

**RELIGION AND SECULARISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A PRIMER****By Aaron Rock-Singer**

Aaron Rock-Singer is a social and intellectual historian of contemporary Islam. He is currently a PhD candidate in Princeton's Near Eastern Studies department. His dissertation explores the emergence of the Islamic Revival in Sadat's Egypt (1970-1981) and draws on Islamic magazines, audiocassette sermons, and television programs to chart the key projects and players within this religious shift. His research more broadly concerns the relationship between state-sponsored and Islamist educational projects, Salafis and Muslim Brothers in Egypt and the diverse ways in which religious actors use mass media. www.aaronrock-singer.com

This article is based on Rock-Singer's talk on the same subject at FPRI [Butcher History Institute](#) on "[Understanding the Modern Middle East: History, Identity, and Politics](#)," held on October 17-18, 2015 in Philadelphia.

Abstract: Religion was a pillar of pre-modern political identity in the Middle East, arising out of Muslims' understanding of Islam's foundational moment and state institutions that developed with the spread of Islamic Empire. Beginning at the turn of the 19th century, European colonial powers and indigenous reformers questioned the centrality of religious identity; instead, it was to be the nation that defined the political community. Since then, the nationalist project has permeated 20th century ideological conflicts in the region, equally shaping the claims of secularists and Islamists. Today, advocates of religious change refer back to early Islamic history as they seek to place religious over national identity, yet they, like their competitors, are unmistakably shaped by the secular nationalist project.

Looking out at the contemporary Middle East, one may observe a region riven by basic conflicts of political identity, and religion is frequently a focal point for these tensions. The conflict is not solely between those who seek to marginalize Islam's role in politics and those who seek to place it front and center; the conflict is just as heated between Islamists and Salafi-Jihadis in Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Tunisia as it is between secularists and nationally-oriented Islamists.

As such, this article will focus on four main questions: what was the role of Islam in the pre-modern political identity in the Middle East? How did Islam's position shift as a result of both European colonialism and indigenous reformers? How did this shift, in turn, undergird key ideological conflicts of the 20th century? And, finally, how did this history shape the post-Arab Spring Middle East?

Religion as a Pillar of Pre-modern Political Identity in the Middle East

The role of religion in pre-modern political identity is inseparable from the original tie between religious and political identity at the dawn of Islam. This is not because Islam's founding moment was necessarily slated to shape the next 14 centuries; instead, it was because many later Muslims understood this founding moment as a golden age to be replicated. In exploring the original fusion of religious and political identity, this article will examine not merely a distinct historical moment, but also a future model of emulation.

Muhammad ibn Abd Allah, known later to Muslims as the Prophet Muhammad, was born in 570. Around 610, Muhammad began meditating at night and, over the next 22 years, until his death in 632, he received revelations. What is most relevant when it comes to the question of political identity is that these revelations did not emerge in a political vacuum. Instead, whom you worshipped and whom you allied with politically were tied closely together in the ancient world.

Muhammad was no different. In 622, Muhammad and his followers emigrated to an agricultural community called Yathrib, later renamed Medina, which was 215 miles to the north of Mecca. It was in Medina that Muhammad became not merely a religious leader, as he had been in Mecca, but a political leader as well. In this setting, confessing belief in one God and in Muhammad as his Prophet implied a commitment to building a new political order. We read that the Prophet instructed his followers not only how to perform religious rituals (including prayer, fasting, and penance) but also how to tax and distribute booty. Taxation was no less a religious ritual than praying for these earliest Muslims. It was no surprise in this context that religion was central to political identity.

This is not to suggest, however, that religion was the only factor in identity. Muhammad's emergence as a religio-political leader was deeply shaped by the tribal politics of 7th century Arabia. It happened to be the case in 7th century Arabia that there was an agreement between the conquest goals of a polity headed by the Prophet Muhammad and the material interests of the tribes of the city formerly known as Yathrib, now Medina. Crucially, such a fit was contingent rather than necessary.

Religion remained central to political identity following the golden age of Islam, yet constantly bumped up against the pull of ethnic ties. The remainder of this section will discuss this dynamic with reference to three significant Islamic empires: the Umayyads (r. 661-750), the Abbasids (r. 750-1258) and the Ottomans (r. 1299-1922).

