



# Islam and Politics

*By John L. Esposito*

ONLY A FEW decades ago, the prevailing wisdom in the West (America and Europe) was that modernization meant the Westernization and secularization of society. This belief was at the heart of modernization and development theories. The West was seen as the model to be emulated by developing countries. As one prominent scholar of the Middle East put it, the choice in the Muslim world was between “Mecca and mechanization.”

In recent decades, to the astonishment of many, we have seen a retreat from the secular path, a global resurgence of religion in politics, including the Religious Right in American politics, Christian Liberation Theology in Latin America, and Jewish fundamentalism in Israel. In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism is reflected in the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in an ostensibly secular state and multiple Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Christian communal conflicts. In Myanmar (formerly Burma), we see a conflict between militant Buddhist monks and the Muslim Rohingya minority.

The intersection of religion and politics enjoys a special place in the history of Middle Eastern Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

However, in Europe, the experiences of the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Protestant Reformation were indigenous and precipitated the secularization of politics in the West. Secularism, the separation of religion and politics, came to be accepted as the political development norm by many governments, policymakers, experts, and the media. In contrast to the West's experience, the emphasis on secular values came to the Middle East and broader Muslim world through European colonization. The mingling of religion and traditional forms of governance had never been as discredited as it was in the West. Tradition and religion in the Muslim world, although marginalized, continued to play a role in society and politics. There was no mass intellectual and political movement that explicitly sought to secularize the Middle East.

The prominent reassertion of Islam in Muslim politics, which began in the late 1960s and 1970s, was rooted in a religious revivalism that affected both Muslims' personal and public life. Common to this contemporary religious resurgence is a quest for identity, authenticity, and community, and a desire to establish meaning and order, personally and in society. On the one hand, many became more religiously observant, emphasizing prayer, fasting, dress, and family values. On the other, Islam reemerged as a religio-political alternative to failed nationalist ideologies.

Governments and Islamic movements, both moderate and militant-extremist, used religion to mobilize popular support for their programs and policies. Faith and politics combined to address the problems of political and social injustice (authoritarian governments, repression, maldistribution of wealth, and corruption as well as unemployment, inadequate housing, and poor social services) while also seeking to preserve Muslim religious and cultural identity and values that had been threatened by international Western dominance.

A number of visible crises or failures also proved to be catalytic events. The 1967 Six Day War, in which Israel decisively defeated the combined Arab armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, transformed the liberation of Jerusalem/Palestine into a transnational Islamic issue. Then the Pakistan-Bangladesh civil war of 1971–1972 heralded the failure of Muslim nationalism. The Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979 proved to be a pivotal event with long-term global impact and implications for relations between the Muslim world and the West. Finally,

the Palestine-Israel conflict grew in strength during the 1980s and spawned its own Islamist movements, among them HAMAS and Islamic Jihad.

Pervasive themes during the Islamic resurgence focused on the failures of Western models of development and the West's disappointing role as an Arab and Muslim ally, as well as fear of the political, economic, and cultural dominance caused by Westernization. Many blamed the ills of their societies on the excessive influence of and dependence upon the West, especially on the superpowers of America and the former Soviet Union. Efforts to modernize were seen as a process of progressive Westernization, secularization, and increasing globalization. Resentment grew against "neo-colonialism"—exported by the West and imposed by local Western-oriented elites—that powerfully undermined Muslim religious and cultural identity and values.

In the later twentieth century, while most Islamic movements developed in response to domestic conditions, international issues and actors increasingly played important roles in Muslim politics: the Soviet-Afghan War; the Arab-Israeli conflict; sanctions against Saddam Hussein's Iraq; the "liberation" of Bosnia, Kashmir, and Chechnya; and Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. In addition, countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Libya, as well as individuals, used their petro-dollars and wealth to extend their influence internationally. They promoted their religious and ideological worldviews and politics by supporting government-Islamization programs as well as Islamist movements, mainstream and extremist.

## THE LEADERSHIP OF ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

**I**SLAMIC POLITICAL AND social movements proved particularly strong among the younger generation, university graduates and young professionals who were recruited from the mosques and universities. Contrary to popular expectations, the membership of movements, especially in Sunni Islam, has not come from religious faculties and the humanities so much as from the fields of science, engineering, education, law, and medicine. Thus, the senior leadership of many movements includes judges, lawyers, teachers, engineers, physicians, journalists, and prosperous businessmen. At the same time,

leaders of militant movements like Egypt's Islamic Jihad, Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda, and those specifically responsible for the attacks of 9/11 also included many university graduates.

