



# FOOTNOTES

*"A nation must think before it acts." - Robert Strausz-Hupé*

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## ISLAM AND ISLAMISM: A PRIMER FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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Defining – and distinguishing between – the terms Islam and Islamism has broad consequences for America, both domestically and internationally. However, teaching about the relationship between these two concepts involves negotiating numerous sensitivities and it can cause considerable consternation for educators. At the most basic level, Islam is a major world religion practiced by well over a billion people, and Islamism is a political ideology to which a subset of the broader Islamic community adheres. The importance of this distinction seems fairly clear. The United States, and the American body politic more generally, views itself as committed to secular governance and religious freedom. While Islam is not completely immune from criticism, Americans have traditionally objected to state interference in religious matters and, theoretically, they should expect the same standards to apply to Islam. Therefore, Islam as a religion would seem to have a clear place in the diverse fabric of American society. Islamism, as a political ideology, opens itself to harsher critiques and even questions about its appropriateness in, or compatibility with, the American political system. Unsurprisingly, American public discourse suggests that Americans generally feel much more comfortable with Islam than they do with Islamism.

Nevertheless, a number of problems arise when one attempts to define either term, or demarcate their boundaries. What exactly is Islam? Does Islam have a political tradition, and if so, how is it different from Islamism? Who has the authority to define either term? It should be noted that similar problems exist in other religious traditions and one could ask comparable questions about the relationship between Judaism and religious Zionism, or Christianity and Christian fundamentalism. Islam is not exceptional in that regard; yet world events have conspired to bring questions about Islam and Islamism to the fore of American political discourse. Thus, this essay will attempt to unravel the two terms as well as their relationship by discussing Islam as well as its political tradition and then contextualizing the rise of Islamism in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries within this broader Islamic tradition.

### Islam

Defining Islam is the first and most important problem that one encounters when comparing Islam and Islamism. There are several ways to think about Islam. First, it is a religion practiced by those who identify as Muslims. Thus, one way to define Islam is to look at what Muslims believe and practice. In its ideal state, this type of analysis would deem each belief to be equally legitimate. However, this is not the only method for defining Islam. Islam is also a text-based religion. It has a holy book, the Quran, and a plethora of other texts which provide context for the Quran and guidance for Muslims. Some Muslim scholars attempt to use these texts to arrive at a definition of Islam.

In its ideal state, such an approach makes claims about what Islam is. Unlike an analysis of the ways Muslims practice their religion, this second type of analysis leaves open the possibility that what a Muslim believes may be wrong, or at least that it is not in accordance with the Islamic tradition.

If one wishes to use the first type of analysis and thus define Islam by the beliefs and practices of Muslims, it is pretty safe to begin with the assertion that Islam is a religion in the Abrahamic tradition that was revealed through the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE. Muslims are in general agreement on that point. However, things begin to get messy when one moves beyond it. Sunnis and Shi'is disagree on many matters of theology and, importantly for this essay, politics.<sup>1</sup> Beyond Sunnism and Shi'ism, a third major sect, Ibadism, also exists. From there it breaks down even further. Four distinct legal schools exist within Sunni Islam. Shi'ism contains a myriad of subjects and breakaway movements. Furthermore, in most sects, Sufi mystics compete with textual literalists over the essence of their faith.

Many of the various sects and subjects disagree even on the most basic tenets of Islam. On one hand, Sunnis have five Pillars of Islam and six Pillars of Faith, which they consider fundamental. On the other hand, most Shi'is have a different set of fundamental principles they refer to as the five Principles of the Religion and then an additional ten Ancillaries of the Faith. In extreme cases, some Muslims disagree with ideas that other Muslims consider to be the defining essence of their faith. For example, most Muslims would insist that Muhammad was not just a prophet, but the last conduit of a divine message for humanity. However, not everyone who identifies as a Muslim accepts this claim. Members of the Alawi sect, who identify as Muslims, consider the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law and successor,<sup>2</sup> Ali, to have been a semi-divine leader. Further complicating attempts to define Islam by the practice of Muslims is the fact that, historically, many casual Muslims or members of the non-literate masses probably could not name the Pillars of Islam or of Faith for the sect to which they claimed to belong. They mixed Islam with various folk traditions and even other religions. It is not uncommon to read about Muslims attending church on Christian holidays and vice versa. Thus, there is no agreement in practice between those who identify as Muslims about what Islam is.