Following the Muslim civil war of 661, the Umayyad caliphate was established, with its center in Damascus, Syria. The first thing to realize about the relationship between religion and political identity was that the population was taxed along religious lines. Muslims had an obligations to serve in the military while non-Muslims pay a tax, known as the *jizya*, which absolves them from the responsibility to serve. The *jizya* continued to be used under both the 'Abbasids, who succeeded the Umayyads and under the Ottomans. The levying of this tax along religious lines reflected a broader division of society: under all three empires, religion was the primary marker of political identity. Indeed, under the Ottomans, this was formalized in a *Millet* system. This diverse empire, which encompassed, at different times, much of the Arab world and the Balkans, included many non-Muslims, whether Greek Orthodox (including ethnic Greeks, Arabs, Macedonians, and Bulgarians), Jews, Catholic Armenians and even some Protestants. In this context, it was the Greek Orthodox patriarch who represented ethnic Greeks, Arabs, Macedonians, and Bulgarians, not a specific representative for each ethnic community. The point here is that, in the pre-modern Middle East, religion was the central pillar of political identity as a legal matter.

One shouldn't, however, overstate this point: Neighborhoods were often religiously mixed and, even with the prominence of religion to political identity, other ties remained. Just as the conquests of the early Islamic community in Arabia saw a neat fit between the expansion of the Islamic community and the material interests of the tribes that supported them, tribal concerns were central to the Umayyads, too. Yet, under this empire, the fit between tribal interests and the broader Islamic polity declined with the conversion of ever-larger numbers of non-Arabs, as well as the mixing of Arab and non-Arab Muslims. It was thus no surprise that when revolt against the Umayyads came in 750, it was in Khurasan, a region in eastern Iran. The rebels of Khurasan who launched the Abbasid revolution were of mixed Arab and Persian ancestry and they revolted partly because the governance structures of the Muslim community had not caught up with the changing face of that community.

Yet, the move beyond the initial identification of Islam with Arab tribesmen did not efface previous identities. Rather, it merely broadened the range of identities that was included. Instead of appealing specifically to the Arab population, the Abbasids spoke the language of a new set of subjects centered in Mesopotamia and Iran. They certainly asserted their legitimacy in distinctly Islamic terms, noting their descent from the Family of the Prophet Muhammad. Yet, they also spoke in terms of the Persian concept of the divine right of kings by which the ruler ruled based on divine imperative. Just as importantly, the Abbasids did not seek to vanquish Arab tribal ties; instead, when the Abbasids arose around 750, they coopted a significant number of Syrian troops so that they would take part in the new regime. Put simply, as the Islamic Empire spread, previous identities and allegiances, material interests and political divisions had to be managed under a banner of religious unity. This was true in the Ottoman Empire as well; despite the centrality of the banner of Islam, ethnicity didn't vanish and was certainly a source of tension between an Ottoman center and a diverse empire of Arabs, Armenians, ethnic Greeks, and Turkic Central Asian Muslims.

Before moving onto modern identity and religion, it is worth recapping a few points. First, religion was a pillar of political

identity in the pre-modern Middle East and a source of unity for increasingly diverse Islamic Empires, whether Umayyad, Abbasid or Ottoman. At the same time, though, it was not an all-encompassing identity; ethnic ties and tensions continually resurfaced –whether the dominance of Arabs over Persians under the Umayyads, the ascent of non-Arabs under the Abbasids, or the dominance of Turks over Arabs, ethnic Greeks and the Balkans under the Ottomans. If religious identity served as an umbrella, it was not the only game in town. Crucially, though, ethnicity was not a sufficient basis of political community; that would have to wait for the rise of nationalism in the 19th century Middle East.

