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Thinking About Muslim Politics

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Abstract

Vast public attention has been devoted to the politics of Muslim societies, much of it prompted – and distorted – by the rise of radical Islamism, and there has been a corresponding and voluminous academic literature on the subject. A central debate centres on whether 'Islam' is a formative factor or not and, if it is, how is it determining. A prevalent view is that Muslim politics stems, as does all politics, from structural factors such as institutional development, political economy, and social stratification, among others. Islam is often seen in instrumental terms as facilitating or indeed hindering the drive for and wielding of power and influence in public life. While these contextual factors are undeniably relevant, basic values and norms are also consequential and often motivational. Political culture, which has fallen out of favour in contemporary social science, thus has a role to play. Muslim traditions and symbols can have societal impact, even as their meanings, and control over them, may be debated. The Covid-19 pandemic provides examples of how the political process can be affected by Islam-shaped perspectives as seen in different interpretations of what is religiously permissible and reactions to state control. 'Muslim politics' is a kind of politics that builds on culturally specific normative orders that are self-consciously expressed by various agents who presume to speak for Islam, but whose authority and modes of influence may be, and often are, contested. The concept of 'Muslim politics' is a window through which observers of Muslim societies can supplement understanding of collective action by an appreciation for the meanings that people attach to it.

Keywords: Muslim politics, Muslim societies, Covid-19 pandemic, ulama, fatwas

Introduction

The welcome launch of this new journal affords the opportunity to revisit *Muslim Politics*, co-authored with the anthropologist Dale F Eickelman, twenty-six years after its first publication. Since then, many events have unfolded across Muslim societies, not least the supposed revolutionary Arab Spring when entrenched power faced the pointed chant of "the people want the overthrow of the regime" ("*al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*"), but largely ended reinforced. Needless to add, the rise of ISIS, the extended military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, the salience of 'failed states', and the persecution of the Uighur and Rohingya peoples cannot be ignored. These examples largely involved Muslims in societies where Muslims constitute a majority; even when Muslims were in substantial minorities, they were political. While they are thus illustrative of politics *in* Muslim societies, or even the political action *of* Muslims, they were not necessarily 'Muslim politics'. The addition of the adjective 'Muslim' is more than merely semantic, and it distinguishes the point of view expressed in the book *Muslim Politics* from the assumption that is often made and only lightly interrogated or perfunctorily qualified: all politics is roughly the same. While contextual differences are often acknowledged, the summative explanation of 'politics is politics' remains seductive and encompassing but in need of careful examination.

What is Muslim Politics?

Muslim politics was earlier defined as "the competition and contest over both the interpretation of symbols and control of the institutions, formal and informal, that produce and sustain them".[1] Rather than claiming that the politics conducted by individuals who happen to be Muslim is somehow behaviourally different or unique, this approach applies to when these individuals are motivated by specifically Muslim values. Muslim politics is a *kind* of politics which culture broadly shapes.

Religion and Politics: Three Biases

The study of politics has generally not handled religion well. There are three biases that have distorted our understanding of the relationship between religion and politics. First, the Enlightenment ethos of progression towards a secular public order has cast a long shadow. For a long time, political development was thought to require that religion should be circumscribed to the private (personal) sphere. As

[1] Eickelman and Piscatori 2004, 5.

with ethnicity, religion was largely relegated to the category of a problem that, if allowed a public role, would hinder the search for political stability.

Second, politics was, and largely still is, seen through a structural prism. This is in large part due to an established view of political studies that political culture explains neither the causality nor the timing of political acts. In order to do so, structural factors as class, political economy, and institutional development need to be brought to the centre of analysis. *Muslim Politics* could perhaps have emphasised more how structural factors can set the stage for, but not displace, culturally defined politics. An example that seems compelling now is how the economic and class discontents engendered by neo-liberal internationalism have encouraged the emergence of Islamist social movements which frame their opposition in an 'Islamic'-coded language of justice and, in radical formulations, compete with nouveau-riche Muslim bourgeoisies, even ascribing unbelief to the proponents of this Western-promoted ideology. However, given the conventional state-society analytical framework that seeks to assess the weakness or strength of each, the approach of *Muslim Politics* was one way of giving societal factors their due.

