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## The Relationship Between Religion and Politics in the Middle East

*Odnos med religijo in politiko na Bližnjem vzhodu*

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to address the issues dealing with politics and religion in the Middle East, focusing on secularism vs. Islamism; the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and the Shia and Sunni split, as key themes for the purpose. Via analysis of the complexity of the Middle East, the Secular-Islamist Conflict, the Arab Spring and its outcomes, the article explains how the Arab Spring hardened the traditionally fluid relationship between the politics and Islam. It argues that Islam has never actually left the political realm, as there is still political contestation about the role of Islam in public life. The paper then deals with the complexity of the Shia and Sunni relationship and the split between the two, giving the explanation for such occurrences on the three levels – doctrine, legitimacy, and power.

**Keywords:** politics, religion, Middle East, secularism, Islamism, Arab Spring

**Izvleček:** Cilj tega članka je nasloviti izzive pri razumevanju religije in politike na Bližnjem vzhodu s poudarkom na dinamiki med sekularizmom in islamizmom, posledicah arabske pomladi ter razdeljenosti med šiiti in suniti kot ključnih temah. Skozi analizo kompleksnosti Bližnjega vzhoda, konflikta med sekularizmom in islamizmom ter arabske pomladi in njenih posledic članek pojasnjuje, kako je arabska pomlad utrdila odnos med politiko in islamom, ki je bil tradicionalno fluidnejši. V članku trdim, da islam v resnici nikoli ni zapustil politične sfere in da še vedno obstaja politično nestrinjanje glede vloge islama v javnem življenju. Nato članek obravnava kompleksnost odnosov med šiiti in suniti ter delitev med njimi, ki jih pojasnjuje na treh ravneh: v odnosu do doktrine, legitimacije ter moči.

**Ključne besede:** politika, vera, Bližnji vzhod, sekularizem, islamizem, arabska pomlad

### Introduction

The purpose of this overview is to present the broad issues central to the relationship between politics and religion in the Middle East. The complexity of these issues, as well as the vastness of the region under study, means that this work cannot do justice to the many studies already dealing with this subject, nor fully embrace its regional diversity. Rather than

trying to cover all of this, the following takes a birds-eye view and focuses on several key themes: secularism vs. Islamism; the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and finally, the Shia and Sunni split. Fundamental to all of these are questions of power.

Key to understanding the region is the interplay between power, religion, and secularism. Whilst the majority of the populace across the Middle East profess their faith as and practice Islam, secularism is (according to data published by the Arab Barometer in the Economist in 2017) on the rise (Economist 2017; Akyol 2019). In popular lexicon, an *Islamist* is a fundamentalist, an extremist. A more simplistic definition, as per the Cambridge definition, which we employ here, simply defines an Islamist as someone who has a strong belief that Islam should influence politics (*Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. »Islamist«).

The idea of political Islam is certainly not new. Over the years, the definition of what constitutes »political Islam« has been debated endlessly. It should be underlined that this is a term heavily contested and manipulated by far-right movements in Europe. We're settling for a basic outline: »...[A]ny interpretation of Islam that serves as a basis for political identity and action.« (Voll and Sonn 2019)

This can be refined to suit the contemporary situation however:

[T]he movements representing modern political mobilization in the name of Islam, a trend that emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Political Islam is a distinctive aspect of a broader 20<sup>th</sup>-century development [...] in which Muslims worldwide seek to strengthen their understanding of and commitment to their religion. (Voll and Sonn 2019)

## 1 The Middle East and the secular-Islamist conflict

Since the Middle East is a region which emerged from the confines of colonialism, many of the regimes that replaced the previous colonialists were strongly nationalistic, even leaning to the political left. They were rarely outright atheistic, however, rather maintaining a complex relationship with



their religious citizens, actively using religion to define their national communities. Kemal Ataturk, Gamal Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, Saddam Hussein, and Tunisia's Habib Bourghiba were all leaders of secular regimes, whilst current Tunisian president, Kais Saied, recently stated (during Ramadan, no less):

Islam is the religion of the people, not the religion of the state [...] We don't pray or fast because the first article of the constitution says so, but by divine commandment. The state is an entity that resembles a corporation; its religion has no significance. Our relationship is with Allah, not with those that claim to be the sole institution responsible for worshipping God. (Bar'el 2022)

Broadly speaking then, Islamists are those who seek to see increased presence of Islam in the political sphere, whilst secularists are those who range from atheists to those who still believe, but have no wish to see Islam 'entering' the political space. The question for contemporary regimes is how to profit from this divide and maintain power.