The Arrival of European Colonialism and the Relationship between Religion and Politics

At the turn of the 19th century, European colonial powers began to reshape the Middle East. This was not the beginning of contact between the West and the Middle East – ties of trade and politics well precede this contact – but the tables had turned considerably in the face of overwhelming European political, economic and military might. The French arrived in Egypt in 1798, the British set up outposts in the Arabian Peninsula in 1799, the French annexed Algeria in 1834 and then the British took control of Egypt from 1882 to 1922. In painting this picture of European colonial expansion, it's also important to note Russian and British imperialism in Iran during the mid to late 19th century. While European might was considerable, the changes that would ensure in the relationship between religion and politics was not merely a product of coercion. Rather, for Middle East elites, Western political power and intellectual thought were often assumed to be linked; to catch up with its European colonial masters, the Middle East had to modernize itself along intellectual, political, economic and military lines.

The question of modernization – and how far to take it – was central to 19th century political elites within the Ottoman Empire. Faced with the erosion of the Empire's political and economic independence, Ottoman statesmen sought to centralize the state, embracing new transportation technologies (including the railroad) and expanding both educational and bureaucratic institutions. Most crucially for this particular context, they embraced an idea of “Ottomanism” in the late 19th and early 20th century; Ottoman citizens of different religious communities took seriously the promise of a civic order based on allegiance to a broader Ottoman Empire, one in which citizenship, rather than religious community, defined one's political place. Ottomanism, however, was not the only vision of communal belonging relevant at this time and local ethnic dynamics came to the fore as Ottoman subjects, Arab and non-Arabs, increasingly came to identify with ethnic communities rather than an Ottoman center. While one shouldn't embrace an uncritical narrative of the spread of nationalism – that would only come later – what is apparent here is a “cultural” identity, based on ethnicity, which superseded both the traditional Islamic view by which religious affiliation was the ostensible pillar of political identity and Ottoman attempts to provide a civic identity that could unite the Empire's subjects along more inclusive lines. Crucially, though, it is only after the First World War that nationalism would appear.

One can observe a somewhat different dynamic within states that experienced direct colonization. In this context, it was not just the question of economic and military might and the need for an inclusive imperial identity – Ottomanism – but of the spread of nationalism and the redefinition of the role of Islam within society. Egypt's response to French colonialism is a case study of this shift. There were increased efforts to define Egypt *primarily* as a territorial nation-state and the secularization of law so that “Islamic law” was limited to issues of personal status, whether marriage, divorce, or inheritance. In the process, “religion” became a secondary component of political identity, subservient to the national. While Ottomanism certainly gestured in a similar direction, an imperial civic identity was far weaker than its national counterpart and its intervention in religious law far more limited.

This may therefore beg the question where this national identity came from? The short of the long is that nationalism represented an elevation of ethnic ties – ties that had long stood on the backburner within political identities in the Middle East – to the forefront and the conflation of ethnicity with a “national” community defined by political borders. In this regard, the Middle East was hardly exceptional: worldwide, the idea of the nation spread through the 19th and early 20th centuries, facilitated by the spread of literacy and newspapers that enabled people to *imagine* themselves as part of a nation. The urgency of national imagining in the Middle East, in turn, took on increased importance with the shift away from colonial powers to self-rule. In the early 20th century, British mandates in Palestine, Iraq and Transjordan and French Mandates in Syria and Lebanon promised eventual political independence. In other countries within the region, there was no promise of independence (most notably, Italian colonialism in Libya and French colonialism in North Africa), but national ties served as an effective means of uniting the indigenous population against colonizers. While religious identity had certainly not vanished – often, it served as a useful second source of unity – it was the national tie that dominated.

During the 19th century, Middle Eastern countries were exposed to unprecedented European penetration, which not only challenged these countries politically, military and economically, but also pushed them to articulate identities that could better unite their inhabitants. In this context, the idea of the nation – a supposedly primordial identity based on shared ethnic ties – took center stage. While the role of ethnic ties was not new – we have seen the continued ties and tensions that surround ethnicity within Islamic history – the script had been flipped as a national community based on ethnicity became the primary pillar of identity and religion took a secondary role.