Third, many studies have commonly, though not exclusively, presumed that politics is coercive and based on power. This is often the result of a hierarchical and command image of political decision-making – a top-down approach that complements the statist paradigm. The cooperative element is regarded as a matter of influence, rather than power per se. The designation of 'soft power' to refer to such means by which regimes extend their impact as the communications media, stands as an implicit criticism of notions that politics can only be 'hard': "It co-opts people rather than coerces them."[2] It is clear that the academic and policy emphasis on radical Islamism and governmental efforts to contain it have reinforced implicit notions that Islam and politics are intimately bound up with compulsion and force.

As Robert Wuthnow argues, the main analytical approaches since mid-twentieth century have drawn on conventional assumptions such as these.[3] Modernisation theory aggregates several competing assertions and differing interpretations and is now distinctly out of favour, but, as a broad and influential school of thought, it proposed that religion would decline in importance as development proceeded. We know that this has demonstrably not occurred in

[2] Nye 2002, 5.

[3] Wuthnow 1991.

either Muslim societies or supposedly post-traditional societies such as the United States.

World-system theory set out to correct at least one of the inherent problems of modernisation theory: dealing with societies as if they were discrete, isolated units. Rather, this school of thought emphasised the interactions that have tied societies together since the sixteenth century with the expansion of European trade and diplomacy. This system promoted the dominance of modern capitalism, which, from the nineteenth century, became the driving force of social development. Yet capitalism, we are reminded in an obvious echo of earlier critical voices, may become the victim of its own contradictions.

In this depiction of social processes, religion was given short shrift. The main problem stemmed from the epistemological assumption that material conditions must be given analytical privilege. Moreover, where religious movements were acknowledged – for example, in protest against the prevailing elites – the role of norms, symbols, and indeed spirituality was overlooked in favour of such broad factors as the burdens of debt, the competition among the powers for energy supplies, the arms race or, as Immanuel Wallerstein and Noam Chomsky have pointed out[4], the patterns of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Critical theory seeks to steer a middle ground between modernisation theory and Marxism. In a Weberian way, it notes the damaging effects of bureaucratisation – especially in much of the developing world – and, in a Marxian way, it casts capitalism in a critical light. Habermas argues that both problems have suffered from a surfeit of 'technical reason' – an instrumentalised use of knowledge geared to control of money and power. What is needed, rather, is 'communicative action', or openly talking together for the purpose of human understanding and social harmony. If technical reason is allowed to proceed unchecked, materialism and political oppression will triumph.[5]

Religion does not disappear from this model of political analysis. It appears in the guise of protest movements against such modern ills as over-bureaucratisation and commodification. Yet at times, particularly when seen in the mode of fundamentalism, religion is depicted as running against the calm sensibility that should underpin civilisation. Faith-based protest movements are conceded to be politically significant in the short run, but the domination of religion is deemed ultimately to preclude coherent order, which must rely on the primacy of secular culture for rational communicative interaction.

[4] See, for example, Wallerstein 1974; Chomsky, 2015.

[5] Habermas 2004; also see Voskuhl 2016.

As Wuthnow says, these conventional approaches "regard religion as something that wiggles when these controlling [economic and political] puppeteers pull the strings".[6] We have been handed a simplified calculus that makes religion the dependent variable and politics the independent variable.

Rational Choice, Constrained Choice

One particularly influential approach to politics highlights the importance of rational choice. A long scholarly tradition, principally drawing inspiration from economics, holds that the explanation for social action lies in the rational decisions of the individuals who make up society. These individuals move between the constraints of their context, such as the pressures of time and the information they have at hand, as well as their goals and preferences. The means to ends must be carefully calibrated, but, seeking profit or, broadly, self-satisfaction, individuals may be required to choose between ends or preferences themselves.