The other way to define Islam is through textual analysis. The Quran is the central document of the Islamic faith. For almost all Muslims, the sayings (*hadith*) and traditions (*sunna*) of the Prophet Muhammad also provide divinely sanctioned guidance. After all, if God chose Muhammad to be his messenger, Muhammad must have been doing something right. For most classically trained Islamic scholars, the truth about Islam can be found in these texts. Until the 1970s, the Orientalist tradition of scholarship in the West also relied on these texts to define Islam. However, both Muslims and non-Muslim scholars have had immense difficulties locating the essence of Islam in its canonical texts.

The Quran is not a story. It is a series of non-chronologically arranged commands, statements, and snippets of stories. Often commands in one part of the Quran are contradicted in another part. Thus, in one verse drinking wine is prohibited (Quran 5:93) and in another it is permitted (Quran 2:219). In some places the Quran calls for peace (Quran 2:190) and in other places it demands war (Quran 9:5). Various debates have taken place throughout Islamic history over which verses to obey. But even if everyone agrees to obey a particular verse, its meaning and implications are not always clear. For example, Quran 2:256 states "there is no compulsion in religion." In the classical period Muslim scholars debated whether this was an injunction against imposing religion by force, or simply a statement of fact – that religious belief is a matter of the heart and, therefore, it is impossible to impose it by force. Further complicating matters, some Islamic scholars claimed that the verse was an injunction against imposing religion by force, but they asserted that it was revealed to address a particular historical circumstance. Thus, it was not a general injunction and does not apply to later generations of Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See my "[The Geopolitics of the Sunni-Shi'i Divide in the Middle East](#)," *Footnotes*, December 2013.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Sunnis, he was the fourth successor of Muhammad, following three other "caliphs." According to the Shi'is, he was Muhammad's direct successor and the three other caliphs were usurpers.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Crone, "No Pressure, then: Religious Freedom in Islam." *Open Democracy*, November 7, 2009.  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/patricia-crone/no-compulsion-in-religion>

The texts outlining the Prophet's sayings and traditions about his life are equally imprecise. These texts contain a vast documentation about the Prophet's life; yet they too often contain contradictory information. Furthermore, they are based on an oral tradition that was not written down until at least a century after Muhammad's death. Islamic scholars in the medieval period began to question the authenticity of many of the sayings that were attributed to the Prophet. They developed an intricate science to classify the sayings as sound, good, weak, or fabricated. Yet, as one might expect, not everyone agrees on which saying fits into which category. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Western scholarship on Islam has debated the historicity of these sayings and traditions.<sup>4</sup> Thus, attempting to find clear definitions of Islamic beliefs in Islamic texts is quite difficult.

## Islam and Politics

The difficulty in pinning down Islamic beliefs or finding definitive textual sources carries over into investigations of the Islamic political tradition. In addition to being a prophet, Muhammad was the leader of a political community. As such, the guidance that he provided through the Quran and his sayings has a good deal to say about politics. However, disagreements over those sources have led to endless disputes. While the Prophet was alive, the politics of the Islamic community were fairly straightforward. Muhammad had a direct line to God. Therefore, his declarations and decisions were beyond reproach. Following his death, that certainty evaporated. Muslims who would later be known as Sunnis argued that Muhammad had not named a successor, and that, therefore, the community was free to choose the most suitable ruler. The Shi'is believed that Muhammad had named his son-in-law, Ali, as successor and that succession should remain within the Prophet's familial line through Ali and the Prophet's daughter, Fatima.

This dispute about leadership of the community had ramifications far beyond which man was in charge. If the Sunnis were correct, and rule was nonhereditary, then the leader was essentially the best among equals. If the Shi'is were correct, and leadership of the community was hereditary, then the leader (*Imam*) was chosen by God. Similar to the divine right of kings in Medieval Europe, the reasoning in the latter case suggests that God would not choose someone who would lead them astray. Therefore, the Shi'is often attribute an "infallibility" to their Imams. Accordingly, Sunnis and Shi'is disagreed not only about the rightful leader of the Islamic community, but also about the nature of that leadership.

As the generations passed, the Shi'is divided even further over which way the line of the Ali's descendants broke. When an Imam died without producing an obvious heir, some Shi'is claimed that he had not died, but rather had gone into hiding. They asserted that he entered a state of "occultation" and that he would eventually return as a messianic figure. For centuries, Shi'is have argued among themselves over whether an Imam had gone into hiding, and if so, which one. For Shi'is who believed that the Imam went into hiding, there was no agreement about who had political authority in his absence.

