



# Religion and Nation: The Political Consequences of a Modern Differentiation

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# Religion and Nation:

## The Political Consequences of a Modern Differentiation

Jocelyne Cesari, Ph.D.

**M**ost of the time, religion is in the news for the bad—riots, political violence, discrimination, etc.—much less for the good. Either attention or neglect reflects the underlying conviction that religion and politics do not mix.

Because of the assumption that religion is politically meaningless, the intersection of the two has been overlooked or ignored while in reality, religious and political institutions and ideas have never ceased to interact, even in secular democracies. To analyze these continuous interactions, it is necessary to deconstruct the religious versus political distinction and to identify how it came to be.

The first step in this direction is to highlight the rise of nations as a major factor in its creation. In other words, there is no difference between religion and politics until the rise of the nation as the modern political community. The genealogy of religion versus politics sheds light on its ignored association with the building of nations. It is not about deconstructing the concepts of religion and nation: This has been done.<sup>1</sup> What remains unexplored are the mutual interactions of religion and nation-state and how these interactions explain the current politicization of religion in different contexts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, (United Kingdom: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, (United States: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *We God's People: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in the World of Nations*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

The other unforeseen dimension of the religion-politics divide has been its worldwide dissemination associated with the adoption of the nation-state as the only legitimate political system. This globalization has changed the status of “religious” traditions everywhere. The case of Muslim-majority states will illustrate this influence on the current political role of Islam.

## Genealogy of the Religion versus Political Divide

The absence of the religious dimension of the political community (and vice versa) dominates our *modern times*. Of course, religions still fulfill social actions: Medicare, welfare, education, cultures, etc. What is at stake is the marginalization of the *societal* status of religion which is more encompassing than the civil activities of religious groups. Societal refers to the capacity of religion to shape the political community, i.e., to provide collective meanings of sovereignty, law, duties, and responsibilities. The end of the “wars of religion” was the foundational moment of separation of religion and

politics that led to the marginalization of these societal dimensions of religion.<sup>3</sup>

**“Societal [status of religion] refers to the capacity of religion to shape the political community, i.e., to provide collective meanings of sovereignty, law, duties, and responsibilities.”**

The counterintuitive implication is that the divide between *religion* and *political community* is *foundational to political modernity and entrenched within the nation-state*.<sup>4</sup> Such an assertion seems implausible since our Western scholarship is founded on this taken-for-granted and fixed division that marginalizes religion as a

provider of meaning and resources for anything related to politics. It is, however, never fixed, and varies from country to country and historical periods, even in the European and American “cradles” of modernity, as exemplified by the rise since the 2000s of religiously based political groups.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (United States: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *We God's People*.

**“Cultural, ethnic, and religious features of groups certainly persist throughout successive historical periods. This continuity, however, does not entail sameness or perpetuation of the meanings given to symbols, rituals, or practices since the foundation of the group.”**

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In this respect, the nation is the foundational community of modern politics. This modern community cannot be fully apprehended through the polarization that dominates the study of nationalism: with on one hand the adepts of the primordialist approach<sup>5</sup> that emphasizes culture or bloodline and, on the other hand, the constructivists<sup>6</sup> or modernists<sup>7</sup> for whom nation as “imagined community” is the outcome of modernization processes.<sup>8</sup> Nations, however, are neither totally inherited nor constructed. Cultural, ethnic, and religious features of groups certainly persist throughout successive historical periods. This continuity, however, does not entail *sameness or perpetuation of the meanings* given to symbols, rituals, or practices since the foundation of the group.

In the same vein, the imagined community of the constructivist approach is not entirely satisfactory because it operates on a very “thin” conception of organic social cohesion, which is that people are brought together primarily by structural changes in

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<sup>5</sup> Moshe Gammer (Ed.), *Political Thought and Political History*, (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Gellner and John Breuilly, *Nations and Nationalism* (2nd Ed.), (United States: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (2nd Ed.), (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (United Kingdom: Verso, 2016).

material production and political power.<sup>9</sup> The historical sociology of nations inspired by Norbert Elias' 1939 work *The Civilizing Process* can help overcome this polarity. To that effect, the nation is a collective consciousness and sets of institutions built on historical processes which continuously transform what people see as inherent and essential features that make them say "we". The nation is the modern expression of the political community that combines two features: *equality of individuals* and *sovereignty of people*, which are not found in past political communities, such as empires, cities, and tribes. It means that equal rights for all are foundational to the modern nation and cannot operate without the political sovereignty of the people. In other words, the nation is a set of discursive practices by which the territorial identity of a state and the cultural identity of the people whose collective representation it claims is constituted as a singular fact.