This conceptualisation does not fully explain, however, how either individual preferences are determined or collective action occurs. Political action is thought to result from whatever is deemed to be in the interests of society members. Self-interest may be determined by a rational assessment of success, but that profit-or-loss calculus may be framed, at least in part, by a Leviathan determining the limits of what is permissible and not. Equally true, self-interested action may come from predispositions that are more deeply rooted and might even be called non-rational. Related to this is the Durkheimian dilemma: how does individual self-interest convert into social life? Individuals may privilege personal gain over the common good, thus rendering collective action problematic. But why individuals adhere to collective enterprises, whether those are tribes, religious groups, or even political parties, and why they may rise above their own concerns for altruistic or communal purposes, cannot be explained by a simple 'coercive' model employing the threat of loss or sanction. To discern political goals, underlying value-attachments may be instructive.

As pervasive as the rational choice approach is in the general study of politics, much of the area specific literature has focussed on the constraints on choice because of the embedded political character of the society – that is, authoritarianism. Well-defined and opposing positions arguing that democratisation is possible and contrarily that it is improbable, emerged, but so too arguments that autocratic cultural and political patterns have been the longstanding default position in Muslim societies. Concepts like 'enduring',

[6] Wuthnow 1991, 13-14.

'robust', 'resilient', or 'upgraded' authoritarianism or 'neo' or 'advanced sultanism'[7] have been used to explain rooted resistance to substantive power-sharing and, especially after the disappointing turn of the Arab Spring, the failures of supposed democratic experiments. The secular intellectual Sadiq al-Azm recognised the perhaps still-potent structuralist dystopia of Arab society where three possibilities had long been present: an entrenched praetorianism with the domination of the military over the political; Islamist forced imposition of the *shari'a*; or ethnic and sectarian divisions.[8] Asef Bayat recognised the disjunction between social authority and power. The regimes of the Arab and, by extension, the Muslim world possessed political and administrative power but had no social authority. By way of contrast, revolutionaries have social hegemony, but do not actually rule.[9] Other works grant analytical value to official images, monuments, architecture, and other representations, constituting a kind of symbolic authoritarianism that induces behavioural, if insincere, compliance.[10] These approaches judiciously avoid Orientalist-type assumptions that the problem inheres in Islam or the character of a people. Their common view that the political field is hemmed in by material factors such as restraining institutions, narrowly based elites, and/or distorted socio-economic conditions may provide a useful, though at times incomplete, explanation for the nature of the political order.

Bringing Culture Back In

The approach in *Muslim Politics* places the study of politics firmly in the realm of meaning and interpretation. We argue that culture is a system of meanings that both act upon and are acted upon by people's actions in a continuous dialogue, so that cultural systems both shape and are shaped by individual and collective action. In this sense, culture is more than just instrumental for the creation or maintenance of collective action, although it can have such utility, and it is also not always a force

[7] For example, Posusney 2004; Bellin 2012; Goldstone 2011; Heydemann 2007; Davidson 2021.

[8] Al-Azm 2011. He thought that the Arab Spring uprisings had challenged '*in principle*' [emphasis added by al-Azm] this "disabling trio of options" that had long prevailed in Arab societies. But by 2013, he acknowledged that the reappearance of old patterns could occur: "... there exists [sic] ample elements of authoritarianism, criminality, paternalism and vendetta, that make the reformulation of a despotic regime, in one form or another, a likely and formidable possibility... [I]t is unfitting to underestimate the possibility of the emergence of some form of military dictatorship, ... which ... would be cloaked with religious creeds, jurisprudence and sectarian extremism": Al-Jumhiriya 2013.

[9] Bayat 2011, 2013.

[10] See Wedeen 2015 [1999].

independent of political collective action, although its creative force can be discrete and consequential.

The standard criticism of any cultural approach is that culture becomes a clearly demarcated sphere of life, a substantive identity or object such as 'Javanese culture' that privileges similarities over differences. Islamic studies has had a version of this approach in Ernest Gellner's famous postulation of 'Muslim society',[11] According to him, there was a dialectical relationship between city and tribe, each with its own peculiar form of religion. The urban form of society was dominated by the religious officials or '*ulama* who represented scripture and divine law, whereas the tribes were dominated by mystical saints and various charismatic leaders. Political rule was always vulnerable to the double threat of marauding tribes and of the '*ulama*-led urban society that never fully recognised the legitimacy of government. The power of the tribes declined as modernity proceeded, whereas urbanisation and mass literacy have reinforced the urban-based scripturalist ethos and its challenge to secular power. This argument explained, in Gellner's view, the surge of Islamism in modern politics.