The Sunnis have an equally complicated political history. They are by far the largest sect. Thus, they have ruled in most places and at most times in Islamic history. However, their aversion to heredity rule broke down, at least in practice, a generation after Muhammad's death. Beginning in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, political leadership of the Sunni community became dynastic. Further complicating matters for Sunnis was that the leader's status as a first among equals did not provide him with any special connection to God. Thus, the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad remained the sole sources of religious legitimacy. Early in Islamic history, a class of religious scholars developed who could interpret Islam's canonical texts more authoritatively than the political leadership. Thus, in practice, a separation between religious and political authority emerged. In theory, no such separation should have existed in Sunni Islam, and Sunni sources were reluctant to acknowledge its presence.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ignác Goldziher (1950-1921), who is sometimes considered the father of Islamic Studies in the West, claimed that the sayings of the Prophet reflect debates that occurred a century after his death and probably originated in that period.

<sup>5</sup> See Ira M. Lapidus. "The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6, no. 4 (Oct., 1975): 363-85.

Many of the debates about politics within the Islamic tradition can be linked with corollary debates about Islamic texts. One of the most politically consequential verses of the Quran is 4:59. It states: “Obey God, obey the Messenger, and those who possess authority among you.” The first part of this verse is quite clear and uncontroversial. Believers should obey God and the Prophet Muhammad. However, the last part of the verse, the injunction to obey “those who possess authority,” has, for obvious reasons, been at the heart of Islamic politics since the very beginning of Islam. Who are those who possess authority?

The earliest Sunni interpretations of the Quran gave several possibilities. First, some Sunnis thought the verse referred to a temporal or military leader. Often, these leaders were referred to as “princes,” “commanders”<sup>6</sup> or “sultans.” Next, some early Sunni Muslims argued that “those who possess authority” referred to Islamic scholars. A number of traditions clearly stated that the verse referred to “the possessors of knowledge,” “the people of knowledge and jurisprudence,” “the possessors of religion and reason,” or simply “the scholars.” Finally, more nuanced interpretations of the verse assigned authority to princes and sultans, but qualified their authority in that there was a level of piety required of them.<sup>7</sup> As we will see below, this later interpretation was singled out by Islamists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but in the early years of Islam, there was little agreement on the essential question of who possessed authority.

As dynastic rule set in, Sunni Muslims increasingly attributed the authority referenced in the Quran to kings, sultans, emirs, and other political leaders. The major Sunni scholars of the Middle Ages, such as al-Mawardi (d. 1058) and al-Ghazali (d. 1111), wrote political treatises which became the most authoritative works on politics in Sunni Islam until the modern period.<sup>8</sup> They argued that it was not permissible to rebel against a Muslim ruler. They cited the Arab proverb sometimes attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, that “a thousand days of tyranny are better than one day of anarchy” and they defined “those who possess authority” as the political rulers. These factors led to quietism among Sunni scholars which, despite a few notable exceptions like Ibn Taymiyah in the 14<sup>th</sup> century or Muhammad ibn abd al-Wahhab in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, remained an important predisposition toward politics in pre-modern Sunni Islam. In some cases, such quietism manifested in radical ways. For example, in Central Asia, some Islamic scholars from the Muslim communities within the Russian Empire argued that it was sufficient for the ruler to permit Muslims to practice their religion. Thus the ruler himself did not need to be Muslim, and Christian Russia could be considered an Islamic state.<sup>9</sup> This would be an important precedent in the modern period, as more Muslims migrated into non-Muslim lands. It should be noted, however, that theories of Islam and politics were discussed among scholars and elites. It is unclear to what extent the masses were party to or understood any of these discussions. Like other pre-modern communities, 90 percent of people in the Islamic world were illiterate. There is good evidence to suggest that they did not understand or even know about the high Islam that was debated in seminaries and royal courts.

## Islamism

The modern period in the Middle East really starts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it is during this period that transformations in the relationship between Islam and politics begin to occur. Modernity brought a politics of the masses to the Middle East. Regimes that had ruled in the name of a dynastic family came under pressure to rule in the name of the people. The question was, who were the people? And, what made a people a people? In Egypt, where modern Islamism had its beginning, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw intense debates over political identity. Proponents of Egyptian nationalism competed with pan-Arab nationalists and with socialists whose political consciousness was rooted in their class. The Islamists argued that they were Muslims before anything else, and that

<sup>6</sup> The word Amir means both “prince” and “commander.” Linguistically, this interpretation seems logical considering that the root a. m. r. is used to form both *amr* (authority) and *amir* (prince/commander). In this sense, a prince/commander could literally be understood as one who has authority.