## **Religion and Politics Beyond the West: The Case of Muslim-Majority Countries**

Nation-building in Muslim countries resulted in a decisive re-organization of the society-state-religion nexus, unknown in premodern times.<sup>10</sup> Under the Caliphates, Islamic institutions, and clerics were not subordinate to political power, since the former were financially and intellectually independent from the latter. Additionally, the Caliphs ruled over a huge amount of ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse populations.

As the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the emergence of the state as the central political institution went hand-in-hand with the homogenization of the populations inhabiting the nation's territory. That is why nation-building systematically omitted and sometimes eradicated particular ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups to create one

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<sup>9</sup> Anthony W. Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism*, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought: The Response of the Shi'i and Sunni Muslims to the Twentieth Century*, (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005).

nation defined by one religion, i.e., Islam, and one language. This homogenization also led to a politicized narrative of religion, what is called *hegemonic Islam*.<sup>11</sup>

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A congruence was created between Muslims of certain obedience, e.g., Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Hanafi schools, and bounded territory. Shari'a, previously the monopoly of Ulemas, was reshaped as state law and secularised with the introduction of French or British legal procedures. It was also reduced to family law, including marriage, divorce, custody of children, and inheritance, while Shari'a courts were abolished and replaced by a secular court system. Because of the lasting role of Islam in regulating these immanent dimensions, such as family life, sexuality, and freedom of speech, they are nowadays the most acutely disputed issues between "secular" and "religious" actors. In other words, the Ulemas lost their influence on the immanent and were progressively relegated to the guidance of souls and regulation of family affairs. In this respect, hegemonic Islam occurred in three major ways:


1. the nationalization of institutions, clerics, and places of worship of one particular trend of Islam, e.g., Sunni over Shia;
2. the redefinition and adjustment of Shari'a to the modern legal system as well as the inclusion of Islamic references into civil law (marriage/divorce), criminal law, and restriction of freedom of speech (blasphemy/apostasy), based on the prescriptions of that particular brand of Islam;

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<sup>11</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *What is Political Islam?*, (United States: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2017).

3. the insertion of the doctrine of that state-approved Islam into the public school curriculum into national history textbooks and civic education.

Consequently, Islam became a marker of national and collective identity independently of the level of personal religious practice, not only for Muslims but also for religious minorities. In other words, the political cosmology brought by the nation-state is shaped by the co-terminality of Islam-territory and political power in ways unknown in pre-modern Muslim empires. It creates a connection between Islam and citizenship by establishing Islam as the parameter of public space for Muslims and non-Muslims, believers and non-believers alike. It implies that before being expressed in Islamic parties or movements, political Islam is a foundational element of modern political identities framed by the nation-state. In this sense, religion is “less about beliefs” and more about a world view which is often effective without the active awareness of those experiencing it.<sup>12</sup>

 **...the sacred that used to be associated with the foundational Islamic community has become a feature of the national one.**

It is therefore no surprise that the sacred that used to be associated with the foundational Islamic community has become a feature of the national one. Take, for example, the dispute over the Syrian flag. In 2018, the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition gathered in a constituent assembly in the northern Idlib province to change the Syrian Revolution flag, which would retain the green, red, and black colors adopted in 2012 but replace the red stars with the Islamic testimony of faith,

*Shahada*, i.e., “I believe that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the prophet of Allah”. This decision caused an uproar among all factions of the Syrian revolution.

Yahya al-Aridi, a member of the Druze community, described the flag change as “heresy” and wrote in a tweet, “Those who came out of this heresy to change the flag of

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<sup>12</sup> Rhys H. Williams, “Religion as Political Resource: Culture or Ideology?”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35, no. 4 (1996): 368–78.



revolution did more harm to the cause of the Syrians..."<sup>13</sup> Even Islamists were conflicted. The leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Abu Malik Tali, commented via telegram, "No party should oblige other groups or the general public with a specific color or shape. This is one of the divisions that should be avoided," adding that "the Prophet, peace be upon him, had numerous flags, of different shapes, and banners shouldn't be limited to a single color."<sup>14</sup> This battle over religious inscriptions on flags illustrates the tensions between the secular/sacred of the national community and the sacred of the religious community.