Critics of this approach accept that there are certain cultural themes common to most Muslim lands and epochs that derive from religion as well as common historical reference. However, in contrast to Gellner, they argue that the *'ulama* are not sociological or political constants: they are assigned different meanings and roles by socio-political contexts. Modern Islamism is a political ideology that differs from what preceded it and, rather than serving as a uniform code of belief and practice, articulates diverse and often contradictory interests and goals. As Sami Zubaida notes, the wide variety of social and political forms that existed historically and are present today cannot be interpreted as variations on a common model of an essential Muslim society.[12]

Two thorny problems complicate the social scientific attempt to recognise the cultural basis of politics without descending into essentialism. The first problem relates to how we scrutinise a culture. The critical aspect of culture for understanding politics is that it is public and, as such, observable. Rather than assuming or intuiting the bases of identity and action, social scientists are able to discern cultural patterns through observing words and actions. What we know of a worldview comes from social practice, and this approach helps to redress the second difficulty: how we allow for change when a seemingly systemic explanatory variable is placed at the centre of political analysis. Explanations that make culture

[11] Gellner 1981.

[12] Zubaida 1995.

static or, alternatively, focus on crises or exceptional patterns are unhelpful. Rather, we may infer implicit understandings from outward actions and statements, but outward actions can also create changes in underlying beliefs and understandings, which, in turn, give rise to evolving social practice.[13]

Politics and Meaning

This argument builds on the assumption that politics begins with conceptual structures through which we process information and give meaning to it. Some might call those conceptual structures culture; others, 'narratives', 'stories', or 'symbols'. These may mobilise people to action and set boundaries between right (permissible) and wrong (impermissible). They may also structure expectations of rightful (or malevolent) conduct, thereby endowing or withholding legitimacy in response to a variety of political actors, not just the state.

Sixty-five years ago, Wilfred Cantwell Smith described Islam as the 'form' of Muslim civilisation: "It is essentially the pattern of meaning that economics, politics, and all the other factors in their social life have for the Muslim – insofar as a pattern of meaning is attainable. Islam is not one of the ingredients in a Muslim's social or individual life; rather, it is his orientation to its various ingredients."[14] What is argued here is that politics follows a remarkably similar logic in various settings. Understanding this logic, while also grasping the full significance of context, helps one to understand Muslim political conduct, not just the politics of individuals who happen to be Muslims.

However, one cannot speak of the logic behind Muslim politics without thinking simultaneously of the practical dimensions of how cultural symbols are inherently contested, emerging, and porous – an interpretation of culture at odds with the understanding of an earlier generation of the social sciences. Political symbols are subject to dispute and interpretation and, therefore, contestation; they are emerging in the sense that they are subject to evolution; and they are porous because of the lack of rigid borders between them. Street slogans, social media videos, ritualised performances such as the Shi'i 'Ashura, online *fatawa*, and musical anthems (*nashids*), among others, are tangible examples of efforts to encapsulate and express political meaning in compressed yet affective terms. These forms of expression interact, however, with everything from social networks, extended families, gender relations, and ethnic groups, to awareness of what some call the

[13] Eickelman 2000.
[14] Smith 1957, 324.

'deep state' of interlinked security, commercial, and military ties. Politics is rooted in time and place, but culture can provide the framework or the cognitive repertoire for collective action. Islamist movements can project themselves into the political sphere when they transform religious idioms and rituals into everyday practices, creating a sense of belonging that governs both individual religious practice and the shared values that direct how people operate in public.

The ability of these stories, or symbolic politics, to do so must be seen as affected by contextual factors. These include the degree to which the narrative, story, or symbol accords with common understandings: the charisma or social authority of the narrator or storyteller, the means by which they communicate, and the strains or resistances to them and their message.

In short, the intimate interconnections between religion and politics are obvious and undeniable. However, their meanings are not pre-ordained. They are formed and reformed in the cultural arena, which is itself *in part* but not wholly shaped by specific context, even if by way of resistance to it.