<sup>7</sup> The most thorough and authoritative early exegesis is by Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839–923 CE). For his discussion of the verse, see *Tafsir al-Tabari: Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil al-Qur'an*, Vol. 8 (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arifa, 1950-1960), 490-507. (in Arabic)

<sup>8</sup> See Al-Ghazali, *Ghazali's Book of Counsel for Kings (Nasihat al-Muluk)*, Trans. F.R.C Bagley (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); and Al-Mawardi, *The Ordinances of Government*, Trans. Wafaa H. Wahba (Reading, UK: Garnet Pub., 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

their Islamic identity should form the foundation of the political order. With this focus on Islam came inclinations toward piety and religious fundamentalism. In 1928, Hassan al-Banna relied on these ideas to form the first Islamist party, the Muslim Brotherhood, in Egypt. Banna and his Islamist followers spoke of a golden age of Islam, which they sought to restore. They felt under assault by Western colonialism and the rising liberal secularism, which they saw as colonialism's byproduct. Islamists such as Banna insisted that because the Prophet Muhammad was a political leader, who had established a state on the basis of Islam, their religion was inherently political. Thus, they insisted that while separating politics from religion was permissible in Christianity, it was forbidden in Islam. Therefore, those Muslims who promoted such ideas were, in fact, adopting the Christian secularism of their colonial masters and that this was at odds with the essence of Islam. Accordingly, Banna and his followers felt that restoring Islam to its proper place in society would require combating not only colonialism but also liberalism and secularism. In doing so, they made claims about the illiberal nature of Islamic politics.

Not all Muslims agreed with Islamist claims about the nature of their religion. Some Muslim scholars made explicit arguments about the compatibility and, in rare cases, even the necessity of secular liberalism in the practice of Islam.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, they opposed the Islamists on theological grounds. Most Muslims seem to have paid little attention to such debates. Like people all over the world, they were concerned with making a living, providing for their families, and, when possible, they occupied themselves with various leisure activities. They did not read Banna's writings. They continued to believe in and practice their own understanding of Islam, but they felt free to adopt wide-ranging political identities.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, Islamist intellectuals expanded upon Banna's ideas. Most famously, Sayyid Qutb argued that non-Islamist political systems, such as monarchy, democracy, and dictatorship, were inherently un-Islamic. His arguments were rooted in classical Islamic debates, but they were often selective in their reading of texts. For example, Qutb saw "those who possess authority" in the Quran as referring to the temporal rulers, just as other scholars had done in the pre-modern period, but he made this status contingent on the righteousness of the ruler. As we have seen, this interpretation had a precedent in early Islam, but only as one of a plethora of possibilities. Esteemed Sunni Islamic scholars in the medieval period often rejected that interpretation in favor of seeing the rulers as possessors of authority. Thus, Qutb contradicted authoritative medieval arguments in favor of an interpretation of the verse that undermined the trend toward political quietism in Sunni Islam.<sup>11</sup> Qutb's ideas spread widely in the Islamic World. Some groups took them in radical directions, claiming that Muslims who did not rebel against, or separate themselves from, un-Islamic political systems were not really Muslims – they were apostates and their blood was licit. Thus, Muslim civilians became legitimate targets in the minds of some Islamist terrorists. Eventually, Sunni Islamists fractured into groups with political ideologies ranging from the democratically elected Islamist party which currently rules the NATO member state of Turkey, to the extremists in the Islamic State and al-Qaida.

Shi'i Islamists were heavily influenced by their Sunni counterparts. As mentioned above, Shi'is traditionally viewed legitimate political power as residing with their Imams. Thus, in traditional Shi'i understandings of politics, the Imam was the possessor of authority mentioned in Quran 4:59. In his absence, Shi'i religious leaders generally eschewed politics. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Shi'i Islamists would challenge that trend. The most significant thinker in that regard was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who in 1979 led the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Khomeini defined "those who possess authority" not as the Hidden Imam, but as the executive of a legitimate Islamic state. Like other Shi'i scholars, Khomeini claimed that the Prophet and then the Shi'i Imams were "those who possess authority" in their time. But in a break with the majority Shi'i tradition, he argued that authority had been handed down to the religious jurists while the last Imam remained in hiding. Thus, Khomeini claimed "those who possess

