



Political Islam: Theory

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Abstract

This essay focuses on questions that pertain to the ideological, normative, symbolic, and epochal aspects of political Islam. Political theorists, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have disagreed on whether political Islam is an exclusively modern political phenomenon or is indebted to long-standing Islamic religious commitments. More specifically, they have also disagreed on whether the shape and ambitions of political Islam are entirely determined by the powers and institutions of the modern, bureaucratic state, particularly its secular desire to control, regulate, and reshape religion. These interpretive debates have often sat uneasily with ongoing normative debates about what kind of secularism democracy requires and whether democracy has priority over liberal rights and freedoms.

INTRODUCTION

Political Islam should be understood in the broadest sense possible as the range of modern political movements, ideological trends, and state-directed policies concerned with giving Islam an authoritative status in political life. The fountainhead of organized political Islam is the Muslim Brotherhood movement, founded in 1928 in Isma‘iliyya, Egypt, by Hasan al-Banna with affiliated and semiaffiliated branches through the Muslim world and countries where Muslims live as minorities. However, the self-conscious concern with preserving, restoring, or fixing Islam’s authoritative role in politics began before this, with such nineteenth-century figures as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and then, more forcefully, the intellectual responses to the 1918 abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate [(Rida 1988 (1922))] and the responses to the secularist manifesto of the al-Azhar scholar ‘Abd al-Raziq (1925), *Islam and the Foundations of Government* (Ali 2005), by such scholars as Muti‘i (1926) and al-Khidr Husayn (‘Imara 1989).

Political Islam by and large belongs to the right of the political spectrum, but it would be a mistake to see it as a single movement or ideology. Islamist trends range from left-leaning populist protest movements (Dabashi 2006, Rahnama 1998, Ramadan 2008) to ultraconservative movements devoted more to social control over morality than to economic redistribution. But political Islamism cannot be mapped so neatly onto a modern European left–right ideological spectrum. Islamist groups and trends differ not only according to their relative economic radicalism or moral puritanism, but also on a number of other axes (Shepard 1987).

First, Islamists differ in their traditionalism with regard to religious authority and knowledge. Some Islamists reject the traditional sources and methods of premodern orthodox religion and hold that the interpretation of the political message of Islam is open to Muslims not classically trained. Importantly, this kind of “interpretive modernism” does not necessarily signal a moral or political liberalism. The chief theorists of the more conservative, utopian strain of political Islam (Banna, Mawdudi, Qutb) were all autodidacts rather than classically trained scholars, but so have been many of the left-leaning or even liberal Islamists. Yet it is a mistake to claim (as it often is) that all Islamism is represented by this rejection of traditional scholarly authority (Zaman 2002). Scholars (Khomeini, Motahhari, Montazari, Taleqani) led the Shi‘ite revolution in Iran, and many Sunnis also hold that the partial goal of an Islamic state should be to empower religious scholars to speak authoritatively about Islamic law (Scott 2012). The religious movement known as Salafism is particularly insistent on rigor in interpretive method (a strict reliance on revelatory proof texts, particularly prophetic *hadith* reports) and on the existence of scholarly authority (Meijer 2009).

Second, groups or trends may differ in their tendency toward political quietism or willingness to use violence. The Salafi movement is united by a commitment to a particular version of the Muslim creed, an unyielding focus on purifying Muslim belief and practice from any imaginable form of idolatry (*shirk*), and an obsession with mastering the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad for the purposes of both knowledge and emulation in practice (Haykel 2009). But politically, Salafis include extreme quietists who preach near-Hobbesian obedience to even the most tyrannical rulers (Lacroix 2009, Salomon 2009) and others who participate in competitive politics (Høigilt & Nome 2014, McCants 2012, Monroe 2012, Wiktorowicz 2001), as well as members of the global jihadi movement (Hegghammer 2009, Paz 2009). Islamists have differed not only on the purity and intransigence of their ultimate goals, but also on the means of reaching them. They have included political gradualists willing to work within corrupt, “un-Islamic” political systems as well as radical revolutionaries unwilling to legitimize any institutions that represent un-Islamic (*jabili*) political ideas (Mecham & Hwang 2014).

Third, political Islam should not be restricted to social movements seeking to attain power or to those revolutionary governments brought to power by Islamist activism (Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan).

The goals of political Islam, above all Islamizing domestic legislation, have been co-opted by many states, including Pakistan, Egypt, Morocco, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Nigeria (Otto 2010). The study of political Islam would be incomplete if it focused only on nonstate social movements, parties, and militant organizations (Mandaville 2007, pp. 147–97; Nasr 2001).

Finally, Islamist movements differ with regard to their relationship to the nation-state. Although the Islamist movement began with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, it has always been a transnational, global movement. However, some organizations are more expressly committed to attaining power within specific national contexts, or to the liberation of specific Muslim lands from foreign occupation, even as they remain part of a transnational movement. But because Islam regards the community of believers (the *umma*) as the most important political community, transnationalism and cosmopolitanism are unavoidable in Islamist activism. This dimension of contemporary political Islam has garnered significant scholarly attention (Allievi & Nielsen 2003; Devji 2005, 2014; Mandaville 2002; Roy 2004).

The literature on political Islam in political science, history, religious studies, anthropology, and sociology is voluminous (Esposito & Shahin 2013, Volpi 2011). As with many multidisciplinary areas of scholarship (Pitts 2010, pp. 212–14), political theory as an academic field has lagged in carving out a distinctive approach and contribution to the study of political Islam, if we understand political theory in the institutional sense of work performed by academic political theorists. This essay thus focuses more thematically on questions addressed in a variety of literatures that pertain to the ideological, normative, symbolic, and epochal aspects of political Islam. The first section focuses on the question of what is modern about the ideology and praxis of political Islam. The second section examines the recent “critical study of secularism” and its implications for studying political Islam. The third section looks at the more specific debate around the problem that the modern state poses for Islam. The fourth section revisits the “Islam and democracy” question in light of recent events since the rise and fall of the so-called Arab Spring.

WHAT IS MODERN ABOUT POLITICAL ISLAM?

One view popular among both political Islamists and many Western scholars is that Islam has produced a political movement in modernity because there is something essentially political about Islam. Common touch points for this view include the fact that the Prophet Muhammad was a political and military leader who established Islam as a political entity, that Islam never historically developed the institutional separation between a corporate “church” and a corporate “state” out of which functional secularism could evolve, and that Islam is deeply associated with the public enforcement of a religious law (*shari‘a*) (Roy 1994).