Muslim Politics in the Pandemic Era

Events such as the Covid-19 pandemic are unlikely to alter the basic conceptual framework I have outlined. But they highlight two aspects of importance: globalisation and, paradoxically, the residual power of the state.

There are three ways that religion and globalisation can be linked. First, globalisation can stimulate not only the creation of religious networks and social movements, but also an awareness of these as an integral part of the Muslim landscape. As with Sufi groups, these may in fact be competitive with the state or other hegemonic institutions; crucially, they are also seen and understood as such. In Ali Mazrui's provocative language, although Muslims may be confronting cultural homogenisation, at the same time they become aware of being part of a "demographic Islamisation of the Western world".[15] Second, awareness of connectedness – thanks largely to more intensive communications, trade, and travel networks – and of the pressing new problems they give rise to, inspires the idea that religion is, in large part, shaped by exogenous forces and cannot be just a personal, private affair. Ayatullah Khomeini famously acknowledged the pervasive (and pernicious) power of the United States when he argued that Muslims had blindly followed 'American Islam' – i.e., the privatisation of religion. This had to be resisted and Islam seen as inherently public and political.

[15] Mazrui 2000.

But, third, the awareness of connectedness also relativises, as the Covid-19 pandemic has exemplified. That there are world or global religions is not new, yet the appreciation of what this means in the case of global Islam may be so. Marshall Hodgson reminds us that in the late medieval period, political boundaries among Muslims were of little consequence,[16] and transnational and ritually sanctioned activities such as *hajj, ziyarat, and rihla* have continually ensured both mobility and inter-cultural contacts. And yet the assault on the concept of one indivisible *umma* was to set in quickly with the advent of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires, imperial control, and the creation of local dynastic rule and an inter-state system. With modern communications and the hybridity of modern societies today, however, globalised Islam, like all globalised religions, has had to deal more urgently with the reality of plural identities and belief-systems, and so the need for comparison and delineation. How are we alike and, more importantly, different from other religions? One approach emphasising similarities – a 'liberal' one, if you will – is that Islam espouses values of tolerance like Christianity and other religions do. But, as Peter Berger cautions, there could also be a defensive reaction, affirming Islam's difference and even superiority when measured, implicitly or explicitly, by other religions. This might lead, as he believed had occurred, to a drive to impose orthopraxy on either one's own community ("micro-totalitarianism") or society in general ("Reconquista").[17] The relativisation of Islam in a global calculus – positioning it, favourably or not, in comparison to other religions – sets the stage for interpreting what Islam should be and do in the current era.

Paradoxically in light of its global nature, the other major way that the pandemic is relevant to our concerns is a renewed emphasis on the state as the most effective level of response, such as through staffing hospitals, devising and regulating new health regimes, and dispensing vaccines. This is consistent with a conventional statist bias when conceptualising politics and, therefore, may not seem any different from earlier times; it may seem to be politics as usual and little to do with Muslim politics. But contestation over the controllers of symbols, not only the symbols themselves, is part of the Muslim politics equation. To the extent that the state is strengthened and has uses its institutional machinery to enforce its pandemic remit, it has pertinent implications. In Pakistan, for example, some citizens saw the government invocation of religion to justify its health restrictions as a way of extending state interventionism generally.[18] As with earlier vaccines,

[16] Hodgson 1974, 57.

[17] See, for example, Pew Research Center 2006.

[18] Lebni, Ziapour, Mehedi, and Irandoost 2021.

Covid-19 vaccines have generally been certified as *halal*, but concerns had been raised over the extent to which they may have animal components and the degree to which 'religious harm' may occur in using them.[19] *Fatwas* were thus sought and given, thereby both reinforcing the authority of centralised and often already controversial bodies and prompting either acquiescence in or opposition to bureaucratic control of Islam. A case in point is Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), a semi-official but increasingly influential body that has stimulated criticism in Indonesia in the past with *fatwas* on family law and heresy, among other subjects, viewed by some as discriminatory. MUI issued eight largely uncontroversial *fatwas* on various aspects of the pandemic,[20] But in aligning with government policy at a time of national emergency,[21] these could be seen as reinforcing concerns about the body's *de facto* 'monopolistic' position as religious arbiter and its role in the 'shariatisation' of public life.[22]

