

Modern Islamic Political Thought, “Islamism” and Nationalism

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We wanted to serve Iran by employing Islam and Mr. Khomeini
wanted to serve Islam by employing Iran.
- Mehdi Bazargan¹

No religion is true. A religion can only become real, i.e.
correspond to that which it gives itself out to be and is taken to be.
- Karl Barth²

How to tell the story of “Din”³ And fatherland,
No words I have on this difficult stand.
So do not take ill if due to thy ways,
I cherish to revive the good old days.
- Muhammad Iqbal⁴

The nation [is one of the] most untheorized concepts of the
modern world.
- Partha Chatterjee⁵

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¹The first Prime Minister after the 1979 revolution, Mehdi Bazargan, *Inqlab-E Iran Dar Do Harakat/ the Iranian Revolution in Two Opposing Directions* (Tehran: Mazaheri, 1983), 75.

²Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 151.

³Islam or religious faith.

⁴Muhammad Iqbal, *Armaghan-I Hijaz* (1938), <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/>. Last visited: 10/01/2016

⁵Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation, and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Oxford India Paperbacks (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), xi.

Abstract: This paper theorizes the nexus between “Islamism” and nationalism, showing that neither nationalism nor religion(s) can be studied in isolation. I argue that Islamism is unable to conceive of a political system beyond the nation-state and appears to have internalized the political boundaries imposed by the discourse of the nation-state. Such internalization, in turn, affects the Islamist understanding of umma and similar ‘universalist’ concepts. My paper insists on a keen attention to the context in the analysis of religious interpretations. Despite elements of continuity in religious thought, contextual influences transform the practice of religious interpretation and mark it with temporal specificity. Muhammad Iqbal (1877 –1938) once noted that “the task before the modern Muslim is, therefore, immense. He has to rethink the whole system of Islam without completely breaking with the past.” However, such a rethinking is not homogeneous and bears the mark of interaction with particular socio-historical contexts; religious thought in the era of nationalism was affected by its context as much as it affected the context itself. This dialectic manifested itself as reciprocity and mutual entanglement. In this paper, I explore these entanglements and reciprocities of nationalism and Islamism.

Introduction

In this paper, I intend to address the influence of nationalism on modern Islamist thought. In doing so, I divided my paper into two parts. In the first, I shall demonstrate through historical examples how in the late 19th and early 20th century, nationalist discourse imperceptibly made its way into newer interpretations of Islam. I argue that Islamic interpretations became increasingly exclusionary. Numerous non-Turkish writers and thinkers laid out their criteria for being a true Muslim.⁶ In fact, it is only in the context of the rise of rival Muslim nationalisms that one can make sense of the nationalist utterances by Arab revivalists such as Muhammad ‘Abduh and ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi.

It was against this background that al-Kawakibi claimed that, unlike the rest of the Muslims, the blood of the Arabs in Hijaz remained pure and unadulterated and therefore uniquely suited for the leadership of the Muslim world. Such emphasis on the purity of blood, a tacit claim to the existence of real Qurayshis—supposedly the rightful owners of the caliphate—signifies the rise and pervasiveness of ethno-nationalistic politics among Muslims.⁷

I devote the remaining part of this paper to establishing that “Islamism” is unable to think in terms of a political system beyond the nation-state. I argue that Islamists have internalized the idea of national political boundaries. Such internalization, in turn, affects Islamism's definition of the umma and similar ‘universalistic’ concepts.

⁶ For more on this subject see, Kamal Soleimani, *Islam and Competing Nationalism in the Middle East, 1876-1926*. (New York: Palgrave, 2016).

⁷ ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, *Um Al-Qura* (Cairo: al-Azhar, 1931) 196-97.

I. Modern Islamic Revivalism and Its Socio-Historical Context

In modern Muslim religious thought, the nation is perceived to be self-evident: since the religious agent operates within the paradigm of nationalism, she is inclined to unite her religious idiom with that of nationalism. Life within the 'nationalist paradigm'⁸ imposes a modern mode of conceiving of the nation, and that enables nationalist agents to employ nationalist idioms to explain their affiliation with the nation.⁹ The paradigm imposes its requirements on religious interpretations, and functions as a context for rethinking religion, thereby affecting its scopes and limits.