This claim—that there is an inevitable alienation from the modern secular nation-state because of its incongruity with more authentic and essential Islamic expectations—informs one academic camp. For Lewis (1976), the modern Western befuddlement with political Islam is of a piece with medieval Christian misrecognition of Muslims as “Saracens” or “Muhammadans” and the perverse preoccupation with the question of Muhammad’s sincerity as a prophet. Rather, “if we are to understand anything at all about what is happening in the Muslim world at the present time and what has happened in the past, there are two essential points which need to be grasped. One is the universality of religion as a factor in the lives of the Muslim peoples, and the other is its centrality” (Lewis 1976, p. 40). In this view, the more populist and even democratic politics becomes in Muslim countries, the more we should expect it to reflect an Islamic religious idiom. “Islam from its inception is a religion of power, and in the Muslim world view. . . power should be wielded by Muslims and Muslims alone. . . Here again, it must be recalled that Islam is not conceived as a religion in the limited Western sense but as a community, a loyalty, and a way

of life—and that the Islamic community is still recovering from the traumatic era when Muslim governments and empires were overthrown and Muslim peoples forcibly subjected to alien, infidel rule” (Lewis 1976, p. 49). This view echoes the language used by Islamists themselves in explaining why Muslims must never accept secularism and the privatization of religion.

A similar interpretation is advanced by an important group of scholars who have turned their attention to the nature and history of secularism. They focus on the historical contingency of post-Enlightenment European organizations of politics and the violence that it does to all religious traditions not willing to shrink into the private realm. In responding to the “fundamentalism project” of Marty & Appleby (1991–1995), Mahmood (1994) writes, “[I]t is curious that secularism is rarely problematized as a universal ideal. After all, the relegation of religious practice to a ‘personal and private’ sphere is a product of a historically situated eighteenth-century Christian conception of a privatized form of religion” (p. 30). Mahmood shares with Lewis, then, the observation that certain normative conceptions of what religion is (private, internal, devotional) lead non-Muslim scholars to see political Islam as an instrumentalization of religion rather than as a kind of religiosity. I discuss this literature on the critical study of secularism more below.

Cook (2014), a noted historian of Islamic thought, similarly observes that “Islam today has a higher political profile than any of its competitors” (p. xii) and asks whether any features of Islam’s origins and pre-modern past help to explain this. Cook’s sophisticated analysis investigates the distinctly religious legacies of Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity in the core political arenas of identity, solidarity, political society, warfare, divine jealousy, and polity in order to assess what guidance, expectations, sensibilities, and legacies those three heritages give their modern adherents. What Cook (2014, p. 45) refers to as the “politics of Muslim identity, the politics of Islamic social values, and the politics of the Islamic state” are based on the strong political implications of Islamic doctrines in all of the above arenas. No single one of Islam’s political commitments is unique to Islam, but no other religious tradition displays all of them together, from political solidarity to a theory of righteous warfare.

Cook avoids strong determinism but argues that Muslim political solidarity and the drive for religious control over worldly power resonate clearly from the founding of Islam to the present. The advantages of Cook’s analysis are the exhaustiveness of his research and his refusal to oversimplify the forms that political Islam might take in modernity or the potential strengths of its ideological competitors. Islam does bequeath a powerful political impulse, but this prevents neither Islam itself from changing nor Muslims from assimilating a variety of novel values and desires in politics.

Yet most scholars remain uncomfortable with seeing political Islam primarily through the lens of Islamic religious doctrine and political legacies. Even Gellner (1992), who regarded the political forms of early Islam as central to any understanding of Islam’s relationship to modern secularism, struck a middle position. He held that Islamic fundamentalism must be seen in the context of the reaction to modernization in all its forms, but that certain classical features of Islamic religious doctrine practice are clearly observable in the modern revival. What is noteworthy, for Gellner, is that modernity has led to the triumph of “High Islam” (scriptural, orthodox, dogmatic) throughout Muslim societies, whereas premodern Muslim societies tended to witness cycles of “revivalism” followed by a return to folk “Low Islam” outside of the cities (Gellner 1992).

Although the influence of modernization theory discouraged mainstream social science from studying Islam’s influence on politics before the 1979 revolution in Iran (Lerner 1958), a common refrain of scholarship on Islamism is that the ideology is essentially entangled in the problem of modernity and merits analysis alongside other reactionary, populist, or antiliberal modern ideologies. Indeed, a common trope about Islamism is that it is primarily a reaction to modernity

(see Char 2010, Lawrence 1989, Sivan 1985). In one sense, the modernity of political Islam is a truism, as Islamists live in modern societies and cannot help but address their political activism to

specifically modern predicaments: political, social, economic and cultural issues that emerged in the Middle East as a result of the expansion of the world capitalist market, the colonization of important areas of the region by England and France, the formation of new territorial nation-states, the rise and decline of secular nationalist movements, the frustrations and failures of economic development, the reformation of gender relations, and the hybridization of culture and identity in the course of the wide range of contacts and interactions among Europeans and their cultures and the peoples of the Middle East. (Beinin & Stork 1997, p. 4)

Certainly, core concepts of Islamist activism were unthinkable before the modern period: from prefixing concepts such as state, economy, society, and party with the all-purpose adjective “Islamic” to more specific notions such as that of the Islamic movement as a “vanguard” (*tali‘a*) (Roy 1994, pp. 37–47). Moreover, whereas Islamism is based on a critique of Western domination and its corrupt, pagan values, political Islamists have tended to accept uncritically some of the main features of modern politics, particularly the state, the institutions of centralized bureaucratic domination, and the use of technology (Hallaq 2013).

It is precisely in this desire to graft Islamic morals, rules, and symbols onto modern institutions that some scholars have located political Islam’s failure. Roy (1994, pp. 20–21) identifies a central problem of modern Islamist thought “in [its] quest for a universal state. . . [But] it has failed because Islamist thought, at the end of an intellectual trajectory that tries to integrate modernity, ultimately meets up with the ‘Islamic political imagination’ of tradition and its essential premise: politics can be founded only on individual virtue.” However, Roy is wrong that the premodern Islamic political tradition held that politics relies on individual virtue. A key attribute of classical Sunnism is that it gave up hope for a perfectly just and pious ruler and relied instead on the force of the law and the community’s knowledge of it. A treatise by the great thirteenth- and fourteenth-century theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), one of the most popular premodern figures for modern Islamists, separated political action from individual piety or virtue (Anjum 2012, Ibn Taymiyya 2000, Johansen 2008). A much deeper problem for political Islam is its faith in “applying *shari‘a*” as a political panacea while trying to preserve the modern bureaucratic state and meet the socioeconomic expectations of modern Muslims.