To widespread derision, the Egyptian Minister of Religious Affairs blamed the Muslim Brotherhood for the spread of Covid-19 in the country.[23] Debate unfolded in several countries over whether it was permissible to suspend what are considered religious obligations. In 2020, the government of Saudi Arabia suspended mosque prayers, halted *umra*, and severely limited *hajj*, and in 2021 the Ministry of Hajj and Umra required that pilgrims who wished to pray at al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca and al-Masjid al-Nabawi in Medina had to be vaccinated against Covid-19 (*al-muhassanin*).[24] The International Union of Muslim Scholars, based in Qatar and then headed by Yusuf al-Qardawi, published a *fatwa* that it was permissible to pray at home and even to stay away from Friday congregational prayers.[25] But some Salafi *'ulama* took exception to the government-ordered

[19] For example, Australian Fatwa Council 2021. Its *fatwa* of February 2021 said there was no such harm.

[20] Seff 2021. These included *fatwas* on Friday prayers and, during Ramadan, the Sinovac and AstraZeneca vaccines, swab tests, and the treatment of the bodies of Covid victims. These were based on various legal principles, such as versions of *darura* (necessity), and different schools of law (*madhhabs*), which raised a minor criticism of inconsistency.

[21] Widhiyoga and Ikawati 2022, 19. Although not discussed in this article, MUI might contribute to the 'software' that is needed for encouraging community cooperation and compliance with a 'resilient health system' while simultaneously reinforcing its place in existing power dynamics.

[22] Hasym 2020.

[23] The New Arab 2020. Mohammad Mukhtar Juma said: "Some members of the group who are infected with coronavirus have been told to spread it among the army, police, judiciary, media and other innocent members of the community."

[24] Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2021.

[25] Murad 2020; Khan 2020. Murad is associated with Qatar University. Khan quotes Dr Aleem Ashraf of Hyderabad as endorsing the idea of social distancing as in keeping with the Islamic practice of *khalwat* and encouraging it during the pandemic: "Compared to all the major grounds where *'tanha-*

closures of mosques. One *'alim* in Morocco, for example, issued a *fatwa* on Facebook that claimed the Prophet "never authorized the closure of mosques or suspension of group prayer".[26] Some Iranian clerics, believing that Shi'i shrines closed by the government were in fact sanitising and virus-free environments, attempted forcibly to reopen them.[27]

While the pandemic afforded an opportunity for the religious bureaucracy to exert more influence, it also fed into longstanding critical views of state preferences. One common Salafi view alleged that the pandemic was retribution from God for straying from the straight path of Islam, while others zeroed in on the Chinese government's mistreatment of the Uighur people as the specific cause. One prominent Shi'i *ayatullah*, the Iraqi Hadi al-Mudarresi, who has had close ties to the Iranian regime, similarly argued that Allah had "sent a disease" to the "tyrannical" Chinese government that had mocked Muslim traditions and imposed offensive non-Islamic practices on its Muslim peoples.[28] Given the muted or non-existent Saudi, Pakistani, Iranian,[29] and others' criticism of the Chinese government, these statements could reasonably be understood as criticism of the statist status quo. So too the view of one Jordanian cleric with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood who argued that *jihad* is "a means of purification" from the disease and so would allow those saved from it to advance the liberation of al-Aqsa,[30] a view that doubtless would not have been welcomed by the Kingdom's pro-Western regime, which has been in a peace treaty with Israel since 1994.

Radical Islamist groups echoed that divine retribution was being inflicted on China as well as on the West and its regional allies. While taking Covid-19 seriously and arguing that Muslims should adopt all necessary precautions, ISIS crowed that the Western states were in a "state of paralysis" and economic collapse that could

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Namaz' (prayer in isolation /without congregation), is permissible ... coronavirus is [a] thousand times more damaging and dangerous, and cannot ... justify *'bajamat-namaz'* (praying in congregation) at the moment."

[26]Hanna 2020. *Fatwa* of Hasan al-Kattani, March 15, 2020; 'Umar al-Haddushi, another Moroccan Salafist, reaffirmed this view and called Covid "a soldier of God."