Such paradigmatic requirements should be thought of as major grounds for the fusion of religion and nationalism. By the same token, modern Muslims' eagerness to find examples of democratic forms of governance in the golden age of Islam should be seen in this context. In turn, their attempts to reconstruct the religious past may be more inclined to make the past compatible with the modern state than to enthusiastically lobby for the re-introduction of 'the original Islam.'¹⁰ Modern Muslim scholars' views on the state, separation of powers and forms of governance as exemplified in the following passage, merely illustrates such tendencies:

When we consult the present, the historical past and the age of the four righteous caliphs, it becomes apparent to us after careful study that the prevailing political system at that time observed -- to a large degree -- the principle of the separation of powers. Legislation in that era was entrusted to "the body of jurists who exercised independent legal judgment." The caliph, as head of state, was not a specialist in the Shar'a; instead, his function was limited -- primarily -- to legal execution and to administration. It was the judges who possessed independent power. The caliph and his governors were subject to it, just as was every other individual (emphasis added).

Aside from the generalization and historical inaccuracies, in the above passage, the modern conception of the state has been imposed on the past or past made compatible to the modern. The modern nation-state becomes the measure of rereading Muslim history of governance. Reading that claims both uniformity and continuity that resembles primordial nationalist historiography. Therefore, it is necessary to note that neither nationalism nor modern Islamic religious thought can be easily studied in isolation.

Islamic revivalism is an attempt to reconstruct the past—a past that both serves and challenges the present. Islamic revivalism, notwithstanding its diverse historical forms, has displayed antithetical attitudes towards contemporary conceptualizations of Islam. Critiquing modern Muslims for their assumed distance from 'the original Islam' has constituted the core of Islamic revivalist claims. Such claims unintentionally validate the fact that religious knowledge or interpretations of Islam are part of human endeavors and thus are always relative and

⁸See Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*. (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1995).

⁹For an insightful discussion on this subject see Billig: 1995.

¹⁰al-Ṣaʿdī quoted in Al-Tashrīʿ wa-sann al-qawānīn fī al-dawla al-Islāmīya, dirāsatahlīliya/ Legislation and the Enactment of Laws in the Islamic State: An Analytical Study, (Cleveland: Dār al-nahḍa al-Islāmīya, 1992) 46-55.

contextual. Revivalist interpretations are not an exception to this rule. Nevertheless, modern forms of revivalism or “Islamism” claim that the original message, in its pure sense, is recoverable. Islamist varieties are explicit in their claim to an exclusive access to the original meaning.¹¹ Even the term fundamentalism—notwithstanding its essentialist and pejorative identification—ironically takes the claim of returning to the original understanding of “the fundamentals” seriously. Overall, such approaches indicate the subtlety and pervasiveness of the belief in the non-contextual nature of religion(s).

Religious interpretations cannot be detached from their historical circumstances and socio-political contexts. Indeed, a cursory reading of the works produced by religious scholars of the late 19th century reveals clearly a markedly racial and ethnic bent. As such, even ethnic influences on religious interpretations may entail both continuity and context specificity. For instance, non-Turkish Muslim revivalists had ambivalent feelings about the Ottoman Caliphate and his policies. Their ambivalence rooted in both their nationalistic and religious feelings, and colored by growing anti-colonialist sentiments. The revivalists' interpretations were thus to take place under the influence of a simultaneously nationalist, modernist and anti-colonial socio-political and cultural environment.

Now the question is whether nationalism in the Muslim World itself was inherently secular. Historically, religious thought has always been subject to a multitude of interpretations. Islamic religious thought is not an exception to this rule, and the claim of different ethnic groups of being favored by God or being His chosen people is just one such interpretation. Therefore, it hard to exclude nationalist readings of Islam since “There are as many Islams as there are situations that sustain it.”¹² Hence, the anthropologist Talal Asad is right to contend that ‘religion’ cannot be defined universally and that “we [should] focus instead on how our subjects define religion.”¹³ However, it was difficult to agree with Asad when he claims that “although Islamism has virtually always succeeded Arab nationalism in the contemporary history of the Middle East, and addressed itself directly to the nation-state, it should not be regarded as a form of nationalism.”¹⁴ While Asad is correct in claiming that Islamism is not secular,¹⁵ His inadvertent suggestion that “nationalism is essentially secular” is problematic.¹⁶

Asad's point deserves a closer scrutiny for a number of reasons. I should point out that he partly bases his argument on his definition of the term *umma*, whose revival is assumed to be the ultimate goal of Islamism.¹⁷ For Asad, the way in which the *umma* is conceived differentiates Islamism from a nationalist trend such as Arabism. Asad argues that Arabism imagines the *umma* as the Arab *umma* (al- ‘Arabiyye)—a political community. He also states that this imagined political community is distinct from a “theologically defined space enabling [Medieval

¹¹ Cf. Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, 1st ed. (Karachi: International Islamic Publishers, 1981). Also, *The Islamic Concept and Its Characteristics* (Indianapolis IN, USA: American Trust Publications, 1991).