But the ideological analysis of Islamism’s modernity goes beyond the tautology that Islamism is modern because it occurs in modernity and seeks to transform it using its own tools and institutions. The themes of alienation and crises of legitimation are often viewed as indispensable for analyzing modern ideological movements. Shortly after the Iranian Revolution, Dekmejian (1980) and Ayubi (1980, 1993) diagnosed the Islamist revival as a response to the legitimation crisis experienced by “alien” secular liberal, socialist, and nationalist ideologies (which had dominated twentieth-century politics to that point) in the wake of the 1967 Six-Day War, economic stagnation and injustice, and political corruption. In fact, some scholars have advocated analyzing Islamism as a species of nationalism in pseudoreligious guise (Keddie 1969).

Keeping with this theme, but bracketing critique or normative judgment, Euben (1999, p. 15) argues that “Christian as well as Islamic fundamentalists share a preoccupation with the erosion of values, traditions, and meaning seen as constitutive of post-Enlightenment modernity. . . [and] can be understood as part of the larger attempt among various groups and theories to ‘re-enchant’ a world characterized by the experience of disenchantment.” We should thus compare Islamic fundamentalists such as Qutb to Western critics of modernity such as Arendt, MacIntyre, Taylor, Neuhaus, and Bellah. Euben’s analysis shares with Lewis’s (1976) the virtue of relaying Islamist

claims at face value without assuming they are ideological cover for more authentic material or psychological dislocations.

The notion of modernity as producing alienation that in turn provokes a desire to “return” to something that preceded it (Strauss 1981) invites obvious comparisons to other examples of the politics of reactionary backlash. Particularly after September 11, 2001, the notion of “Islamofascism” became a rallying cry for those who supported a more confrontational stance toward radical political Islam at home and abroad (Berman 2003, Hitchens 2007, Schwartz 2006). But academics have taken seriously the comparison with twentieth-century European fascism, and for good reason. Arjomand (1986), for instance, argues that the 1979 revolution in Iran is best compared to the twentieth-century fascist revolutions in Europe. Arguing that both fascism and Islamism are based on the reaction to social dislocation and normative disorder, Arjomand observes that both expect revolution to restore cultural authenticity and moral purity; the propaganda of both is preoccupied with the threats of moral laxity, weakness, hedonism, foreigners, and cosmopolitanism; both seek to integrate social classes into a national group on the grounds that true political conflict is between peoples and nations, not classes; both make populist appeals to the dispossessed in a way that offers identity, resentment, and culture instead of economic revolution; and, finally, both involve a certain synthesis of other ideologies that they simultaneously attack (nationalism, democracy, liberalism, Marxism, and capitalism). For these reasons, Arjomand refers to the Iranian revolution as a victory for “revolutionary traditionalism” rather than the kind of pure traditionalism that opposed the Iranian constitutional revolution in the early twentieth century.

There are also important similarities in political praxis. Both fascism and Islamism are often led by recently disposed or dislodged classes; the frustrated middle classes often make up the core of Islamist activists (Fischer 1982). Both seek to politicize the population in ways unknown in premodern political societies, or in modern monarchies such as Morocco or Saudi Arabia that use religion in more traditional ways. Indeed, it has been widely documented how the myth of revolutionary legitimacy, the cult of state power, and the rule of a designated “leader” have effected a modern transformation within Shi’ism as much as a religious transformation of society (Akhavi 1996, Arjomand 1988). Even out of power, the first Islamist group, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, was founded “at a time when social disaggregation and the conservative protest of threatened social groups were lent expression universally by forms of political organization associated with generic fascism: youth societies, scouting organizations with lofty moral values and with emphasis on discipline and adulation for the leader, conspiratorial para-military groups, and ideologies of social exclusivism” (Al-Azmeh 1991, p. 45).

This focus on political culture and praxis has accompanied some of the most provocative claims about the essential modernity of Islamist, and particularly international jihadi, groups. At the extreme is Tibi’s (2012, p. 1) claim that “Islamism is not Islam” at all because “Islamism is about political order, not faith” (see also Tibi 2009). Tibi sees Islamism as a purely political religion (Burrin 1997, Gentile 2005) that is a “cultural-political response to a crisis of failed postcolonial development in Islamic societies under conditions of globalization” (p. 23) whereas Islam is defined solely as the affirmation of the famous five pillars of the faith. Islamism is thus an invention, rather than a resurgence, of tradition, including the invention of “imagined community” (*umma*). This politicized Islam ought to be placed next to the older, European versions as one more form of modern totalitarianism. Unfortunately, any potential insights into the similarities between political Islam and other modern illiberal political movements are sacrificed by Tibi’s simplistic and arbitrary “Islam versus Islamism” dichotomy (as though “Islam” were any one single thing, easily defined as private worship or belief) and his unwillingness to explore any premodern Islamic religious discussions of law and politics.

Barely more complex is Gray's (2003, pp. xvii–xviii) argument that “radical Islam is a by-product of late modern globalization. In the case of Al Qaeda this is evident in the use of the technologies and types of organization that go with the present phase of globalization and also in the nature of its ideological appeal. Al Qaeda gains strength from the collapse of traditional societies that is an integral feature of globalization. The Utopia it envisions is not a return to the local cultures of the past but a universal civilization in which such cultures will no longer exist.” But Gray is less interested than Tibi in Al Qaeda's ideology as expressed in doctrine. For him, the medium is the message: “The spectacular violence of Al Qaeda. . . is better understood as a fusion of symbolic violence of the kind waged against capitalist institutions by groups such as the Baader-Meinhof gang with overtly apocalyptic terror of the sort practiced by the Japanese Aum cult. . . . The belief that a type of society better than any that has ever existed can be brought into being by the systematic use of violence belongs in our time, not that of our medieval ancestors. Like Jacobinism and Leninism, Nazism and Maoism, radical Islam is a uniquely modern pathology” (Gray 2003, p. xix).