## IDEOLOGICAL WORLDVIEW

**I**SLAMISTS STRESS THAT the Muslim world's state of decline is due to corrupt authoritarian and un-Islamic regimes and excessive political, economic, and cultural dependence on the West. The cure is a return to the faith and values of Islam. Islam, they assert, is a comprehensive ideology or framework for Muslim society that embraces public as well as personal life. They believe that the renewal and revitalization of Muslim governments and societies require the restoration or reimplementation of Islamic law and values, the blueprint for an Islamically guided and socially just state and society. While the Westernization and secularization of society are condemned, modernization, as such, is not. Science and technology are accepted, but the pace, direction, and extent of change must be subordinated to Islamic belief and values in order to guard against excessive influence from and dependence on the West.

## THE QUIET REVOLUTION

**I**N CONTRAST TO the 1980s, when political Islam was simply equated with revolutionary Iran or clandestine groups with names like Islamic Jihad or the Army of God, the Muslim world in the 1990s saw Islamists participating in the electoral process. A quiet revolution had taken place. While a minority of religious extremists sought to impose change from above through terror and holy wars, many others pursued a bottom-up approach, seeking a gradual transformation or Islamization of society through word and example, preaching, and social and political activism.

Islamic organizations and associations emerged as part and parcel of mainstream society, with institutional forces in civil society active in social reform, providing educational, medical, dental, legal, and social-welfare services. Islamic banks and insurance companies as well as publishing houses mushroomed.

This social activism was accompanied by increased political participation. In the late 1980s and 1990s, failed economies and discredited governmental development policies led to political crises and mass demonstrations. These protests resulted in limited political liberalization. Islamic candidates or leaders were elected as mayors and parliamentarians in countries as diverse as Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. They served in cabinet-level positions and as speakers of national assemblies, prime ministers (in Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan), Deputy Prime Minister (in Malaysia), and Indonesia's first democratically elected president. The general response of many governments to this political power of Islam was to retreat from open elections. They identified their Islamic opposition as extremist and/or simply canceled or manipulated elections, as in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and Jordan.

The majority of Islamists have worked to bring about change through social and political activism within their own societies, by participating, where permitted, in electoral politics and civil society. However, a significant and dangerous minority of extremists, *jihād* groups from Egypt to Indonesia, al-Qaeda and ISIS, claim a mandate from God to make radical changes since the rulers in the Muslim world and their societies are viewed as anti-Islamic. For these extremists, those individuals and governments who remain apolitical or resist extremist ideas are no longer regarded as Muslims, but rather as atheists or unbelievers, enemies of God, against whom all true Muslims must wage holy war (*jihād*).

Extremists also believe that Islam and the West are locked in an ongoing battle which stretches back to the early days of Islam, is heavily influenced by the legacy of the Crusades and European colonialism, and is the product today of a Judeo-Christian conspiracy. This conspiracy, they charge, is the result of superpower neo-colonialism and the power of Zionism. The West (Britain, France, and especially the United States) is blamed for its support of un-Islamic or unjust regimes and biased support for Israel in the face of Palestinian occupation and displacement. They portray violence against such governments, their representatives, and citizens (Jews, Christians, and other Muslims, non-combatants as well as combatants) as a legitimate form of self-defense.

## OSAMA BIN LADEN AND GLOBAL TERRORISM

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 was a watershed moment in the history of political Islam and of the world. Its terror and carnage signalled the magnitude of the threat posed by Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. The multimillionaire, seemingly devout, university-educated, wealthy son of a prominent Saudi family had fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan, a struggle that allied him with a cause supported by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and many others. However, after the war, he became radicalized when faced with the prospect of an American-led coalition in the 1991 Gulf War to oust Saddam Hussein from his occupation of Kuwait and the prospect of the presence and increased influence of America in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf. Osama bin Laden was regarded as the godfather of global terrorism, a major funder of terrorist groups in what he claimed was a global *jihād*.

Osama bin Laden's message appealed to the feelings and grievances of many in the Arab and Muslim world. A critic of American foreign policy, he denounced its support for Israel, US/UN sanctions against Iraq that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians, and the substantial American (military and economic) presence and involvement in Saudi Arabia that he dismissed as the "new crusades."

## ISIS AND ITS ISLAMIC PEDIGREE AND VISION

LIKE AL-QAEDA, ISIS offers a warped militant Salafi rationalization to justify, recruit, legitimate, and motivate many of its fighters. Their unabashed acts of barbarism and terrorism—slaughter of civilians, savage use of beheadings, killing of innocent Muslims and Christians—all violate Islamic law.

While there are similarities in ideological worldviews and tactics between ISIS and other terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, distinctive differences exist. ISIS has sought to create an Islamic state (a regional if not global caliphate), to occupy and control areas, to govern, and to impose their version of a transnational caliphate with its harsh version of law and order. They are far more ruthless in driving out, suppressing, and executing Shiah Muslims and Kurds, Sunni imams/religious

leaders and others who disagree with them, and they demand conversion to their warped and extraordinarily violent brand of Islam from minorities such as Christians and Yazidis, forcing populations to publicly pledge their allegiance to the caliphate in exchange for security, in a mafia-like version of “protection” and social services.