¹² Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, Phronesis (London; New York: Verso, 1993), 1.

¹³ Quoted in Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 23.

¹⁴ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 199.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 196-98.

era's] Muslims to practice the disciplines of *dīn* in the world."¹⁸ Asad's reading overlooks both the historical impact of Arab nationalism on Islamism and the nationalist tendencies present in the Arabo-Islamic revivalist reinterpretation of *umma*. It is true that Islamism has connections to "the tradition." The tradition, however, to borrow Katherine Ewing's phrasing, has passed through "the gaze of modernity."¹⁹ One could even describe Muslim revivalist groups as those demanding "reinterpretation of the present through a reevaluation and recreation of the past that it fits within the modern context."²⁰ Hence, in Asad's reading the modern context in which these connections are made to "tradition" go unattended.

Moreover, ethnic self-differentiation has been mostly embedded in Muslim Arab revivalism. Historically, Arab revivalist trends have perceived non-Arab Muslims as one of the causes of the "decadence" or "degeneration" (*inhītat*) of Islam.²¹ They mostly discussed the non-Arab's role in Islam, in negative terms. The ethnic overtone of such explanations is evident, as Arab revivalists tie the "impure" of non-Arab Muslim's understanding of Islam to their ethnic character and to their history.²² For example, Muhammad 'Abduh, the renowned Egyptian Islamic revivalist had no qualms in stating that "since the Turks were late converts, they remained unable to grasp the spirit of Islam."²³ He wrote that the Ottoman Turks' rule "polluted

¹⁸Ibid., 197.

¹⁹Katherine Pratt Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

²⁰Andrew Rippin and Jan Knappert, *Textual Sources for the Study of Islam*, Textual Sources for the Study of Religion (Manchester Greater Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 30. Emphasis added.

²¹ Even Muhammad Iqbal accepts the decadence (*inhītat*) of the Muslim World. One of his poems titled "in the time of *inhītat*, conformity (*taqlid*) is better than *ijtihād*," states:

The present age has many tumults hid
Beneath its head; its restless temperament
Swarms with disorders. The society
Of ancient nations in these modern times
Is in confusion; sapless hangs life's bough

...

Stability in strict conformity.

Go thou thy father's road, for therein lies

Tranquility; conformity connotes

The holding fast of the community.

In time of Autumn, thou who lackest leaf

Alike and fruit, never break from the tree,

Muhammad Iqbal, *Rumuz-I Bekhudi* trans. Iqbal Academy Pakistan (Iqbal Academy, 1918, <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/> last visited: 10/01/2016). It should be noted that Iqbal wrote the above poem in 1918. In his later works, he does not seem to have much regard for conformity. In his 1930 work, for instance, Iqbal states that "a false reverence for history and its artificial resurrection constitute no remedy for people's *decay*" (emphasis added). See *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 203.

²²See Muhammad 'Ammara. *Abd al-Rahaman al-Kawakibi: The Martyr of Islam and Freedom*. (Cairo: Daralshuruq, 1988)

²³Hamid 'Enayat, *Seyri Dar Andishay-E Siyasi-Ye Arab/ An Overview of Arab Political Thought*(Tehran: Sherkat-e Sohmi-ye Kitabha-ye Jibi, 2536), 149.

the purity (khulus) of Arabic language, which in turn led to discord and sectarianism amongst Muslims.”²⁴

In ‘Abduh’s mind, there was an organic link between the Arabic language and Islam. The “degeneration” of the first, for ‘Abduh, led to “the decline” of the second. In his 1902 work, *al-Islam wa al-Nasraniyya*, ‘Abduh also claimed that “Islam [originally] was a religion of the Arabs.” However, an Abbasid Caliph’s decision “to create a foreign (ajnabi) army comprised of Turks, Dailamites and other [non-Arab] people... alienated – or made foreign –Islam... transforming it into a non-Arab (‘ajami) [religion].”²⁵ ‘Abduh was not the only person to hold such views. Similar remarks are often made by other iconic revivalist figures, including Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1855-1902) and Rashid Rida (1865-1935).²⁶ Even Hassan al-Banna (1906 – 1949), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, once declared that “we do not deny that the various nations have their distinct qualities and particular moral character [however] we believe that in these respects Arabism possesses the fullest and most abundant share...”²⁷