[27] Lebni *et al*. 2021.

[28] MEMRI 2021a. In a video of 28 February 2020, he noted the irony that the state, having mocked the *niqab*, was impelled to make masks mandatory for both men and women.

[29]Dubowitz and Ghasseminejad 2020, 44. The Iranian regime, especially the powerful Revolutionary Guards, has been criticised for exonerating China of any responsibility for the outbreak of Covid-19 owing to the important economic relationship between the two countries, and for using it as an occasion to spread 'disinformation' about the United States as engaging in biological warfare.

[30] MEMRI 2021b.

be exploited.[31] An al-Qa'ida spokesman, referring to "America and its allies"' by the emotive designation 'Abu Jahl', the prototypical enemy of the Prophet and his message in seventh century Mecca, predicted the pandemic would hasten their demise; in the meantime, any believers who fell victim to Covid-19 would be considered martyrs.[32] ISIS accused the Shi'a and particularly their leaders of responsibility for the pandemic in Iraq and said it was a "sign" that they should "abandon polytheism".[33] Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Syria-based jihadist group formerly associated with al-Qa'ida, noted that mosques in the "liberated areas" of Syria remained open and well-attended, unlike those in areas where the Asad government had prevailed. They argued that the pandemic was nothing compared to how the Shi'a "have corrupted the religion of the people and their earthly life"; the Shi'a, labelled with the pejorative symbolic term 'Rafidiyya' or 'Rejectionists', were then lumped together with the Russians, allies of the Syrian regime, and the 'Alawites ('Nusayriyya,' seen as dominating the rule of the Asads) as 'human viruses' ('*al-fayrusat al-bashariyya*'). Meanwhile, the influential Palestinian-Jordanian jihadist ideologue, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, somewhat sardonically noted the closure of "sultanate mosques", which operate by "command of the ruler and law" ("*bi-amr al-hakim bi-amr al-qanun*") and disseminate official propaganda. The consequent benefit was the opening of prayer space for those opposed to the state and promoting alternative sermons.[34]

As can be seen from this review, the COVID-19 pandemic – as might be the case with other globalised crises in the future – gave rise to both an appreciation for the comprehensiveness of connectivity and a heightened consciousness of localised differences. Although linkages are more salient and the power of transnational commodification is real, globalisation does not inevitably flatten the field and homogenise cultures. It can also encourage comparison and differentiation with others and stimulate culturally specific debates and contestation, such as over the religious meaning to be attached to disease and the resultant duties of believers. In short, it can raise the question of how to frame a purportedly universal phenomenon in familiar, identity-compatible terms. At the

[31] *Al-Naba* 2020, 3; *The Voice of Hind* 2020, 7. The publication of the ISIS Wilayat al-Hind in South Asia invoked the idea of divine retribution but also encouraged believers to attack government officials while they were preoccupied with the pandemic.

[32] Al-Tamimi 2020. This reproduced and translated the original Arabic article by Khalid al-Siba'i published by Al-Thabat News Agency.

[33] Hanna 2020.

[34] Al-Tamimi 2020. Arabic reproduced and translated (in order): Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, tweet of March 24, 2020; Zubayr al-Ghazi, posting of March 20, 2020; and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, post of March 23, 2020 on his Telegraph channel.

same time, the pandemic strengthened the capacity of states in the face of national emergency, yet also prompted criticism of them. The pandemic showed, that even at such times, the politics in Muslim societies can be framed by variant views of what Islam allows or requires *and* of who can define the rules and set the agenda. It solidified the sense that religion should have a public position on, or public response to, statist-defined religion. Muslim politics is not just a legitimising device for power considerations, though validation is inevitably part of the process, but also for the crafting and putting forward of religious agendas in the public arena, which often challenge those set by the state.

Conclusion: Studying Muslim Politics

Political culture clearly cannot be ignored, but not just in the sense of patterns of tangible political conduct or public opinion. Underlying normative attachments and meanings are also revealing, and religion needs to be seen in its changeable and dynamic expressions as integral to understanding them.