Ideological Conflict in the 20th Century Middle East and the Role of Islam

In the face of European colonialism and cultural challenge, the question as how to respond. In the late 19th century, two leading religious figures, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ‘Abduh, came together to advance the cause of Pan-Islamism as an antidote to imperialism. Al-Afghani, a native of Iran, and ‘Abduh, a leading religious figure in Egypt, focused on securing the independence of Muslim lands, whether India, Iran or Egypt, from foreign control. These efforts, however, were of limited use: while al-Afghani likely played some role in initiating the tobacco protests in Iran in 1891, there was little else to show for his efforts in practical terms.

One explanation for al-Afghani’s failure is that nationalism had overtaken Pan-Islamism. While this is certainly possible, the central factor here is the power of states to determine political identities; religious identity would continue to play a role, but it would come from within, rather than outside the boundaries of nation-states. As increasing numbers of Middle East states gained political independence *as nation-states*, political projects that worked within the framework of the territorially-defined nation increasingly gained strength. In some cases, this involved resolutely secular nationalism that relegated all religious symbols and practices to the privacy of homes; most notably, Mustafa Kamal Atatürk, founder of the Modern Turkish Republic, even insisted on the use of a Latin instead of Arabic alphabet to write in Turkish, so as to distance the secular republic of Turkey from its Islamic Ottoman past.

While Atatürk represented an extreme, he was not alone. Secular-nationalist regimes arose in Iran under the Pahlavi family beginning in 1925, in Egypt under the Free Officers movements of 1952, and in Iraq with the foundation of the Republic in 1958. While secular nationalist regimes claimed to maintain a clear divide between the secular nationalist project and Islam, facts on the ground contest this neat division. Most notably, many of these states took an active role not only in monitoring what went on in mosques, but also in providing appropriate preachers. Along similar lines, religious education was taught within the public educational system in ways that supported state policies, rather than excluding religion wholesale. So, on the one hand, religion clearly played second fiddle when it came to political identity. On the other hand, it’s important to remember that, notwithstanding claims of secularism, state elites in Egypt, Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere were actively involved in using religion to define their national communities.

Alongside state-sponsored projects of secular nationalism, Islamic nationalism arose. In describing them as Islamic nationalists, the point is to highlight the continued prominence of the nation in their definitions of political identity. This trend is particularly notable in the region’s most prominent Islamist organization, the Muslim Brotherhood. Founded in Egypt in 1928 by a school teacher, Hasan al-Banna, the organization spread to Syria in the 1930s, Jordan in 1945, Kuwait in the 1950s, Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and Iraq in the 1960s. Throughout the region, different branches of the Muslim Brotherhood – which share ideological roots but are organizationally independent – work within the nation-state framework, seeing to transforming their respective countries. While they maintain an ideal of Pan-Islamic unity – like al-Afghani and ‘Abduh – their focus is local. It is in this context that leading thinkers have turned to the development of visions of a “civil” state – which privileges national identity – with an Islamic reference point. Though they might valorize a Pan-Islamic caliphate, they are not oriented towards this goal as a practical matter. Just as importantly, though, it is important to note that the question of the relative balance between religious and national identity is a source of contention among Islamist organizations across the region and, often, the “civic” basis falls away in the face of more authoritarian calls to implement Islamic law. While Islamist organizations such as the Brotherhood largely accept the centrality of the nation, this acceptance can involve internal complications.

Nonetheless, the national focus of Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood – and their subordination of religious to national identity – is clear in the contrast and enmity between such groups and their Pan-Islamic Jihadi competitors, often known as Salafi-Jihadis. To understand the commonalities and differences between these two streams, a bit of history is necessary. As noted earlier, Egypt was ruled by secular nationalist leaders following the Free Officers’ revolution of 1952. Most notably, Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser, who ruled between 1954 and 1970, repressed, jailed and executed leading Brothers as well as rank and file members of the organization. It was in this context that a faction within the Brotherhood, led

by another school teacher and literary critic, Sayyid Qutb, came to a startling conclusion: though Nasser and his ilk claimed to be Muslims, they were not because they ruled by man-made rather than divine laws, accepting artificial national boundaries while rejecting the transnational Islamic community. Though Qutb went to the gallows in 1966, his most radical ideas lived on in the rise of groups in 1970s Egypt that practiced *takfir* – the act of decreeing another Muslim to be an infidel based on his or her perceived disobedience to God’s law. Without delving too much into a side discussion, in the Qutbian formulation, religious identity was the only relevant form of communal belonging. On this front, Qutb was not merely a purist but, as our discussion of Islamic history suggests, at odds with the dominant trends of Islamic history since the rise of the early Islamic community in 7th century Arabia.