Contrary to what Asad thinks, the definition of *umma* by the revivalists does not seem to be very different from the one put forth by Arab nationalists.²⁸ It must be noted here that the redefinition of *umma* was heavily informed by the Muslim anti-colonial struggle in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – a struggle that shaped modern Muslim self-perception and enabled the revivalists to see the entire Muslim world as a unified politico-religious entity vis-à-vis the colonial West with its ties to Christendom. In addition, Muslim Arabs’ exclusive, and inherently ethno-religious claim to the caliphate increased the chance of imagining the *umma* in ethnic and political terms.²⁹

In fact, Muslim revivalist writings, such as that of al-Kawakibi, exemplify the inseparability of Islamist and Arab nationalist claims to the caliphate in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. al-Kawakibi argued that all Muslims would fall behind an Arab caliph as at the beginning of Islam. For him, this was true because he believed that “of all ethnic groups, Arabs are the most qualified (ansab) to be viewed as [the authentic] source of the religion (marja’ an fi al-dini), and as providing the role model (qudwa) for all Muslims.”³⁰ The ethnic perception of *umma* becomes abundantly clear in al-Kawakibi’s writings when he classifies Muslims as

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Muhammad ‘Abduh, *Al-Islam Wa Al-Nasraniyya/ Islam and Christianity* (Cairo: al-Manar, 1323/1905), 123.

²⁶ Cf. Mahmoud Haddad, “Arab Religious Nationalism in the Colonial Era: Rereading Rashīd Riḍā’s Ideas on the Caliphate” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1997). Also, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, *Um Al-Qura* (Cairo: al-Azhar, 1931).

²⁷Hasan al-Banna, “Our Message,” http://www.ymsite.com/books/our_message/index.htm. Last visited 10/01/2015.

²⁸Asad acknowledges that *umma* can mean “a people” (*Formations of the Secular*: 197.)²⁸ However, the term has more to it than what Asad calls “the sense of ‘a people’—‘a community’ in the Qur’an” (Ibid). In the Qur’an, while the Muslim community is regarded as an *umma*, so is Ibrahim – a single human being is also considered an *umma* (2/143; 21/92; 23/52). Likewise, a small group of Muslims of Jews, and of Christian [(3/104; 7/159; 3/113) as opposed to their respective communities at large], are also designated by the term *umma*. The Qur’an sometimes uses the term to describe a religious tradition (7/159), and sometimes for a community consisting of the *deniers* as well as the *endorsers* of a newly introduced divine message (3/113). An initial stage of the life of humanity—supposedly a collective homogeneity—is also described as a unified *umma* (*ummawahida*, 43/22 & 23).

²⁹ For more on this see, chapter three.

³⁰al-Kawakibi, *Um Al-Qura*, 196-97.

umam(in the plural form).³¹ So, he declares that “No Muslim nation(umam al-Islamiya) is as eager in preserving its own independence and freedom as the Arabs of the Peninsula.”³² al-Kawakibi contends that Arabic is not only the first language (khusus) of one-third of the world's Muslim population, it is also their most common (‘umum) and richest language.³³ In defense of Arabs’ exclusive right to the caliphate, al-Kawakibi enumerates various “superior” Arab national traits, and contends that they were “the first umma to follow the principle of consultation.”³⁴ Furthermore, Arabs, he stresses, are “the best-guided umma in observing al-ishtrakiya³⁵ (egalitarianism)...”³⁶ and “the most eager umma in honoring their pacts.”³⁷

Al-Kawakibi was unequivocal in claiming that the realization of the Prophetic message and the revival of Islam was only possible through the reestablishment of an Arab caliphate.³⁸ He also believed that an Arab caliphate was the only way to Arab liberation (falah).³⁹ Thus, al-Kawakibi quotes the renowned medieval Arab poet al-Mutanabi, announcing that “people are dependents on their kings for [any achievements] and there will never be an Arab deliverance under non-Arab kings.”⁴⁰

It must be indicated that al-Kawakibi’s book was very popular among Muslim Arab revivalists. It was so popular that Sammi Dahhan, one of al-Kawakibi’s biographers, claims that the book was “revised either by Abduh or by Rashid Rida,” two well-known revivalist figures.⁴¹ To al-Kawakibi, Islam and the Arabs were almost inseparable. The Arabs were the only people who could have halted ‘the decadence of Islamic civilization’ caused by the Turks and other non-Arabs. In essence,

al-Kawakibi’s defense of Islamic civilization was a glorification of Arabs in the development of that civilization. The virtues of Islam—its language, its Prophet, its early moral and political order—were Arab achievements. In his view, the decadence of Islam was caused by the practices of the Turks and other non-Arab people had introduced into the umma, and he went so far as to express regret that the Turks had ever embraced the faith...al-Kawakibi called for the Ottomans to relinquish their unjustified claim to the caliphate and to restore the office to its rightful possessors, the Arabs.⁴²

³¹ *Umam* (plural; singular: *umma*)

³² al-Kawakibi, *Um Al-Qura*, 195.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

³⁵ The term *al-ishtrakiya* is used to mean socialism. Here, however, egalitarianism seems to be what al-Kawakibi is referring to.