Whereas Tibi unselfconsciously asserts that Islam is mere faith and devotion, the problem with Gray's analysis is that it is largely a priori. That is, he extrapolates from his theoretical understanding of modern European totalitarianism rather than from any study of Islam, medieval or modern, or of Islamism, radical or other. Islamist groups from the Brotherhood to al Qaeda have embraced cults of sacrifice and martyrdom (as have modern nationalisms) and see violence as a necessary means for attaining their goals. But Gray is conjecturing when he claims that modern radical Islamism aims at transforming humans and societies through mass violence. Al Qaeda preaches a classical doctrine of obedience to God and a political theology of Muslim power (Abou El Fadl 2001), but it rarely speaks of its ideal Islamic order in the kinds of utopian-millenarian terms that Gray associates with modern totalitarianism. Islamist theological anthropologies instead tend to preserve a deep strain of pessimism about the level of moral perfection humans can achieve through their own efforts. Al Qaeda and affiliated groups see themselves at war with outside invaders and local traitors (Gerges 2005), but Gray mistakes their justifications of violence for theories of universal moral transformation through violence.

A bizarre inversion of Gray's approach can be found in Devji's (2008, p. 8) claim that al Qaeda and other international jihadi groups aim at bringing about a “global humanitarian order. . . [and] in this way they are no different than the plethora of nongovernmental agencies dedicated to humanitarian work.” Devji's analysis feels, like Gray's, forced onto the Islamist or jihadi material and inspired more by a prior theoretical reading of modernity. Of course, jihadis have used the word “human” and never cease pointing to the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Western powers, but Devji shows little interest in documenting actual conceptions of universal humanity operating in jihadi discourse. The notion of a “terrorist in search of humanity” thus feels like an academic gimmick rather than a study of the development of cosmopolitan or universalist forms of ethical concern beyond classical Islamic (and Christian) expectations of universal conversion to the true salvific religion.

But this is not to deny that certain Islamist ideologues have developed utopian theoretical interpretations of Islam that do point to a desire to improve the human condition through political action. The Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (executed by 'Abd al-Nasir in 1966) is perhaps the most important modern Islamist political theorist. Qutb is most famous for his concepts of the modern world as an un-Islamic space of pagan ignorance (*jabiliyya*) and the need to restore God's legislative sovereignty (*hakimiyya*) (Mandaville 2007, pp. 76–83; Qutb 2008; Shepard 2003). But Qutb's tireless emphasis on the essential pragmatism, realism, and ease of the Islamic code points to another aspect of his project. By showing that Islamic law is perfectly configured for the desires

and capacities of ordinary human selves, Qutb tries to show that it not only is commanded by God but also is the law that we would ideally give ourselves. Moreover, by arguing that most moral pathologies are a result of disordered political and social relations, Qutb appears to be arguing that Islam is political because it creates an egalitarian political society that frees humans from fear and domination to act on their natural goodness. Much modern Islamist thought not only is utopian but also aspires to being realistically utopian (March 2010). Thus, Gray was not entirely off base in his claim that Islamism often seeks to attain levels of moral perfection through politics that were not imagined by premodern Muslim thinkers, but he may have been looking in the wrong place and focusing too narrowly on the theme of transformative violence.

This desire to justify Islam as a “system” (Shepard 1989) that is equipped to speak to persons’ natural desires and political expectations does seem unprecedented in premodern Islamic political writing. Qutb’s political theory is not only about rejecting the underlying epistemology of modern Western rationality and popular sovereignty (Euben 1999) but also about answering that most modern of political questions: How can humans be both free and governed? Qutb is not alone in this. Modern Islamist thinkers across the political spectrum have articulated a fairly novel apologetics of Islamic law and politics that consistently draws on the theme of Islam’s essential harmony with humans’ innate disposition (*fitra*) and moral psychology (March 2015).

It thus seems undeniable that the problems of modernity in postcolonial Muslim societies are at the center of any understanding of political Islam. But the political resurgence of Islam has played no small part in reopening scholarly questions about some of modernity’s central practices, powers, and assumptions. One of the major trends in political, social, and cultural theory of the past years has been the critical study of secularism and the inquiry into whether we might inhabit a “postsecular” age (Casanova 1994, de Vries & Sullivan 2006, Habermas 2008). Political Islam has been at the center of these debates.

POLITICAL ISLAM AND THE CRITICAL STUDY OF SECULARISM

The work of Asad (2003) has inspired one very important strand of this inquiry. Asad’s basic approach is not to reject secularism from any alternative normative perspective, but to establish secular power and secular moral categories as objects of anthropological and genealogical inquiry in order to inquire into “the epistemological assumptions of the secular . . . [and the] behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life” (Asad 2003, p. 25). Central to this inquiry is the observation that secularism is never just the “great separation” of politics and religion (Lilla 2008) but that it always involves the active interference with and remaking of religion. “What is distinctive about ‘secularism’ is that it presupposes new concepts of ‘religion,’ ‘ethics,’ and ‘politics,’ and new imperatives associated with them” (Asad 2003, pp. 1–2). Whereas ideological defenses of secularism often portray it as a solution to a pre-existing, even perennial, problem of religion and peaceful coexistence, Asad (2003, p. 5) proposes that we see secularism as “an enactment by which a *political medium* (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion.” For Asad, secularism involves not just the separation of public reason (secular) and private reason (religious) but also the transformations that allow religion to be so reformed. It must make religion amenable to being private, moral, and ethical, rather than legal, political, and adjudicative. It does this through “the statecraft that uses ‘self-discipline’ and ‘participation,’ ‘law’ and ‘economy’ as elements of political strategy” (Asad 2003, p. 3).

Political Islam is not set up as a direct object of inquiry or genealogical investigation within this research project. Nonetheless, some implications follow for the study of Islamism. Islamism is almost everywhere operating within the structures of modern secular states. Thus, for Asad,

the aspirations of political Islam are not given by some permanent feature of Islam as trying to encompass all aspects of life, although it is true most Muslims are not satisfied with a religion that is limited to mere private belief or “public talk that makes no demands on life” (Asad 2003, p. 199). The crucial factor is that the modern state in Muslim societies, a state imported from Western models, aims at the transformation of all aspects of life. “All social activity requires the consent of the law, and therefore of the nation-state. The way social spaces are defined, ordered, and regulated makes them all equally ‘political’” (Asad 2003, p. 199). It is the secular state’s aspiration to total social control that shapes the Islamists’ political imagination, partly because even their cultural activism tends to come up against state regulation. This also explains the particular shape of Islamist desires and demands: The modern Islamist vision of a homogenized Islamic public sphere and a codified Islamic legal system owes more to the legacy of the modern secular state than to premodern Islamic political traditions (Asad 2003, pp. 253–54; Hirschkind 1997).