The crucial component of the story is that the Qutbian stream didn’t succeed in Egypt because it faced the overwhelming power of the state’s repressive institutions. In this context, its leading figures moved onto Afghanistan in the late 1970s. In the shadow of the 1979 Soviet invasion, they found common cause with ideological sympathizers from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Palestine and elsewhere as they partnered with local Afghani leaders to fight the Soviets. It was in this context that the Afghan Arabs sought to live a Pan-Islamic paradise that pivoted on the ability of religiously justified violence to create a political community that placed Islam first in Afghanistan.

Up to this point, this narrative has largely avoided discussion of Western influence. Although Islamists certainly decry Western impurity frequently and speak of the need to expunge foreign ideas and identities, their opponents are local. Put differently, when they speak of the West, one needs to ask whom they’re targeting and why it’s beneficial to them to speak in this idiom. Most frequently, it is the secular nationalist competitors whom Islamists tar with the accusation of association with the West.

This focus on the local allows for an understanding of the multiple visions of the relationship between religious and national identity more clearly. Here, one can look at secular nationalist and Islamist nationalism as not only political competitors but also ideological cousins. Though they differ in key respects – most notably over how the political community should define itself – is it primarily national or religious? – they share a similar view of the basic borders of the political community, which is the nation-state. They also have broadly similar views of *how* inhabitants of these countries should serve them: obedient to the authority of the government, industrious citizens are to work for the betterment of the political community.

This vantage point also helps to understand Pan-Islamic Jihadism more accurately. Far from a throwback to the pan-Islamism of the late 19th and early 20th century, this movement – most commonly identified with al-Qaeda – emerged out of the perceived failure of Islamist nationalism in Egypt between the 1950s and 1970s. Put simply, a project that placed the nation, and not Islam, as the central pillar of political identity, supported by state institutions, was too powerful for Jihadis. Accordingly, Jihadis moved abroad – moving away from fighting the “near enemy” in Egypt (the Egyptian regime) to the “far enemy” (the Soviet Union) in Afghanistan. Though Muslim Brothers and pan-Islamic Jihadis share a certain common trait – the commitment to transnational political cooperation among Muslims – they also differ greatly. Most notably, varied Islamist nationalist organizations have made their piece working within the nation-state and with the prominence of the nation within political identity. Neither should this seem strange: if one thinks of Islamists *not* as a monolithic ideological mass but as individuals *raised within particular countries*, then it makes perfect sense that, for most, the borders of these countries – and the notion of a nation – retain appeal.

Political Identity and the Trials and Travails of the Arab Spring

How and why does this history matter as we seek to make sense of the political tremors, polarization and violence of the post-Arab Spring Middle East? Notwithstanding what has appeared to be a tumultuous aftermath of the Arab Spring, the broad dynamics that emerged over the past two centuries have largely remained in force. The Arab Spring has seen three main scenarios. In the first, national and Islamic identity work in tandem thanks to the durability of a civil state. Tunisia, arguably the Arab Spring’s sole success story, is a case in point: the country successfully navigated a transition from Ennahda (the Islamist party victory in the 2011 elections) to Nidaa Tounes, which is composed of members of the former ruling party, secular leftists, members of the Tunisian General Labor Union, and the national employers’ union. Two dynamics in Tunisia are of particular note. First, the civil state serves as the basis for negotiation; there is no question that national identity is primary *nor* is there a question of whether Islam has a place within Tunisian society. Instead of seeking to dominate through the application of Islamic Law, Islamists focus on ensuring space for religious practice. Their secular opponents, on the other hand, participate in a debate over the role of Islam in Tunisia: Should the constitution specify a state religion? Is Islamic finance appropriate for Tunisia? In which domains should Islamic courts have purview over civil law? Second, a significant portion of the population, beyond the ranks of those who vote for Ennahda, want religious influence in personal status issues, even as many of these same people would express support for a strong divide between religion and politics. The takeaway here

is that the ranks of those who support a strong role for religion in political identity is far larger than that of Islamists; religion is central to political identity in ways that far exceed the Islamist project.