³⁶ al-Kawakibi, *Um Al-Qura*, 196.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 150-51.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴¹ Abbas Mahmud Al-Aqqad, *'Abd Al-Rahman Al-Kawakibi* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1969), 81.

⁴² William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* 2nd ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000), 126.

The discourse of the caliphate in the rest of the Sunni world was mostly informed by the colonial presence, and therefore generated degrees of solidarity with the Ottomans. However, the caliphate remained an exclusionary concept for Arabs.⁴³ Thus, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the invocation of concepts such as *umma* and *khilafa* among Arabs had a much greater bearing on ethnicity than it did in the rest of Sunni world. Such an approach to the revival of the institution, under the leadership of an Arab caliphate, could shed some light on the mixed reactions against European colonialism of those Muslim figures and groups like ‘Abduh, Rashid Rida and the Wahhabis. Fearing that it could undermine their claim – even when they sided with the Ottomans against European colonialism—both nationalist and revivalist Arabs remained reluctant to ascribe any legitimacy to the Ottoman caliphate.⁴⁴

It is erroneous to assume that Muslims have always imagined the *umma* with any uniformity specially after the death of the fourth Caliph in 656. It is true that in medieval times Muslims did not believe their community at large as a political community,⁴⁵ Perhaps because it took only a few decades following the death of the Prophet for Muslims to fall under two rival political rules – one centered in Medina and the other in Damascus. The emergence of rival governing centers marked the beginning of a never-ending Muslim disunity – a disunity which, in the ensuing centuries, gained newer dimensions and greater scale. Moreover, Muslim discord came to be interpreted differently. Even *ahadith* (plural; singular: *hadith*, the Prophet’s sayings) were utilized to justify disagreements (*ikhtilaf*) within the *umma*, at least theoretically, as a blessing (*rahmahtun*) from God.⁴⁶ Such interpretations⁴⁷ were disparate in nature, ranging from denial of the overall necessity of the state to the legitimation of concurrent rival political domains within the community as a whole. The majority of Sunnis had readily accepted the *hadith* that categorically rejects the legitimacy of any state after the first four caliphs (the so-called *Khulfa al-Rashidun*, or the Rightly Guided Caliphs).⁴⁸ After that, according to the same *hadith*, the Muslim community will be ruled over by usurping or unjust (*‘adud*)⁴⁹ kings.⁵⁰

It cannot be emphasized enough that the ideas of reviving the *umma* and the actual *khilafa* coincided with the rise of nationalism and anti-colonialism in the Muslim world, a fact which reveals the shared historical context of Arab nationalism and Islamic revivalism. In the last two centuries, Islamic revivalism has been one way in which modern Muslims have formulated their concerns. Islamic revivalism, itself diverse, has been informed by different types of ethno-nationalisms, geographies, and other contextual factors. From early on, Islamic revivalism has concerned itself with a reliable and authentic Islamic governance, especially in the face of the colonial threat. However, this has not prevented a blithe insertion of nationalism

⁴³ Cf. Al-Aqqad, *‘Abd Al-Rahman Al-Kawakibi*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁵ See, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 197.

⁴⁶ There are still ongoing discussions among Muslim clerics over this *hadith*. See, <http://www.ebnmaryam.com/vb/t32140.html>. Last visited: 10/01/2016.

⁴⁷ See Soleimani (2016).

⁴⁸ See Soleimani (2016).

⁴⁹ *‘Adud*, from the root word *‘adda*; literally, means biting or holding something with the force of teeth.

⁵⁰ Major *Sunni hadith* authorities such as Terminal and Nisaei have transmitted this *hadith*. See, <http://www.dd-sunnah.net/forum/showthread.php?t=5679>. Last Visited: 10/01/ 2016

into the modern Islamic revivalist discourse.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Arabs, more than other Muslims, “ethnicized” the discourse of the caliphate. It is worth noting, however, that throughout the Muslim world the idea of the caliphate was becoming increasingly imbued with nationalism. The abolishment of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924 uncovered this common tendency among Muslims. While different Muslim groups have tried to keep a nostalgic discourse of the caliphate alive, they have also simultaneously prioritized their national boundaries as the only possible home for an Islamic caliphate.⁵¹ Such a nationalistic prioritization resulted in the very first conference for the revival of the caliphate in 1926 in the Cairo. In the conference, “each participating delegation wanted to make its ruler the caliph.”⁵² Thus, the establishment of the caliphate is not essentially universalistic. Even if it is perceived as the embodiment of a real Islamic state, Islamist groups, in general, imagine the creation of a possible caliphate within their current and local, national space. It is important to bear in mind that whether such groups are labeled as fundamentalists or Islamists, they have also internalized the boundaries of the nation-state.