Asad’s work is the axis around which much literature on the relationship between secular power and Islam as a public religion has rotated. But the critical study of secularism is (justifiably) focused more on exploring secular power than on exploring Islamism, and it is often concerned with redeeming Islamist or Muslim political alternatives to secularism only in a thinly relativist sense. That is, because the scholars in question do not endorse any positive alternative to secularism in either the public or private sphere (and here they differ from the many theist critics of secularism in the academy, which include not only Christians from Charles Taylor to John Milbank but also many Muslims), their exploration of Islamic alternatives to secularism often merely takes the form of defending them against the most simplistic forms of criticism.

For example, Mahmood’s (2011, p. xii) influential *Politics of Piety* aims “to lay bare a parochial and narrow conception of autonomized agency that refuses to grant legitimacy to any other form of subjectivity or criticality” merely to refute the charge that pious Muslim women are “passive, obsequious and uncritical. . .not that the program of ethical self-cultivation pursued by the piety movement is ‘good’ or conducive to establishing relations of gender equality, or that it should be adopted by progressives, liberals, feminists, and others.” Mahmood aims to refute the illiberal judgment that secularism’s progressive formulations exhaust ways of living meaningfully and richly in this world. But most liberal pluralists would reject that original judgment.

More complicated is the question of whether the claim that pious religious persons live meaningful, agential lives—and that these lives are cultivated as part of a long-term discursive tradition (Asad 1986)—can speak to the desirability of even connected criticism (Walzer 1993) that calls for a reconciliation of tradition with norms of justice or equality. Some have read Asad and Mahmood as antiseccularists who reject any positive value for progressive transformations of religious practices from within (Mufti 2013, Robbins 2013). In reference to Mahmood’s work, Abbas (2013, p. 165) comments that “the priority given to metropolitan concern, and postcolonial guilt, means metropolitan intellectuals get to anoint good Muslims and tar bad ones. They get to choose between those who raise acceptable concerns, and thus get to retain their Muslim status, and those who do not” (see also Gourgouris 2008a,b). My own view is that this harsh interpretation overstates the aspirations of Asad, Mahmood, and others associated with the critical study of secularism. Whether investigating suicide bombing (Asad 2007), Islamic theological reform (Mahmood 2006), prosecuting heresy (Agrama 2012, Hirschkind 1995), the politics of blasphemy (Asad et al. 2009), or the headscarf (Asad 2005, 2006), the sharpest critical claims advanced are either a simple *tu quoque* to common Western accusations of Islamic violence or intolerance or an attempt to unmask as partial and particular common secular liberal claims of impartiality, neutrality, and universality. Both edges of the critique are represented in Asad’s retort to the ideological claim that secularism aims through its control over religion to reduce pain and suffering. Asad (2003, p. 11) questions “whether it is pain and suffering as such that the secularist cares about

or the pain and suffering that can be attributed to religious violence because that is pain the modern imaginary conceives of as gratuitous.” Asad simply points out that violence and domination can not only survive the privatization of religion but be enacted precisely in the process of privatizing it.

At worst, there is a temptation in this scholarship to misrepresent Islamic political and ethical traditions in order to fit a particular theoretical narrative about the radical mismatch between modern secular-liberal state power and Muslim ethical sensibilities (March 2012) and to imply that it is “secularism itself that makes religion into an object of politics” (Agrama 2012, p. 33). Indeed, there is a certain irony in the fact that the study of Islamic political practices as part of the critical study of secularism sometimes requires silencing or mischaracterizing internal Islamic motivations and conceptions of political power because the domination of the secular state is seen as so complete. The only places where we are encouraged to look for “authentic” modes of Islamic moral and political reasoning are in spaces that do not compete with the state for public power (such as the al-Azhar fatwa council or private spaces of ethical self-discipline). The project of critiquing secular liberalism thus seems to end in a cul-de-sac: The spaces authorized by liberalism are where the most authentic forms of traditional religiosity can flourish, precisely because in not challenging the state’s authority they escape its regulation.

However, at its best, this literature resists simplistic narratives of secular progress and religious backwardness. It looks beyond the standard concepts of ideological analysis (e.g., freedom, coercion, equality) to concepts that point to daily practices, sensibilities, and dispositions that better reflect how secular and religious citizens experience political life. An example is Asad’s (2012) essay on the brief period between the toppling of President Hosni Mubarak and the July 3, 2013, coup in Egypt: He focuses on how concepts such as fear, awe, and obedience can operate simultaneously in religious and secular registers and how they are important for understanding not only religious/secular antagonisms but also shared sensibilities toward worldly power.

IS THE “ISLAMIC STATE” A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

Although a core goal of political Islam from its twentieth-century inception has been to create an “Islamic state” or to fuse “religion and state” (*din wa dawla*), we see from the critical study of secularism that the modern, postcolonial state in Muslim countries is not a neutral instrument of political and legal power. The centralized, bureaucratic, legislating, sovereign state was imposed on Muslim societies throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sometimes by local modernizing elites and sometimes by European colonial powers. Consequently, except in Saudi Arabia (Vogel 2000), a unified and centralized system for making law and policy replaced the premodern split between a realm of discretionary “secular” power (*siyasa, sulta*) and a realm of uncoded religious law applied in traditional courts. Even where traditional religious law was still enforced in matters of family and personal status in *shari‘a* courts, those courts received their authorization from state authorities and usually applied newly codified (and simplified) versions of traditional Islamic law. The state as such thus represents an asteroid that crashed into the ecology of premodern Muslim society, yet it remains untheorized and uncriticized by most modern Islamist movements.

In contrast, Western scholars of Islam and Islamic law have raised radical doubts about the compatibility between the Islamist desire to apply *shari‘a* and the modern state. Some of these doubts come from a liberal perspective (An-Na’im 1998, 2008; Roy 1994) and some from what can only be termed a MacIntyrian anti-Enlightenment, antimodernity standpoint (Hallaq 2013). An-Na’im (1990, 1992) has long been known as one of the clearest voices arguing that Muslims must reform Islamic law from within so that the laws of Muslim states will enjoy both compatibility with

human rights law and popular legitimacy. However, in his *Islam and the Secular State* (An-Na'im 2008), the author argues that Muslim societies ought to endorse something like American-style secularism, according to which religion may breathe easily in the public sphere and inform public morality but make no claim to authority over coercive state legislation. He writes that "in order to be a Muslim by conviction and free choice, which is the only way I can be a Muslim, I need a secular state" (An-Na'im 2008, p. 1).