Additionally and most crucially, this genealogy of the religion/politics divide sheds a different light on Islamic parties and movements: they are not the beginning of political Islam, but the second iteration of a political culture ingrained into the national communities.<sup>15</sup> That is the reason why these movements claim an Islamic state. Their goal is not to get rid of hegemonic Islam but rather to expand its influence beyond the domains currently controlled by the secular states.

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***"...the concepts that were originally framed within nations have spread beyond national boundaries to give rise to transnational forms of Islamism that can also be radical, like Al-Qaeda and ISIS."***

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Finally, the concepts that were originally framed within nations have spread beyond national boundaries to give rise to transnational forms of Islamism that can also be radical, like Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

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<sup>13</sup> Yahya Alaridi (@yahya\_alaridi), *Twitter*, Nov. 12, 2018, [twitter.com/yahya\\_alaridi/status/1062004528961204226](https://twitter.com/yahya_alaridi/status/1062004528961204226).

<sup>14</sup> Abu Malik Tali, "Reactions to the adoption of the "Salvation Government": A new banner in Idlib", *Enab Baladi*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/262697>

<sup>15</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *What is Political Islam?*

## From the National to the Transnational Dimensions of the Religious versus Political Divide

Al-Qaeda and ISIS actions seem to reject the religious-political divide. However, Al-Baghdadi's (1971-2019) caliphate is better understood as *a globalization of the national forms of Islam*, rather than a return to the premodern form of polity before nationalism. If political Islam is the result of the diffusion of the religion/politics divide associated with the nation-state, it implies that global jihadism is the most recent and radicalized iteration of the nationalized versions of Shari'a, jihad, and Ummah. A succinct presentation of Islamism can shed light on such an evolution.

As heirs of the 19th-century pan-Islamists, the Islamist movements of the 1960s and 70s were opposed to nationalism. Nonetheless, most of them gradually used Islam more as an alternative to the secular nationalism promoted by state elites, and less as a way to promote the return to the Caliphate. As a result, they have increasingly operated within the context of the national political communities. When Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, he was not systematically opposed to nationalism and nation-state: his political platform called for violent resistance against Western powers and the restoration of Muslim sovereignty, which did not necessarily clash with Egyptian nationalist goals.

This acceptance of the nation-state created a rift between the majority of the Muslim Brothers willing to mobilize within the nation and those determined to fight it. As an example of the latter, Sayyid Qutb's (1906-1966) redefinition of jihad as the fight against the unjust ruler was instrumental to the systematic use of violence for political purposes. It also gave jihad a national dimension that, from Hezbollah to Hamas, remains the most significant form of political resistance.

In this regard, global jihad—also known as Salafi-jihadism—is a unique combination of the jihadi guerrilla of Qutb<sup>16</sup> and Faraj<sup>17</sup> (1954-1982), with the Wahhabi religious doctrine of Saudi Arabia. In other words, the national form of jihad from the Egyptian context became global<sup>18</sup> with the internationalization of the Afghan jihad against the Soviets, while its literalist and exclusivist vision of the Ummah comes from the modern Wahhabi doctrine.<sup>19</sup>

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The Qur’an mentions *Ummah Muslimah* (Muslim community) and *Ummah Wasat* (community of the middle path). Both concepts refer to the Muslim community built by Prophet Muhammed at Medina (622-629), similar to the Aristotelian *polis* discussed above, in the sense that the major differentiation was between sacred and profane, not between political and religious. It meant that the Prophet Muhammed

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<sup>16</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Sayyid Qutb.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 28, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sayyid-Qutb>.

<sup>17</sup> Pearson, E. “Egyptian Islamic Jihad.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 20, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Egyptian-Islamic-Jihad>.

<sup>18</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Wahhabism is a specific interpretation of the Islamic tradition that emerged in the eighteenth century in the Arabian Peninsula with the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abdel Wahab (1703–1792), whose literalist interpretations of the Qur’an became the official doctrine of the Saudi Kingdom upon its creation in 1932. Adherents of Wahhabism reject all ideas and concepts that are deemed Western, maintaining a strictly revivalist agenda. They contend that the Qur’an and Hadith when interpreted according to the precedents of the Pious Forefathers (al-salaf al-Salih) offer the most superior form of guidance to Muslims.

was simultaneously a Prophet and a ruler. After his death, the rapid expansion of the Revelation-based community under the guidance of the Caliphs or lieutenants of the Prophet Muhammed (not of God) disrupted this foundational distribution of power.