## IS RELIGION THE PRIMARY DRIVER OF THE SO-CALLED ISLAMIC CALIPHATE?

**L**IKE AL-QAEDA AND others, ISIS’s appeal to a harsh and barbaric version of religion/Islam captures headlines. Religion, as well as other factors, do play a role to legitimate, recruit, and motivate followers. However, studies of jihadist movements like ISIS show that the primary motivations are most often political: a declared outrage at the occupation and oppression of Muslims and Muslim lands. Thus, for example, ISIS execution videos reveal the primacy of political grievances: foreign military invasion and occupation and the killing of tens of thousands of civilians, as well the “crimes” committed by individuals or groups (Iraqi soldiers, police, and government workers).

Terrorists like Bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of ISIS moved beyond classical Islam’s criteria for a just *jihad* and recognize no limits but their own. Islam’s norms and values about good governance, social justice, and the requirement to defend Islam when under siege were transformed into a call to arms in order to legitimate the use of violence, warfare, and terrorism. Their theology of hate sees the modern world in mutually exclusive, black-and-white categories: the world of belief and unbelief, the land of Islam and of warfare, the forces of good against the forces of evil. Those who are not with them, whether Muslim or non-Muslims, are the enemy and are to be fought and destroyed in a war with no limits, no proportionality of goal or means.

Adopting the worldview of an Islam under siege, they ignore or reject Islamic law’s regulations regarding the goals and means of a valid *jihad*: that violence must be proportional, that only the necessary amount of force should be used to repel the enemy, that innocent civilians must be protected, and that *jihad* must be declared by the ruler or head of state. As scholars of the Islamic Research Council at

al-Azhar University, regarded by many as the highest moral authority in Islam, forcefully stated in condemning Bin Laden's calls for *jihād* and terrorism:

Islam provides clear rules and ethical norms that forbid the killing of non-combatants, as well as women, children, and the elderly, and also forbids the pursuit of the enemy in defeat, the execution of those who surrender, the infliction of harm on prisoners of war, and the destruction of property that is not being used in the hostilities.<sup>1</sup>

## POLITICAL ISLAM AND THE DEMOCRACY DEBATE

**I**N RECENT YEARS, the call for greater political participation and democratization has become widespread in many countries in the Muslim world. Diverse sectors of society—secular and religious, leftist and rightist, educated and uneducated—have increasingly used democratization as the litmus test by which to judge the legitimacy of authoritarian, repressive, and corrupt governments. However, most experts and citizens in Muslim countries do not expect significant reform any time soon. Rulers like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and Libya's Muammar Qaddafi remained in power for several decades. Hereditary monarchies in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan are deeply entrenched. All have relied on their militaries, police, and security forces for their rule and protection.

The "Arab Uprisings" or "Arab Spring" in 2011 marked a potentially historic transition in the political makeup of many Muslim countries: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain. A broad sector of society—eager for change and democratic reforms—made its voice heard, rebelling against decades-long authoritarian rule, reclaiming its dignity and national pride, and insisting that it would decide the direction and the future of its countries. In Egypt and Tunisia, Islamist candidates and parties, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia's Ennahda (Renaissance Party), although initially not among the leadership, swept into power in post-uprising democratic elections. New governments faced formidable challenges: to satisfy the multiple needs of diverse sectors of society and, in particular, to jump-start failed



economies and address issues of high unemployment and increased expectations. By 2013, the Arab Spring began to look like an Arab winter.

Today, Libya and Syria remain deeply divided. Since 2011, more than two hundred thousand Syrians have been killed, five million have fled to other nations as refugees, and more than six million have been displaced within the country. The governments of both Egypt and Tunisia struggled to govern and to deal with opposition critics and movements. While Tunisia's Rachid Ghannouchi and his Ennahda Party lost the second round of presidential elections, they remain major political players. The hardest hit was Egypt and its first democratically elected President, Mohamed Morsi, an American-trained engineer and member of the Muslim Brotherhood. A nationwide anti-Morsi and anti-Brotherhood protest movement erupted on June 30, 2013, around the anniversary of Morsi's troubled first year in power. Many demanded that Morsi resign or be driven from office. This provided the excuse for a military-backed coup, led by Egyptian army chief General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, with strong financial support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has resulted in the worst governmental repression and violence in modern Egyptian history. Egypt has returned to authoritarianism, repression, mass arrests, and military trials, drawing sharp criticism and condemnation from major international human rights organizations. •