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<sup>10</sup> For an example of a scholar to make the case for secularism, see Ali, Souad T. *A Religion, Not a State: Ali 'Abd al-Razziq's Islamic Justification of Political Secularism*. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> See for example the way Qutb employed *ulu al-amr* in his book "Social Justice and Islam," a discussion of which can be found in William Shepard, "The Development of the Thought of Sayyid Qutb as Reflected in Earlier and Later Editions of 'Social Justice in Islam,'" *Die Welt des Islams*, 32, no. 2 (1992), 228-9.

authority” referred to himself and to the other Islamic scholars.<sup>12</sup> And if the scholars possessed authority, it made sense that they should also rule the state. In fact, for the first time in the history of Shi‘ism, Khomeini went as far as to deem all other forms of government as unacceptable. Consequently, Khomeini, like his Sunni counterparts, linked Islamic belief with opposition to secularism and liberalism that he felt were byproducts of Western imperialism. Shi‘i Islamists, like their Sunni counterparts, argued that one could not be fully Muslim if one did not adhere to certain political positions. The Prophet Muhammad was a political leader and thus, as Khomeini put it, “Islam is political or it is nothing.”

Khomeini’s ideas found a wide following, and in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution, they were enforced by the Iranian state. Nevertheless, many Shi‘is outside Iran continued to maintain the traditional, politically quietist interpretations of their faith. Some Shi‘i scholars have continued to insist that the Hidden Imam is the only legitimate political authority and that Shi‘is who wish to live in an Islamic state will have to wait for his return.

### **Islam and Islamism**

Disputes over Islam and Islamism continue to rage in the Islamic World and in Muslim communities in the West. Islamists often refer to themselves simply as Muslims and they claim that those who oppose their ideas also necessarily oppose Islam. They root their ideas in a particular reading of history. If Muhammad combined political and religious authority, then how could Muslims disavow the role of politics in Islam? This is a powerful argument. Yet, the Islamist reading of the past has been selective. No consensus has ever existed on what Islam is, let alone on its relationship to politics. As we have seen, Islamism had its genesis in modern debates about political identity. And despite the fact that Islamists have used classical Islamic texts to make arguments, their ideas sometimes had no precedent in Islamic history. This does not imply that Islamists are wrong or that their logic is invalid. If it is difficult to know what Islam is, it is also hard to determine what it is not. Thus, Islamist claims about Islam are just as legitimate as any other. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that, despite Islamist assertions, no consensus among those who identify as Muslims exists with regard to the relationship between Islam and politics. Nor is it possible to read the classical Islamic texts and come away with an unambiguous understanding of Islamic politics.

As such, Islamists remain a subset of the larger Islamic community. How large a subset is not easy to determine. Partly, this is due to the difficulty in demarcating the lines between Islam and Islamism. Islamists claim that they are simply Muslims who recognize the essential role of politics in their religion. Yet, there are other Muslims who also recognize a role for politics in their religion and sometimes even reject the separation between the two, but they do not consider themselves to be Islamists. For example, in the Arab world, the term “secularism” carries the connotation of unbelief. Thus, very few Arab Muslims claim to be secular. In that sense one might assume that Islamism would be supported by the overwhelming majority of Arab Muslims. Yet, Islamists appear to be either a minority, or a slight majority in most Arab countries. Partly, this dilemma can be solved by recognizing that, historically, Islamists not only deny the separation of religion and politics, but have also insisted that Islam requires the adoption of a certain set of illiberal politics. However, other Muslims who reject the separation of religion and politics sometimes also reject the Islamists’ illiberalism. Indeed, some see Islam as a liberal religion which requires tolerance, democracy, and human rights. Some Muslims have gone as far as to claim that the American Constitution is the embodiment of Islamic values. The picture is further muddled by the fact that most Muslims probably have not given such issues much thought. Like the majority of people around the world, they are more concerned with the mundane aspects of their daily lives. Consequently, while Islam and Islamism can and should be distinguished, it is often quite difficult to ascertain where Islam as a religion ends, and Islamism as a political ideology begins. This problem will continue to confound Muslims and non-Muslims in the United States as Islam becomes an increasingly prominent aspect of American society. One can only hope that a fuller understanding of these terms will be helpful for everyone.

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<sup>12</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 24-5.