The theology supporting An-Na'im's political (not comprehensive) secularism will be familiar to any reader of Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*. Religion for An-Na'im is primarily about the voluntary, conscientious affirmation of religious obligations in the pursuit of salvation, which is entirely negated by the coercive imposition of those obligations by secular state institutions (An-Na'im 2008, p. 2). An-Na'im thus shifts away from some of the most common contemporary Muslim approaches to the theologico-political problem, which claim that Islamic law already is sufficiently flexible, pluralistic, and worldly but also attempt to change some of its most troubling features from within (Bielefeldt 1995). Instead, An-Na'im accepts as fact that *shari'a* is above all a divine code and is, as positive law, simply incompatible with secular politics.

Most thinkers engaged in what is known in the West as the reformist project tend to turn either to the Islamic modernism of Muhammad 'Abduh and the young Rashid Rida (Kerr 1996) or to the jurisprudential tradition of adapting Islamic law through the creative yet cautious use of concepts such as public welfare (*maslaha*) and the "purposes of *shari'a*" (*maqasid al-shari'a*) (Johnston 2007). In contrast, An-Na'im's position finds its precursor in 'Abd al-Raziq's (1925) *Islam and the Foundations of Government*, which similarly called for the separation of state and religion rather than experimentation with their continued interdependence.

Why does An-Na'im take such a bold position, despite many Muslims' historical attachment to the idea of *shari'a* as a public and political, as well as private and ritual, moral code? An-Na'im advances three main arguments. First, true piety exists only when humans obey God out of their own free will and not when they comply with coercive and punitive state institutions. Second, there are totalitarian dangers in collapsing all distinctions among the state, politics, and religious morality. Third, enforcing "God's rule" is in fact enforcing human interpretations of a revelation that cannot be conclusively and infallibly interpreted. This is problematic, not only for those who want to apply *shari'a* as God's law, but for anyone who wants to avoid human tyranny: "[O]nce a principle or a norm is officially identified as 'decreed by God' it is extremely difficult for believers to resist or change its application in practice" (An-Na'im 2008, p. 28).

Thus, the modern state must make no claims to be interpreting or enforcing *shari'a*, but rather must justify all public policy and legislation on the basis of secular "civic reason," which An-Na'im acknowledges as overlapping substantially with the similar ideas of Rawls and Habermas. Indeed, throughout his book, An-Na'im (2008) invokes the idea of reciprocity as the "Golden Rule" of all morality and the fundamental reason why it is unfair for Muslims (or anyone) to impose their beliefs on others, even giving this an Arabic gloss (*mu'awada*). However, An-Na'im is at pains to stress that his form of secularism does not amount to the complete privatization of religion and its exclusion from public life and morality (a misconception to which he attributes the widespread Muslim antipathy toward the idea of secularism), but rather merely the detachment of religious doctrine from the process of constructing coercive laws.

An-Na'im's idea that applying *shari'a* is impossible, because human interpretation is always involved, seems to hold the idea of a religious nomocracy to an ontological standard to which few orthodox Muslims have aspired. Furthermore, although his argument concerning free choice takes the form of a theological truth claim, he does not address the traditional Islamic theological arguments for the public enforcement of certain areas of morality, not to mention the enforcement of Islamic legal norms in areas such as contracts, sales, and succession. However, a wide range

of Islamic theological and political discourses share his most central ideas: that “the state can serve the ideals of an Islamic society for social justice, peace, goodness, and virtue” (An-Na’im 2008, p. 293) and that *shari‘a* can be conceptualized not in formalistic terms but as a substantive commitment to justice and the rule of law.

A roughly opposite position is found in Hallaq’s (2013) *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity’s Moral Predicament*, which advances a familiar story about modernity as loss and trauma. Hallaq describes precolonial Muslim society (in the singular) as governed “paradigmatically” by *shari‘a*. His notion of a paradigm (drawing on Schmitt and Foucault) refers to the dominant domain, episteme, and mentality governing a particular civilization or era. It lies between a pure ideal expressed in texts (say, those of the Muslim theologians or philosophers) and a concrete, documented historical reality. But it errs perhaps toward the latter. Hallaq (2013) asserts that although *shari‘a* “had to *live in* a society that was, like any other, messy. . . the moral law consistently and unquestionably ruled the day” (p. 11), and that “Muslims lived for over a millennium in a far more egalitarian and merciful system. . . under a rule of law that modernity cannot fairly blemish with critical detraction” (p. 110). Hallaq cites almost no social history to defend these claims and does not discuss the social conflicts that *shari‘a* could not eradicate (for a less mythic approach, see Al-Azmeh 2007).

The rupture brought by modernity, according to Hallaq, consists in the imposition of a form of domination completely incompatible with the premodern *shari‘a* paradigm. The Enlightenment philosophical paradigm, in particular its mechanistic view of nature and the universe, its separation of fact from value, its belief in the autonomous self, and its instrumental attitude toward nature, destroys any possible harmony among law, morality, governance, and human consciousness. Most importantly for Hallaq, the Enlightenment gives rise to a modern state that is characterized by five primary “form-properties”: (a) historical derivation from the particular experience of modern Europe, (b) a metaphysics of a sovereign national will embodied in the state that represents it, (c) a monopoly over lawmaking and violence, (d) a massive regulatory bureaucratic apparatus, and (e) the use of technologies of governmentality required to produce modern national subjects (Hallaq 2013, pp. 23–36). Law in the modern sovereign state can only be completely arbitrary and amoral; it refers to nothing outside of the sovereign will that posits it. For Hallaq, law is either based entirely on “morality” in the medieval sense or it is entirely separated from morality in any sense.

Why can we not see modern political Islam as an effort to fill modern political forms with a substantive morality based on Islamic religious values and to replace the amoral sovereignty of the state with the sovereignty of God? For Hallaq, this is not only a daunting practical challenge but also a metaphysical impossibility. The modern state cannot be Islamic because it depends on metaphysical and moral presuppositions that are diametrically opposed to Islam. His argument is a formally simple one: The rule of *shari‘a* is by definition the informal rule of jurists according to their classical methods based on a commitment to the legislative sovereignty of God, whereas the modern state requires top-down codification of law on the basis of the state’s own legislative sovereignty; therefore, “any conception of a modern Islamic state is *inherently self-contradictory*” (Hallaq 2013, p. xi, italics in original).