II. Islamism, Banal nationalism and Nation-State

Islamists’ operation within the confines of the nation-state and their strategic goal to control state structures forces them to deal with nationalism at various levels. Of course, Islamism is not nationalism, if nationalism is perceived as mostly secular. However, if nationalism can be a derivative concept, as argued by Partha Chatterjee, and susceptible to assuming various forms in order to incorporate local cultural mores, its connection with nationalism is more complex.

Islamist attempts to work through the nation-state are in and of themselves grounds for the fusion of religion and politics, which is informed by “national interest.” The modern state has neither entirely removed religion from the public space nor has it expurgated it from politics, nor is it indifferent or neutral toward religions. The modern nation-state consistently manages, rethinks, redefines, and selectively incorporates or discards aspects of religion. The state's treatment of religion(s), however, takes place within the confines of a legal regime (that of secularism), and therefore the state's reinterpretation of religion is legally binding. If one overlooks Islamists’ intense religious idiom, one notices that both Islamist and non-Islamist states adopt similar strategies in their management of religions. The state, be it Islamist or nationalist, monopolizes religious interpretation. Such a monopolization is exerted by either ignoring or outright penalizing non-state actors’ interpretations of religion. State practices in Iran,⁵³ Egypt,⁵⁴ Saudi Arabia, and Turkey⁵⁵ In the last three decades provide us with ample evidence of this.

⁵¹ For the question of how nationalism might fit in Caliphate movement among the Muslims in South Asia, see Adeeb Khalid, “Pan-Islamism in Practice: The Rhetoric of Muslim Unity and Its Uses,” in *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. Elisabeth Özdalga (London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005).

⁵² Kemal H. Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State*, Studies in Middle Eastern History (Boston, MA: Brill, 2001), 257.

⁵³ The Iranian state’s constant pressure on various religious actors, chief among them *Shi’i Maraji’* (or Grand Ayatollahs), evidences this undeniable reality of the state's will to monopolize religious interpretation of religion.

Islamists reinterpret Islam and operate through the confines of the paradigm of nationalism. The impact of such paradigmatic requirements on religious thinking must not be taken lightly. If Islamists remain, as has been the case so far, incapable of rethinking the nation-state – as the “ideal type” of modern governing system – they would just be another hostage of what Billig astutely calls “banal nationalism.”⁵⁶ (Banal nationalism can be conceived as being an inadvertent endorsement and glorification of the nation-state. In other words, the nation-state is “taken for granted”). Whatever the Islamists’ motives may be in their engagement of modern politics is a secondary question. What is at issue here is the inseparability of the Islamists’ vision(s) of the political from that of other types of homo nationalis. As with other modes of modern thought, in Islamism, the boundaries of the state coincide with that of the nation. An Islamist is content with her legal and national “de-affiliation” or “delinking” from the rest of the “umma” of Islam.

The normalcy of such contentions is modern and nationalistic. If such a description is correct, then Islamists are neither living in a different universe nor imagining or advocating a way of life that could be situated outside the confines of the modern nation-state. For Islamists, as citizens, the acceptance of the national boundaries does not seem to constitute a dilemma. That is why Persian Shi‘i Muslims in Iran proudly made it a constitutional requirement for their president to be, among other things, an Iranian-born citizen and a Shi‘i with Iranian ancestry (Iraniul-asl).⁵⁷ Such a reality signifies that an Islamist ought to be considered a “homo nationalis” just like her Christian or Jewish counterparts. After all, in Balibar’s words, “the ‘external frontier of the state’ has to become ‘the internal frontier’” of the citizen,⁵⁸ as necessitated by the sheer fact of life within the nationalist paradigm.

As indicated earlier, Islamists are content with the nation-states’ boundaries. Generally, except for some rhetoric about the role of colonialism in imposing current geographic boundaries, there is no significant Islamist literature indicating that the internalization of the national boundaries may constitute a problem to Muslim religious devotion. The blithe endorsement of existing ethnonational boundaries and repeated nationalist utterances showcases this reality.⁵⁹ What needs to be emphasized here is that a Muslim, be she a traditionalist or

⁵⁴ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayed, and Nawal al-Saadawi’s stories exemplify the secular state’s treatment of undesirable interpretations of Islam.