The Muslim Empires were complex political systems covering a huge amount of territory and regulating extremely diverse populations. As a result, they turned into somewhat 'profane' dynasties rather than imitations of the foundational Revelation-based community. That is why the Ummah was at that time perceived as the sum of the territories and populations under the Caliphate rule, hence encompassing an extensive number of religious groups: Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahais, and Druzes, to name a few.

The turning point in the politicization of the Ummah as we know it today came in the 19th century with the advent of reform movements against the backdrop of European imperialism and the decline of the Ottoman Empire. It was a pivotal moment when the Ummah came to represent an ideal political community made only of Muslims, promoted as the alternative to the Western nation. Paradoxically, this perception of the Ummah was also promoted by the secular nationalists and pan-Arabists, as it was a powerful tool for mass mobilization against the colonial powers.

Three tropes have emerged from this modern reconfiguration of the Ummah:

1. the Arab or Muslim community is based on shared virtue;
2. the duty of the Muslim is to defend the Ummah;
3. the concept of community embodied in the Ummah is associated with a modern pan-Arab and/or pan-Islamic concept of jihad.<sup>20</sup>

These three traits are shared today by all Islamist groups, both national and global. From this perspective, the Ummah of the global jihad is not a rupture but an ultra-radicalized version of the modern political community of the 19th century.

For Al-Qaeda, the Ummah is not only a collective of Muslim citizens but also one made of committed believers who fight to reinstate Islamic rules. In this respect,

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<sup>20</sup> Fred Halliday, "The Politics of the Umma: States and Community in Islamic Movements," *Mediterranean Politics* 7, no. 3 (2002): 20-41.

ISIS' political project is the most recent iteration of this combatant Ummah. The difference between ISIS and Al-Qaeda is that ISIS' goal is to ground this pure and homogenous community of combatants in a territory.

In sum, like Christianity in Europe at the time of the Reformation but with very different outcomes, the Islamic tradition has seen not only its societal influence reordered by the nation-state but also its doctrinal content redefined to make room for state sovereignty over mundane matters. These transformations have not generated a stable consensus and are a significant factor in the rise of political movements based on Islam.

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## Conclusion

This essay is not an argument in favor of religious nationalism, which can be defined as the assertive and explicit insertion of some religious symbols, figures, institutions, and creeds into the national ideology. What it describes instead is the modernization of the religious traditions within the national communities and the ensuing adjustments of religious ideas and institutions to this framework.

Additionally, it is not another postcolonial study to deconstruct the global domination of Western concepts. Instead, it is an attempt to “cross the line” to explore the breeding of these concepts in other locations and the political outcome of this adaptation. Such an approach has two main advantages.

First, it stays away from the assumption that religion in politics is abnormal or wrong per se. The interactions between actors, ideas, and institutions continuously redraw the boundaries between the religious and the political at different historical moments. What is political in Europe, such as the visibility of religious signs in public space, is not political in the US because the line between the secular and religious has been drawn differently. Similarly, the religious claim of some Islamist groups on territories appears political from the Western point of view.

**“What is political in Europe, such as the visibility of religious signs in public space, is not political in the US because the line between the secular and religious has been drawn differently.”**

Acknowledging the existence of these idiosyncratic histories of the secular/religious can have political advantages: President Obama’s Cairo speech in 2009 was at the time positively received across the Muslim world because it was the first time that a Western leader took the pain to acknowledge the peculiar political history of Islam.

Second, focusing on the tensions between religion and politics shifts our focus from doctrines and creeds to collective belongings and practices. It implies that the

exploration of individuals' religiosity is not the most efficient way to capture secularism or politicization of religion. Experts are often at a loss to explain why surveys show that the most religious individuals, from Muslim countries to the US, are not the ones systematically attracted to religiously motivated radical politics.<sup>21</sup> Capturing the different modalities of defining the religious community in contrast to the secular one may be more productive to explain this "incongruity".

Ultimately, the issue is that we are not able to apprehend this tug-of-war between religious and political communities because modern political orders have been built on the idea of religion as apolitical, hence making it at best the occasional interloper or at worst the "intruder" in political affairs.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> James Bell, "The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics, and Society," *Pew Research Center*, April 30, 2013, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/>; Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, (United States: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Darren R. Walhof, "Habermas, same-sex marriage and the problem of religion in public life," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 39, no. 3 (2013): 225–242.

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## **About the Author**

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