His argument rests on the claims that under the “paradigmatic” scheme of *shari‘a* governance in premodern Islam, the ruling authorities had no sovereign will of their own and to ascribe them any such authority is to nullify *shari‘a* governance. Moreover, any effort to codify classical Islamic legal norms and enforce them as part of state law is an abandonment of the very epistemology and metaphysics on which Islam and *shari‘a* are based.

Muslims are thus stuck in a double bind. They cannot embrace modernity and its institutions, for modernity is irredeemably nihilistic and destructive. Neither can they Islamize the political

institutions of modernity, for those institutions are antithetical to everything essentially Islamic. But Hallaq does not prescribe resignation or despair. Rather, he counsels Muslims to recover the moral core of Islam, particularly its practices of ethical self-cultivation. The state cannot be saved, but perhaps Muslims can. Here, he converges with the Asadians in seeing those apolitical practices of ethical self-care as the last remaining vestiges of authentic Islamic normativity. The secular liberal state may be irreconcilable with Islam, but at least it provides some unregulated spaces to cultivate Muslim ethical selves rather than disciplined liberal subjects.

Hallaq does a great service in bringing the state back in as an object of critique. As he notes, modern political Islamists have in general aspired to capture rather than smash the state, and seeing the revolutionary capture of state power as a panacea for the moral ills plaguing modern Muslim societies is foolish. But this very perspicacity may point to the limits of his claim that it is a conceptual incoherence to speak of an “Islamic state.” Many, if not most, modern Islamist thinkers do not share Hallaq’s view that the relative authority of state institutions in enforcing legal norms is the core metaphysical and ontological principle that defines the essence of Islam; instead, they reserve that status for more properly creedal propositions about God, creation, and the Qur’an. Hallaq seems to have no authority for the normative claim that any legislation or reinterpretation Muslims initiate in the modern period is “not Islamic law.”

Even at the historical, conceptual, and descriptive levels, Hallaq seems to overstate his case against the sovereign state in Islamic legal and political theory. Hallaq’s claim is that in premodern Islam the ruler had no will of his own that gave law its authority. This is an oversimplification. Both classical theory and practice distinguished between two realms: governance (*siyasa*) and religious law (*fiqh*). The latter was indeed the exclusive domain of the religious scholars. However, in the many areas of public, social, and economic life where Islamic religious rules are either nonexistent or prohibitively restrictive, Muslim authorities are permitted to act within broad moral constraints as long as their actions are justifiable as advancing communal welfare (*maslaha*) (Stilt 2012). The Ottomans, well before colonialism, went as far as to promulgate formal codes (*kanuns*) in the realm of *siyasa* left to the rulers by the religious law itself. Ottoman legal theorists even declared that the Sultan’s will was the source of the legitimacy of such codes (Imber 1997). The *siyasa/fiqh* dichotomy qualifies the idea that Islamic governance was based purely on the apolitical rule of *shari‘a* and raises complex political questions about how to draw the line between those areas of life where public authorities may coerce and legislate, with only the broadest imprimatur of the religious scholars, and those areas where the scholars may “apply *shari‘a*” free from state interference.

The boldest attempts to “Islamize” entire state legal systems in accordance with premodern juridical doctrines have proven to be practically and politically almost impossible to carry out (Schirazi 1998). Nevertheless, many Muslims think that in all times and places they must try to order their lives and societies in accordance with the most important purposes and priorities of Islam, recognizing historical changes and engaging dialectically with them. It thus seems more sensible from a scholarly perspective to acknowledge that in modernity, Islamic law is not dead (as Hallaq claims) but survives as an amalgam of what is found in the classical texts and what is pronounced by public *shari‘a* counsels, legislatures, *shari‘a*-compatibility courts, civil courts, and independent religious authorities.

For Hallaq, the obstacles to restoration of the unchallenged, hegemonic authority of *shari‘a* as a paradigm are the disciplinary, regulatory, and surveillance powers of the modern state, anchored in the Enlightenment mentality of instrumental rationality and the is/ought distinction. But even though his book aims at exploring “modernity’s moral predicament,” Hallaq does not recognize the distinctive conditions of moral argument in modernity. There is no mention of the distinction between morality (what we owe others as a matter of justice) and ethics (care of the self), and

thus no suggestion that any modern legal and political institutions might aim at morality while acknowledging multiple ethical projects.

There is also no recognition that Muslims might have reasonable disagreements about ethics. For Hallaq it is simply beyond dispute that “the overwhelming majority of modern Muslims wish for the *Shari’a* to return in one form or another” and that the aporia lies in their wish to restore it within the framework of the modern state (Hallaq 2013, p. x). But also worth exploring is the idea that Muslim-majority societies are characterized by the same fundamental challenge of pluralism as other modern societies, given that Muslims disagree profoundly on what Islam and *shari’a* call for and who should speak in the name of religious morality. If Hallaq is right that an Islamic state is an impossibility today, that is likely to be because of the combination of moral pluralism in Muslim societies today and the irrelevance or inadequacy of the premodern Islamic legal corpus for most social and economic policy areas within which Muslims expect their states to act.

ISLAMISM, DEMOCRACY, AND POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY

The lost promise of the recent democracy movements in the Middle East bears directly on these issues. It is somewhat perverse to speak about the social and political challenges to democratization in the Middle East given its violent suppression in Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Bahrain and its preemption in Morocco, Jordan, and the Gulf. But the brief moments of relatively free political competition reinforce the sense that the question of religion and political Islam remains among the core political fault lines in many Muslim societies. The full sociological and institutional dimensions of democratization are beyond the scope of this essay, but there is a sizable literature (predating the Arab Spring) on the question of political Islam and theories of democracy and popular sovereignty (see Esposito & Voll 1996, Lewis 1993, Najjar 1958, Wright 1991, Zartman 1992, Zubaida 1992). One debate focuses on the compatibility of Islam and democracy: Some scholars dispute it (Fukuyama 2001; Gellner 1994; Hallaq 2013; Huntington 1984, 1996; Kedourie 1992; Kramer 1993; Lewis 1996), whereas others find democratic self-governance rooted in the core texts, practices, and values of classical Islam (Abou El Fadl 2003, 2004; Khan 2006; Moussalli 2001; Sachedina 2001; Sulami 2003).

