (SL) has seen accompanied by the emergence of virtual Islamic settlements. SL is a user-created 3D virtual reality enabling its 'virtual citizens' to participate to the creation of this virtual world, to communicate through movable avatars, organise individual and group activities, and buy virtual goods and services. The presence of religious groups was first reported in 2004 when a virtual Catholic mass was organised. Subsequently, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, and several Christian groups have settled, triggering long discussions on SL's forums. Interestingly, several Islamic groups and mosques have settled in this virtual world, while *Muxlim*, a similar digital world made of virtual towns, cities, buildings, mosques, parks, etc., was experimented for a few years following its creation in 2006, providing an Islamic alternative to its secular counterparts.

Conclusion

This chapter suggests two key conclusions: first, that Islam has often been moulded for political goals by both rulers and their opposition; and second, that such manifestations, in all their 'extremist', 'conservative', or 'progressive' diversity, must be understood as a product of their political contexts, not of some religious 'essence'.

What exercises political attention, particularly in the West after '9/11', is the idea of 'Islam' as an inescapably radical and violent political force. The history of the development of 'Islamism', however, reveals a wide range of ideologies and political practices responding to specific problems, such as corruption, oppression, or foreign interference. In this sense, the similarities between the political origins and trajectories of these movements and their nationalist counterparts are more significant than their differences.

As Halliday,²² Esposito,²³ and others demonstrate, the notion that Muslim cultures must necessarily have a confrontational relationship with others is a myth. Similarly, notions of

a 'Green Peril' are not new, dating back to the Iranian Revolution. Along with the idea of 'Islamic terrorism' as an unprecedented – and unprecedentedly dangerous – threat, both these ideas were criticised already in the early 1990s for being a thinly veiled attempt to look for new enemies after the end of the Cold War. The idea that Islam per se presents a threat is therefore not only historically wrong, but also far from new: the heat generated by the events of September 11 is the latest version of this idea. The fact remains that violent Islamists are a small minority, and that the wider anti-Western centre of gravity in Middle Eastern politics has much more to do with the corrupt and socially ineffective regimes – eager to receive Western support in the name of 'democracy', but reticent to translate it into practice – than it does with religion. The real challenge, therefore, is to understand and deal with the underlying issues of political representation, accountability, and welfare which generate Islamist movements.

This chapter has covered considerable territory, necessarily ignoring much that falls under the rubric of 'Islam and Politics'. There has been no in-depth discussion of 9/11 and its aftermath, or of the relationship between Muslim immigrants and their European host societies, their impact on debates about asylum and immigration, or of the development of 'European Islam(s)'.

An implicit over-simplification which we tried to avoid is, however, common to many treatments: in their political engagement, Muslims are implicitly represented as either middle-of-the-road democrats, secular and absorbed into mainstream Western societies; or as radical and violent extremists, probably bearded and dressed in *galabiyas*. The last section in particular hopefully challenges such over-simplifications. What is important about those phenomena is that they directly and innovatively intervene in a public debate about Islam and about politics in a way which transcends conventional dualisms – secularism/public, religion/private, moderate/radical and geographical boundaries. What it means to be 'Muslim' continuously finds new expressions, all of which are equally valid ways of articulating the relationship between 'Islam' and 'politics', just as in the relationship between politics and other religions. Moreover, in their geographical, cultural, and political hybridity, they explode the myth of 'Political Islam' as either modernist or anti-modern.

This diversity of Muslims' contemporary politics is at least as important as the historical, theological, and jurisprudential diversity of the movements outlined above. The point about 'Political Islam' is not so much that it is 'Islamic', but that it is *political*.

Notes

- 1 While the focus of this chapter is primarily on Sunni Islam, comparative points will be made with the other main strand of Islam: Shi'a Islam.
- 2 Inalcık and Quataert, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1916*.
- 3 Roy, *Globalized Islam*.
- 4 Salamè, *Democracy without Democrats?*
- 5 Guazzone, *The Islamist Dilemma*.
- 6 Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*; Said, *Covering Islam*.
- 7 Teti and Gervasio, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Authoritarianism'.
- 8 Gervasio and Teti, 'Civic Activism and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution'.
- 9 Barghuthi, *The Umma and the Dawla*.
- 10 Mura, *The Symbolic Scenarios of Islamism*.
- 11 Ruthven, 'The Map ISIS Hates'.
- 12 Eickelman and Anderson, 'Redefining Muslim Publics'.
- 13 Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*.
- 14 Eickelman and Anderson, 'Redefining Muslim Publics'.

- 15 Roy, *Globalized Islam*.
- 16 www.islamonline.net.
- 17 www.islamicity.com.
- 18 www.fatwa-online.com.
- 19 Bunt, *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*.
- 20 See, for example, Cooke and Lawrence, *Muslim Networks*.
- 21 Telegram's 2007 UK edition was heavily censored in the wake of the 'Danish cartoons' affair.
- 22 Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation*.
- 23 Esposito, *Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*

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