

# Why does Islam Remain Politically Important in Twenty-first Century Middle East?

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## Abstract

The sign of Islamic rejuvenation and reinvigoration that transcended eras along its evolutionary path and the failure of Arab nationalism in the postcolonial period as well as its takeover by Islamism in the post-Cold War era are likely to be thrust into the decades and centuries ahead. Analyzing the trends of contemporary Muslim politics and transposing them onto a future context, Islam will remain politically important in the 21st century Middle East. Fluid domestic Islamist politics, resilient social movements, ideological rivalries, resurgent Arab nationalism and the after effects of Iranian revolution are impacting national debates in the region in significant ways going forward into the century. Regional hegemony and sectarianism underpinned by external interference are likely to blight the region's march towards the future. The widening Shia-Sunni schism is likely to offer political Islam the necessary fuel for advancing supremacist agenda. The transnational nature of the modern world including globalization and the constant threat of secularism is forcing the region to react externally in various ways. Islamism is key to elucidating the discourse appropriate for countering unorthodox themes within the region in the centuries to come. Since it is clear that Islam will remain politically important in the 21st century Middle East, at times with violent extremism, it is imperative that the rest of the world recognizes that fact and concentrates on designing and opening channels of communication that promote diversity and non-violence across the globe.

**Keywords:** Nationalism; Sectarianism; Ideological; Secularism

## Introduction

Middle East is an expansive transcontinental region in Western Asia and North-East Africa encompassing Iran, Asia Minor (Anatolia), Mesopotamia (the Fertile Crescent), the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt. It borders Eurasia to the north and east, Indian Ocean to the south-east, Africa to the south and west and the Mediterranean Sea to the north-west. With a population estimated at 371 million people in 2010 [1], the area has been relevant as the cradle of civilization in human history and prehistory. It is the birth-place of the three Abrahamic religions; Judaism in early classical times, Christianity in late antiquity and Islam in the medieval era.

Islam, estimated to be constituting 23% of the global population in 2015 [2], is the dominant religion in the region. From the caliphate (imamate) system in the early middle ages through the thriving high and late medieval centres of scholarship and the revivalism in the early modern period to the transnational nature in the contemporary era, Islam has been politically active throughout its evolution. This religion will probably remain relevant in the foreseeable future owing to interplay amongst national, regional and global factors. This essay will examine these factors with a view to determine the continued political importance of Islam in the 21st century Middle East.

## Examination of Factors

The Islamic Golden Age in the medieval era was a period of philosophical and scientific breakthroughs which the present day Muslims can only reminisce about in their thoughts. It acquiescingly gave way to Western enlightenment and imperialism, ideas which in

turn gave rise to industrialization and colonialism. These were seen by the populations and leaders of the region as exploitation and secularism, notions that are counter to the self-determination of peoples and Islamic principles. Hence, Muslim Middle East reacted in a variety of ways. Mandaville [3] asserts that the Islamic responses to imperialism were reformism and revivalism. Whereas the first concept was an attempt to react externally against the capitalist occupiers, revivalism was inward-looking and led to the development of Wahhabism [4]. It was premised on the purification and rejuvenation of Islam from mysticism and return to the core teachings. This was a watershed moment in the development of modern religious authoritarianism whose magnitude and resolve increased through the contemporary era. With these agenda still unfolding in the region and seemingly hijacked by Islamist and extremists who are calling for caliphate governance similar to the one that existed in the Middle Ages, the debate about political Islam is likely to overshadow other key discourses in the century.

Within Middle Eastern national territories, debates and struggles about the future are an ongoing concern. These have commenced with the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924 which was followed with colonial mandates, protectorates and emirates. Decolonization ushered in independence, nation-building and wealth creation. Despite the oil boom from the first half of the 20th century, Hiro [5] and Martin [6] posit that much of the population remains disillusioned with bad governance and underdevelopment. From a pro-Western stance throughout the Cold War, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought a global refocus on 'War on Terror.' This has enforced Islamist undercurrents and subsequently a revolutionary wave 'Arab Spring' swept across the region from 2010 [7] and its ramifications are ongoing and will likely be felt for generations. This history underpins the trajectory of political Islam in the Middle East going forward. From

earlier emphasis on Islamic virtue and morality, a new discourse on political pragmatism is emerging [3] as traditionalism and Islamism are contending for political space in the region. Within Islamism are two major ideological groups; militant and progressive – which Mohammed [8] notes are based on generational divide about vision and strategy between the 'Old Guard' and the 'New Turks' in politics. The militancy of the older generations is growing out of favour with the general public and hence new Islamism, promoting democracy and participation ideals, may emerge the eventual winner in the region. This is further buttressed by the multiple interventions and counter-extremist strategies trailing the militant group. The question for this century is whether democracy will be Islamized or vice-versa. Reformism in Islam has already been spearheaded by Jamal al-Afghani (1839-1897) [9] but it failed miserably. The most probable option left is the Islamization of democracy. This gives credence to an earlier work by Khatab and Bouma [10] which contends that Islamic democracy is a novel way of balancing the interests of various actors in an Islamist setting, though Western ideals will come in handy in the process. Meanwhile, in the Middle East, Islam will likely continue to penetrate democratic institutions and actors and influence policy and decision-making. For this reason, Islam is projected to hold on to its importance politically in the region throughout this century.