Potentially more interesting for political theorists are questions related to particular versions or modifications of democracy in an Islamic political context, such as the relationship between democracy and secularism, religious legal and moral constraints on democratic outcomes, and the gap between Islamist doctrine and Islamist political practice. However, an important feature of such discussions in Western academic political theory is that they are normative debates about the practices of other societies. Even if the individual scholars participating in the academic debate come from Muslim contexts themselves, the audience for the debate is not the same as the community whose political life is being debated.

Consider, for example, the debate in political theory and philosophy about postsecularism. In an influential paper, Habermas (2008, p. 18) takes stock of the eclipse of the “secularization thesis.” Universalist that he is, Habermas’s reflections are not limited to the Western public sphere. Just as European Christians “are expected to appropriate the secular legitimation of constitutional principles under the premises of their own faith,” so too “the insight is also growing in the Islamic world that today an historical-hermeneutic approach to the Koran’s doctrine is required” (Habermas 2008, pp. 27–28). Others echo these reflections on the Islamic world. We have seen above An-Na’im’s view that the conscientious nature of Islamic religious commitments, combined with the indeterminacy of Islamic legal judgments, necessitates a secular, liberal state for religious reasons, and Tibi’s argument that the Islamist desire to conquer politics for religion has no classical

Islamic origin. More recently, Hashemi (2009, 2014) has argued that liberal democracy requires a secular form of politics but that getting there requires a patient attitude toward internal religious change. Hashemi is one of many secular political theorists living outside Iran whose confidence has been boosted by the disappointments of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Ghobadzadeh 2013; Jahanbegloo 2009, 2013).

Many other theorists have been more interested in how the evolution of political Islam points to unique models of democracy with a “religious referent” (from the Arabic *marjaʿiyya diniyya*) or with a more public role for religion than recent liberal democratic theory would prefer. Well before the Arab Spring, Bayat (1996, 2007) had argued that by looking beyond theology and even ideological dogma it was possible to observe a “post-Islamist” phase of pragmatic, pluralist Islamic political action in practice, albeit one that did not conform to any principled liberal secularism. Even without claiming a de facto moderation of Islamist political demands, some scholars have noted that Islamist groups have a long-standing “demotic praxis” (Ahmad 2009, 2011) or that Islamist groups simply form an important countervailing force against secular authoritarian states and have contributed to democratization and constitutionalization through their pressure on state power (Browsers 2009, Brown 2012, Eickelman & Piscatori 1996, Feldman 2007, Hefner 2011, Salamé 1994). Despite the recent political unrest in Turkey, which some have likened to a “legitimation crisis” (Benhabib 2014), it has been widely observed that the eventual democratic victory of the Islamist AK (*Adalet ve Kalkınma*) Party resulted in a more formally democratic constitution after decades of military guardianship (Bâli 2012, Gunter 2012, Yavuz 2009).

Somewhat stronger is the claim that an authentic, legitimate form of democratic politics and activism must reflect the traditions, habits, and preferences of those who compose the demos. Thus, Barlas (2013, p. 417), a well-known Muslim feminist, has pushed back against “those that want Muslims to secularize the Qurʾan as the precondition for getting rights,” arguing that “secular attempts to undermine Islam also undermine the prospects for rights and democracy in Muslim societies” and that “the secular project in Muslim societies is a form of self-harm.” Among the more widely held assumptions in theoretical debates on democracy in the Middle East may be that in societies as religious as most Muslim societies are, strict secularism could prevail only through unacceptably antidemocratic tyranny, and thus that democracy in Muslim societies normatively requires a particularly robust space for religious language, values, and protections (Bilgrami 2012, Dabashi 2011, Dallmayr 2011, Jackson 2003, Nasr 2005). Some even saw the 2011 democratic uprising in countries such as Egypt as an “asecular revolution,” that is, a moment of pure popular sovereignty that was “utterly *indifferent* to the question of where to draw a line” between religion and politics (Agrama 2012, p. 231). Although this promise was not borne out by subsequent events, the brief year of electoral politics in Egypt did lead some to say that a popular right to try out “illiberal democracy” trumped the obligation to satisfy liberal secular standards before allowing for popular sovereignty (Hamid 2014).

But how is this notion of a nonsecular democracy to be conceptualized concretely? By and large, the focus—both in practice and in scholarship—has been on the practice of Islamic constitutionalism. Almost all Muslim-majority states have some formal commitment to Islam and Islamic law in their constitutions. In some cases, this has followed from strong ideological commitments to Islamization (Pakistan, Sudan, Iran); in most, however, it is either purely symbolic or has been tactically adopted to preempt Islamist opposition movements (Egypt). Many scholars have focused on the fact that Muslim states have gradually Islamized their laws and developed jurisprudential theories of *shariʿa* compatibility (Brown 1997, Fadel 2013, Lombardi 2006, Moustafa 2007). There is also a substantial literature on the development of hybrid theodemocratic ideologies and constitutional visions by Islamist groups out of power before 2011 (Baker 2006, El-Ghobashy 2005, Harnisch & Mecham 2009, March 2013, Rutherford 2006, Stilt 2010, Wickham 2013).

This ideological development (and long-standing Islamist participation in undemocratic elections and judicial politics) created widespread expectations in 2011–2013 that Islamist groups would come to power prepared to act in accordance with constitutional democratic norms. Such hopes have been vindicated so far in Tunisia, even as the original model for a governing “moderate Islamist” party (the Turkish AK Party) has come under increasing scrutiny for its hegemonic tendencies. The record in Egypt was more ambiguous, as the Muslim Brotherhood’s relatively open constitutional drafting process was seen to be in tension with other less democratic aspects of its daily practice and public rhetoric. But what is certain is that the military coup of July 3, 2013, sealed by the May 2014 presidential election, has put an end to any form of open political participation on the part of Islamists (or non-Islamists) in that country. Events in Egypt, not to mention Syria and Iraq, have marked a historical turning point for political Islam. (At the time of writing, the self-styled “Caliphate” of the “Islamic State” still controls large parts of Syria and Iraq.) They have dashed the quasi-Whiggish assumption that Islamist parties would uniformly moderate and evolve into ordinary, constitutional parties in the mold of European Christian Democrats or Democratic Socialists, although it is not necessarily the Islamists who have rejected this path of accommodation. The events of 2013 and 2014 may mark a point where the mainstream Islamist movement splits again between those who reject democratic competition as a trap and turn to militancy and those who seek to lead a democratization of states presently in the process of deepening their autocratic tendencies.

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