⁵⁵ Perhaps the politics of veiling in Turkey more than anything else unveils the ‘secular’ state’s non-neutrality toward religion. Throughout the enduring debates regarding the headscarf in Turkey, the state unrestrainedly and always questioned the Islamic-ness of veiling. The state took one side of the debate, not because of its defense of secularism, but rather for its push to declare the veil un-Islamic. Turkish state overtly encouraged and supported pro-state Islamic scholars to question the religiosity of veiling.

⁵⁶ See Billig, 1996.

⁵⁷ See, Article 115 of The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, http://www.roshd.ir/Portals/0/KarAfarini/PDFs/rules/ghanoone_asasy.pdf. Last visited: 10/01/2016.

⁵⁸ Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class : Ambiguous Identities* (London England; New York: Verso, 1991), 95.

⁵⁹ With the exception of the Muslim Brotherhood and Ba‘th party in Iraq, no Arab state refers to the Arab region in Iran as occupied Arab land. In the Muslim Brotherhood’s political literature, this region is described as “occupied Arabistan” or *‘Arabstan al-muhtallah*. (The term *al-muhtallah* is usually used by the nationalist Arabs in their reference to Palestine.) See, <http://www.ikhwanwiki.com/index.php>. Last Visited: 10/01/ 2016. Of course, The Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikwan al-Muslimin*) has had a very complicated relationship with the Iranian regime over the past few decades. This example is cited to highlight how ethnic and religious boundaries can casually coincide in the <http://jrdsjournal.wixsite.com/humanities-cultural>

Islamist, will not necessarily see herself as irreligious when she internalizes the boundaries of the nation-state. Such individuals do not imagine themselves as being part of a community of the faithful torn apart by unwanted ethnonational frontiers.⁶⁰

The past few decades have offered Islamists the control of state power in some countries. This opportunity has provided, in a few cases, the potential to demonstrate an alternative to the nation-state. However, Islamism not only has not presented any alternative forms of governing; it has been manifestly incapable of showing any fundamental difference in modern modes of governance. For instance, while Islamists in power have attempted to make the laws of the nation more religious, they have exhibited an utter failure even to overcome the limitations put in place by the dominant ethnic groups within their national context. For example, the Iranian regime or the pro-Islamist Turkish government not only function respectively as a Persian or Turkish state, but they also remain inherently intolerant to political, cultural and linguistic representations of the ethnic Other.

When in power, Islamists reproduce conservative nationalist politics and policies in many ways. Nonetheless, despite their universalist religious and anti-Western slogans, the political stances of Islamists are profoundly nationalistic. Like any other nation-state, the foreign policy of Islamist states is determined by what is usually defined as the "national interest." For instance, both the Iranian regime and Arab Islamist groups have maintained different stances over many catastrophic issues, which have been informed by their regional politics rather than greater Islamic bonds. For example, the massacre of members of The Muslim Brotherhood and defenseless civilians in Hama⁶¹ did not reduce friendly relations between Iran and Syria; rather, it strengthened them. The genocidal wars in the Balkans and outright Russian support for Slobodan Milošević's regime in the 1990s did not induce any Iranian criticism of Russian foreign policy. Neither did China's violent repression of its Muslim population become

literature produced by Islamist groups. The embodied nationalism in these references becomes clearer when the (Sunni) Muslim Brotherhood's support for *Shi'i* Arabs in Iran is contrasted with their complete disregard to the fate of Kurdish *Sunni* majority.

Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) is seen as a possible anomaly and as a group immune to the influence of nationalism. However, there are a number of factors that show that the reverse is the case since: a) ISIL is inherently a Sunni Arab reaction to the developments that have been taking place in Iraq and Syria over the last decade. This is the reason why that former *ba'athi* officers constitute the backbone of ISIL military structure. 2) Its seemingly universalistic message should be seen as a recruitment only a tool for the recruitment of militants around the world rather than an ideological imperative. Before American air support to the Kurds in 2014, ISIL had avoided any operation outside Iraq and Levant. Outside groups like who have claimed to be part of ISIL, they have been inspired by its actions. They are not ISIL's organizational extensions. 3) Arabic language its official medium and has a central place in its self-perception, which proves it is the ethnic character. 4) Again, they don't see any non-Arab to be qualified to have the caliphal role.