Social movements have peaked in the Middle East in response to economic stagnation, widespread poverty and adverse effects of desertification on the environment. Utilizing information technology, publics in a number of states have increasingly resorted to civil disturbance in their agitation for freedom and democracy. This has resulted in the overthrow of governments such as Egypt; insurgencies and civil wars in Iraq, Syria and Yemen; civil uprisings in Bahrain; large street demonstrations in Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait and Oman and minor protests in the Palestinian Territories, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and a number of other countries in the Greater Middle East [11]. These movements have subsequently assumed political roles within national territories. For instance, various armed groups including the dreaded Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) are fighting the Syrian government with the sole purpose of taking over power. Similarly, Hamid [7] notes that the intensification of insurgencies in Iraq, the war in Yemen and general Arab consciousness are the resultant consequences of these movements. Most of these groups are Islamist who are fighting in the name of Islam with some of them riding to power through electoral success following these altercations. They may mutate or merge with other groups but the struggles are expected to continue for the whole of this century enabling Islam to maintain its political importance in the region.

Nationalism has been used as a decolonization tool throughout the world. For its part, Arab Nationalism, taking advantage of Arab civilization, culture and anti-Zionism, called for the political union of the Arab World. It espoused the superimposition of pan-Arab ideology [3] onto religious identity. The concept seems to have lost traction in the late 20th century but is currently gaining momentum courtesy of the 'Arab Winter' [12] sweeping across the region. For it to succeed in the decades ahead, grassroots political support is vital and Islam comes in handy in this mobilization.

On the other hand, the Iranian Revolution which overthrew the secular Pahlavi dynasty and replaced it with a theocracy in 1979 was a classic example in the region of Islamization of governance. According to Jalal [13], the revolution spearheaded by Ayatollah Khomeini with support from various Islamist groups and student organizations, was staged to protest the ills of secularism and what he called *gharbzadegi*

'(westoxication)' such as social injustice, discontent with the Shah's rule and imperialism. With the same issues that led to the revolution largely intact; increased social problems [14], the consequences of the isolation likely to be felt in this century's medium term future [15] and the continued encroachment of foreign powers in the internal affairs of the country [16], the Islamic Republic of Iran will likely remain under religious grip throughout the 21st century. Political Islam based on Shi'i ideology is therefore expected to grow exponentially in the country and expand further across the region.

Domestic politics in individual countries in the Middle East are beholden to competing Islamic and political interests and values. Mandaville [3] posits that religious and Non-Governmental Organizations, scholars, educational institutions and diaspora and immigrant communities are all in the fray supporting either or both of the two parties. In cases where the political establishment is inching towards liberalism, powerful religio-political forces act as their counterweight. For instance, in Iran, the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards have constantly weighed in on the democratically elected government [17]. In other cases, two or more grand families and dynasties wield immense religious and political power and responsibilities. A case in point is in Saudi Arabia where the Al-Saud family governs the state and remains in-charge of foreign policy as the Al-ash-Sheikhs function as the guardians of Islamic symbolism [18] and work through a series of outreaches (*da'wa*), advocacy networks, charities and promotes general religious superintendence. This is a complex relationship and portends a potential existential clash between political ambition and spiritual vision. With the public in most of the region's nations disillusioned by poor service delivery and conservatism; and with the calls for sharia adoption and religious prioritization over politics on the increase, Islam is likely to assume the upper hand in the political dispensation in the coming decades.

Sectarianism in the Middle East is a fairly new phenomenon that is now promising to curtail regional integration and cohesion. The two regional powers; pariah Iran and conservative Saudi Arabia are pursuing mutually exclusive and destructive policies with the undertones of Shia and Sunni politics. The Shi'i nationalism, religious in nature and which evolved modern Iran from the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736) and the Qajars (1781-1925) [3] has been oriented to a political status in the 1979 revolution (Kepel, 2002). Iran has ostensibly become the undeclared leader of the Shia world, driving the policies and the agenda of transnational Shia politics. On the other hand, through the promotion of Wahhabism throughout the world and its Islamic symbolism of hosting the two holy places of worship - Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia have emerged as the Sunni kingpin. Each power seems to preserve its area of denominational influence, in the process widening the existing schism in Shia-Sunni theology and diminishing pan-Islamism. This cocoonism in denominational leadership is lucrative and is being utilized politically and diplomatically within the region and beyond, adding more fuel to Islamic revivalism, factionalism and antagonism. It is therefore arguable that Islam will remain politically important in the Middle East in the 21st century particularly considering the efforts at prolongation of sectarianism amidst competition for regional hegemony between the two major actors and their denominational allies.