A second scenario, most obvious in Egypt, involves a situation in which the national community remains central, yet the realm of legitimate “religious” expression narrows substantially. To be clear, President ‘Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi is hardly a bulwark of secularism; instead, he seeks to actively use religion to advance his policy goals. Though al-Sisi seeks to paint a zero-sum game in which Egypt faces terrorism, this claim hides the fact that a majority of Islamists fight not to destroy Egypt but to participate within it. This is not to make excuses for the Brotherhood’s mistakes and overreaches: when it was in power, it often excluded other contestants to political power from access to government institutions, and processes of political negotiations. The Brotherhood did not, however, jail hundreds even thousands of liberals, or sentence them to death by the hundreds in show trials. The crackdown on the Brotherhood has coincided with a rise in Jihadi violence that seeks to undermine the authority of the Egyptian state and to challenge the validity of national identity. This is hardly a coincidence: by branding the Brotherhood a terrorist organization and treating it as such, al-Sisi created a self-fulfilling prophecy by which segments of the Brotherhood would turn to violence, alongside existing Jihadi groups, in the absence of any alternative. Yet, like in Tunisia, despite the polarization between al-Sisi and the Brotherhood, it is important to remember that many voters see no conflict between religiosity and opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. Islam remains a key component of national identity even as Islamists languish in jail.

A third and final scenario takes the political polarization evident in Egypt to the level of state collapse and civil war. In this, I’m talking about Syria. By providing no space for legitimate political opposition, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad made war on those who supported the primacy of Syrian identity. He also left the field open for Jihadis, whether Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS, who are far more comfortable using political violence against regime targets and civilians alike. While a democratic transition could have provided the space in which the exact relationship between Syrian nationalism and Islam could be negotiated, Assad’s attempts to hold onto power have thrust religious identity to the fore as a non-negotiable source of conflict. This conflict is all the more potent as a result of Assad’s religious ties: as an Alawite, which is an offshoot of Shi’ism, he represents a particularly egregious form of theologically illegitimate leadership for Jihadis. In the face of the failure of Assad to rally the rest of the Syrian opposition to his side – hardly unsurprising given his use of repression against them – Syria has seen both super and sub-national identities – pan-Islamic, sect, tribe, and so forth – come to the fore. In the process, ISIS has arisen, brandishing a vision that rejects national identity in favor of a particularly narrow and anachronistic vision of religious identity. Yet, in doing so, ISIS is a minority *not* only among its contemporary competitors but also within Islamic history.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I’d like to recount what we know about political identity in the Middle East. In the pre-modern period, religious identity was primary, even as ethnic allegiances existed alongside, and often in competition with, religious ties. In this context, the primacy of religious identity was supported not merely by popular sentiment, but by a legal system that divided the population by religious community. Yet, these states were ultimately made up of people who often expressed ethnic allegiances: whether the Arab tribesmen of the Umayyad state, the Persian influences of the Abbasid caliphate, or the dominance of a Turkic center over Arab and Balkan peripheries during the Ottoman Empire, ethnicity never really went away.

In the modern period, by contrast, we see a reversal of roles. Under the banner of nationalism, ethnicity took center stage in the political identity of Middle Eastern countries. While the fiercest secular nationalists sought to relegate religion entirely to the private sphere, most embraced religion as a complement to national identity. The primacy of nationalism was most evident in the claims of a majority of Islamists: even as they challenged the state to Islamize state and society, they rarely questioned the validity of the existence of a national identity. When Pan-Islamic Jihadis did so, theirs was a minority position.

The Arab Spring and its aftermath, despite the very real tremors to regional security and the attendant human suffering, fall squarely within this history. While Syria, and its neighbor, Iraq, offer a cautionary tale of the limits of state control, national allegiances retain sway elsewhere in the region and religion serves as a significant, yet secondary, form of identity. The shift from religion to nation as the primary pillar of political identity, though it arose two hundred years ago, endures today.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 103, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org