There is a kind of embarrassment today in relying on a concept once linked with modernisation theory. In classic formulations dating back to the 1960s, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in *The Civic Culture*[35] defined political culture as the internalised attitudes of a people towards the political system and their own role in the system, and Lucian Pye in *Asian Power and Politics*[36] juxtaposed the West valuing utility and individualism with Asians privileging status and the collective. The level of generalisation in these accounts was abstracted from specific and optimistic accounts: the first on democratic development in five Western countries; the second less on progressive political modernisation than on a reassuring future based on a salutary symbiotic relationship between leader and society in Asian countries such as China and Southeast Asia. Michael Hudson, whose early work on Lebanon and later work on legitimacy as a motivating force of Arab politics, could not be faulted for his neglect of structural factors. He agreed that the problematic aspects of political culture are obvious: reliance on temporary data and opinion surveys or else on static generalisations, unitary assumptions, and reductionism. Mindful of these dangers, he nevertheless concluded that "we should be careful not to throw out the political culture baby with the Orientalist bathwater".[37]

This generalised perspective on approach is what *Muslim Politics* hoped to convey and what is proposed here as having relevance for the future political study

[35] Almond and Verba 1963.

[36] Pye 1985.

[37] Hudson 1995, 65.

of Muslim societies. The concept of Muslim politics is not meant as a totalising, comprehensive explanation for the politics of those societies, but a way into understanding the forms that those politics at times take based on embedded, though not inflexible, normative orientations. In Geertz's aphoristic formulation: politics "reflect[s] the design of …culture".[38] The goal of this is to demonstrate not only the connection between values and political behaviour, but also the need for that connection, 'design', or 'orientation' to be self-consciously expressed and formalised by various agents who presume 'Islamic' authority and through processes which are often contested.

The approach is intended to be as impartial in its observation as possible, though admittedly all research is laden with implicit, if not sometimes explicit, values. What becomes concerning, however, is when the analytical study of Muslim societies is steered in overtly negative or positive directions – that is, politics presented in effect, on the one hand, as the plaything of malevolent rulers, Islamist would-be rulers, or obsolescent *'ulama*, or, on the other hand, as the means to a liberal and pluralist Islam. In other words, the complexity and fluidity of the political process may be obscured by embedded notions of the ends; for example, when Islamist agency is assessed through the prism of hindrances to liberalisation, or when theology and civil society are seen through the prism of promoters of a 'properly understood', tolerant Islam. To capture the multi-layered indeterminacy of the cultural-political process, a more rounded, evidence-based approach is needed.

It would also be useful to remember that social science in general has been hesitant to acknowledge that it, too, is historically and culturally rooted, and that its theories have been a product of their time. As Dale Eickelman says, "the theories by which we understand human societies are as historically situated as the societies that we seek to understand".[39] This is clear in the cases of rational choice, modernisation, world system, and at least some critical theories mentioned earlier, all of which mirrored the preoccupations of their times: post-World War II managed economic success, democratic aspirations, neo-imperialist distortions, and the stultifying effect of technocratic-bourgeois enculturation. In the specific case of Muslim societies, we can also see time-bound theorising: securitisation of Islam as threat from the late 1970s/early 1980s, Islam's democratising potential from the 1990s, and the reinvention of authoritarianism from the late 1990s/early 2000s and especially after the evident failures of the Arab Spring exception of 2011.

[38] Geertz 1973, 311.

[39] Eickelman 2022.

Muslim Politics can also be considered a product of its time. Understandably, it was influenced by various then-current trends in the academic literature, including evaluating modernisation, gender, protest technologies, and transnationalism. But the enquiry into the religion-politics nexus brought us then, and I would argue still does, into larger *conceptual* terrain that flags factors like reinventing tradition, objectification, and the fragmentation of authority, with their greater potential for evolution, self-awareness, and contestation, as underwriting the cultural transcripts that shape some, but patently not all, of the politics of Muslim societies. There are still grounds for thinking that cross-disciplinary insights, such as between anthropology and political science, can yield useful alternatives to the 'politics as usual' line of enquiry that either ignores or overstates the role of religion. Like religion itself, 'Muslim politics' is a window through which, hopefully, we can supplement our understanding of some collective action with an appreciation for the meanings people invest in it.

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