⁶⁰ For an interesting discussion on the coincidence of religious and national frontiers see Philip W. Barker, *Religious Nationalism in Modern Europe: If God Be for Us*, Routledge Studies in Nationalism and Ethnicity (London; New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁶¹ The Hama massacre occurred in February 1982, when the Syrian Army under the orders of the country's president, Hafez al-Assad, conducted a scorched earth operation against the town. The current Syrian conflict and related alliances are the greatest manifestations of how Islamic groups and regimes are divided based on their nationalist tendencies and interest. It is interesting to see to Hezbollah, Iran and Bashar Assad's regime allied with Russian. Turkey stand is mostly determined by its intolerance to any Kurdish political gains and therefore sometimes it allies with Russia and other times with Saudi, Qatari, and the United States.

significant enough to receive any coverage by state media in Iran.⁶² When it comes to the Muslims, outside their national boundaries, these states either remain indifferent or address such issues in relation to the banal imperatives of their national interests.

The primary point is that Muslim understanding of Islam is in equal measure influenced by modern nationalism and the desire to control the state. The attempt here is not to accuse Islamists of lacking sincerity but to point out that they too have internalized the nation-state as the "ideal type." It is only in this context that one could make sense of Hassan al-Banna's statement when he utters that "if they mean by 'patriotism' to reinforce the bonds which unite individuals within a given country, and to show them a way of utilizing this reinforcement for their best interests, then we are also in agreement with them on this. For Islam regards this as a necessary religious duty...."⁶³

To regard patriotism as an Islamic duty in and of itself signifies the fusion of nationalism and Islamism in the reconstruction of modern Islamic thought. Perhaps even more significant is the unintended adaptation of modern ways of describing the nation by the likes of al-Banna, for it indicates that "Islamists" too embrace national identity. The degree of influence that nationalism had on Islamists such as al-Banna can be understood when his views are compared with that of Iqbal's—whose Others were non-Muslims.⁶⁴ Iqbal contends that "the feeling of patriotism which the national idea evokes, is a kind of deification of a material object, opposed to the essence of Islam which appears as a protest against all the subtle and coarse forms of idolatry."⁶⁵

Conclusion

National identity is a particular way of referencing or imagining one's nation. "To have a national identity," in the words of Billig, "is to possess ways of talking about nationhood."⁶⁶ To have ways of talking about nationhood is a modern phenomenon. As noted above, the modern

⁶² In 2009 Ibrahim Nabavi, the renowned Iranian satirist, unmasked the inconsistencies in Iranian state policies regarding Muslim affairs around the world. In a piece on the Iranian regime's salience against China's oppression of its Muslim minority, Nabavi wrote:

It is a religious obligation to defend Muslims in Germany, Italy [and the other parts of Western Europe]. Because they are the ones, who have fled Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria for their lives.... If those Muslims wish to die, they have to return to their countries.... The issue of Chinese Muslims is part of China's internal affairs. Because, for over a millennium Chinese Muslims have not left their homeland and they are only getting slaughtered in their state. Also, we cannot object to Russia massacring Muslims in Chechnya as we won't meddle in Russia's internal affairs. Those Muslims don't even live in Russia; they live in another country.... We unconditionally defend all assassinated Muslims after their migration to a Western European country like Germany.

<http://www.roozonline.com/persian/tanssatire/tans-satire-article/archive/2016/july/12/article/-bc1127ea53.html>. Last visited: 10/01/2016.

⁶³ Hassan al-Banna, "Our Message".

⁶⁴For an interesting book on Muslim nationalism in the early 20th century India, see Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁶⁵Muhammad Iqbal, *Stray Reflections* (Iqbal Academy, 1910), 35.

⁶⁶Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 8.

religious agent is also inclined to perceive the nation as a self-evident phenomenon; since the religious agent operates within the paradigm of modern nationalism, she tends to unite her religious consciousness with that of nationalism. Thus, since the paradigm of nationalism constitutes a context for rethinking religion, it influences and informs its re-interpretation. Ethnic background and nationalist/cultural contexts shape modern Muslim understanding of Islam. In many ways, religious interpretation in different Muslim communities' corresponds with their "imagined" national boundaries. Both traditional Muslims and Islamists take their existing nation-states as a given and redraw their religious boundaries and histories to fit in that of the nation's.

Islamism's obsession with the state power signifies Islamists' internalization of the national boundaries and the overall impact of nationalism the impact on Muslim political thought. When they come to power Islamists are forced to abandon much of their lofty, "universalistic" ideals as necessitated by the banal interest of the state. Modern Islamists take issues with certain laws and policies of the state rather with the modern nation-state itself. For Islamists, the nature of the modern the state is still un-thought as it is taken as a given. Islamists view the state, in its modern form, as the main agent for change and control to implement their more conservative politics and programs. Thus, modern Islamic revivalism, notwithstanding its various forms, is also exclusionary, local, and remains within the confines of the modern nation-state.

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