Regional hegemony itself is likely to work in favour of Islam politically in the 21st century. The Iranian revolution heralded hardening of positions with its erstwhile friends-turned-foes; Saudi

Arabia and Israel. Following the current thawing of relations with the global superpower, the U.S. upon its nuclear agreement with the P5+1, the regional rivals have sensed a resurgent Iran and heightened their diplomatic and security apparatus with it further [19]. The region is now under the grasp of arms race, security dilemma and an unfolding oil and Hajj politics. For instance, Saudi Arabia increased its arms imports by 50% in 2015 to \$9.3 billion [20]. Much of this increase occurred after the 14 July 2015 Iranian comprehensive agreement with the global powers. This state of affairs is pushing power relations into brinkmanship and eventual conflict. Regional hegemony has been rearing its ugly head as Iran is in a long term disagreement with a number of rich Arab Gulf States. It lays claim on Bahrain on account of the latter's prominence in the Persian Empire [21]. Roham [22] adds that the monarchy has been assisted by the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in containing its Shia civil disturbance on several occasions in addition to hosting a U.S. naval base to the chagrin of Iran. UAE on its part disputes Iran's sovereignty over three islands [23]. All these issues derive much of their strengths from religious denominationalism and the situation will likely develop further in the future. This is an exercise of pragmatic hegemony which serves to regionalize sectarianism, in the process emboldening political debate about Islam in the 21 century.

Apart from pragmatism, contention for hegemony is also experienced in the region based on Islamism. As the Middle East is a minefield of militias, the two sectarian arch-enemies; Saudi Arabia and Iran have financed and armed militant and Islamist groups throughout the region, in the process encouraging Shia-Sunni schism to grow and widen across the region. Wahhabism views Shi'ism as a heresy and an innovation (*bid'a*) which does not merit to be considered as an Islamic authority [3]. He adds that securitization of the Shia resurgence following the Iranian revolution has lowered inter-sectarian confidence. The Jordanian King, Abdullah II in 2004 exacerbated the debate when he introduced the concept 'Shia Crescent' to correspond to the half-moon shaped area in the region domiciled by a Shia majority [24]. This has happened in part due to Iranian expansionist attitude. Various Islamist militias have been armed by the different camps to ensure denominational and regional hegemony and to spread their ideologies and propaganda. Saudi Arabia and its allies have found themselves endearing to entities opposing the Iranian allies and vice-versa. For instance, whereas Iran supports the government and the Sunni group aids the opposition forces in Syria; in Yemen, it supports the opposition group, Houthis, as the Saudis and their allies are with the government [25]. The situation is similar throughout the Fertile Crescent and the Levant. These political strategies and counterstrategies are leaning on Islamic sectarianism and will continue propelling the region into sectarian rife throughout the 21st century. In this scheme of things, political Islam will remain important in legitimizing objectives.

External actors are actively perpetuating to the growth and spread of sectarianism and hegemony in the region. Divide and rule policies, double standards in foreign policy and exploitation are some of the tools they employ to achieve geopolitical objectives. For instance, the U.S. has been accused of arming multiple Sunni militias to challenge Shia authorities including the despotic Baathist Syria [26] and unconditionally supporting Israel while the latter continuously engaged in human rights violations against the Palestinian population [27]. Cleveland and Burton [9] note that the U.S. is also accused together with China and a host of European states of unethical economic behavior for being interested merely in oil and gas resources for short-term expediency rather than the long-term stability of the

region. Lynch [26] again contends that Russia is also on the spot for clandestinely instigating Shia militias such as the Hezbollah against legitimate entities. This weaponization of sectarianism and promotion of hegemonic rivalry creates a dangerous synergy that poses a geostrategic challenge to the region. The Soufan Group [28] described these realities as the greatest threat facing the Middle East with the potential to breed mass radicalism, transnational jihadi networks and eventual catastrophes. The shift in Shia-Sunni power dynamics in Iraq is also a consequence of external intervention that has progressively handed the mantle of popular support to Islamist and black market forces. This scenario is likely to balkanize the region and jeopardizes its future peace and security. Islamists thrive in these kinds of conditions where states are threatened with fragility and anarchy. Hence, political Islam is assured to prosper in the decades ahead.

## Conclusion

Finally, globalization has increased worldwide interdependence by creating a complex array of relationships and affecting identities and social affiliations in significant ways. It has rendered information accessible, thrust ideas into the global limelight and condemned clergy to obscurantism. The full range of Muslim transnationalism is experienced in terms of brotherhoods, networks and Diasporas [3]. This has pushed the notions of immigration, religion and diversity under the aegis of social integration, pluralism and multiculturalism, thus affording Muslim globalists awareness of the lives and predicaments of their co-religionists in the Middle East and elsewhere. Globalization is reconfiguring the politics of the Islamic Middle East as the concept is associated with a steep rise in urban poverty [29]. The existing socio-economic inequalities and power asymmetries favour the developed Western world. Brumberg [30-32] laid the base for this argument by positing that the Arab World is a loser in globalization and the Western World the winner. This therefore gives credence to the correlation between the increasing urban poverty in Muslim majority countries and the enhancing social influence and the mobilizing potential of Islamist. The status quo is likely to remain in the region in the 21st century as various Islamist seek to achieve the Islamization of social order through capturing state power.

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