Political leaders across the Middle East are themselves often more secular or pragmatic than they are religious, so often the conflict has been between the state themselves and the Islamist organizations. States have often limited Islamic organizations' freedom of action, as in Egypt, Algeria and Morocco, through heavy restrictions on religious discourse, appointment of imams, administration of mosques and religious education to avoid dissenting voices, as in Tunisia. It hasn't always been a one-way street however. The sheer weight of the general populace's love for and adherence to their faith meant that more often than not, compromises had to be reached.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has found the Middle East younger and more educated than ever, with over two-thirds of region's population under the age of 35 (Bjerde 2020) and ready for change. Amidst the younger faithful, there are large groups of Muslims who consider Islamist ideology to be excessively dogmatic and its organizational structures too rigid. Many choose to practice religion outside the oversight of the official religious establishment, thus undermining the authority of these institutions, which have a long tradition of making deals with the regimes, challenging their authority too.



Nowhere is this more evident than in the rise of the Gulf States, led by what a recent *Economist* article defined as »Secular Despots« (The Economist 2017; Dabashi 2017). Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh are not regular urban centres but are rather at the core of an experiment that seeks to build a global national identity – away from the structures of religion.

Central to this drive towards what is perceived as a more secular, however not more liberal or more democratic Middle East, are the so-called religious reforms taking place across Saudi Arabia. Mohammed bin Salman's (MbS) forceful drive for modernization represents one of the strategies through which he seeks to centralize power under his sole authority. His elimination of alternative centres of power and authority encompasses the entire country.

The strategic weight of the Arab state system now rests in the Gulf. Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, and Doha are the capitals in control of Arab politics – and their outlook is far more (but not completely) secular than of those who came before (Azami 2021).

## **2 The Arab Spring: The failure of political Islam?**

The Arab Spring of 2011 grew out of the decades-long complex interplay between secularists and Islamists. The failure of these regimes awoke a general desire for something different: Islamist government. However, the effects of the Arab Spring have outlasted the Islamists it promoted. What remains is an increasingly divided Middle East as the Arab Spring provided physical, ontological and epistemological challenges that have yet to be resolved.

The rise of »political Islam« began in response to the crushing military defeats inflicted on the Arab countries by Israeli forces in 1967. These defeats marked the start of an Islamic revival, the ideological roots of which began with the formation of Islamist groups, the most important of whom were the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), created by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt in 1928. The movement's rapid growth and popular appeal was, due to its presentation of Islam as a complete system that offered an alternative to the westernization, secularization and materialism



that now threatened Muslim societies, led by increasingly sclerotic and corrupt elites (Sinanović 2012). The MB extended beyond Egypt and formed an expanding number of religious, welfare and educational institutions and facilities, laying the foundation of a large network that sustained the MB through difficult years of brutal suppression by successive regimes, through to 2011. The Arab Spring of 2011 however, saw it emerge from the political penumbra to take the centre stage.

On December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a street-vendor self-immolated as a protest against police harassment. This sparked off a chain of revolutionary events that saw the old, entrenched political orders across the Arab world, characterized by their corruption and poor governance, crumble dramatically and violently. A new order emerged. The results of the 2011 (relatively) free elections confirmed that in the Arab world, there was strong public support for political Islam.

Political Islam and its leading Islamists had already seen periods in power in Sudan in 1989, Algeria in 1990, Egypt in 2005, and the Palestinian territories in 2006. In 2011 however, there was a radical desire for something new. New Islamist parties emerged, and those already extant, consolidated their positions. In Tunisia, in 2011, Ennahda won the greatest plurality of parliamentary seats. That same year, in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and several Salafist parties together accounted for two-thirds of the Legislative Assembly. In Morocco, the victory of the Justice and Development Party in the 2011 elections led to the appointment of the country's first Islamist prime minister. In Jordan and Morocco, Islamist political actors gained new levels of importance. This growth suddenly meant Islamist parties could reign, reversing their previous stance of »participation, not domination« which they had long used to assure rivals and regimes that they simply wanted a seat at the table, but not to establish theocratic orders.

Islamists were now benefiting from their former exclusion and/or persecution by ousted leaders, as the political search for strong alternatives to the old regimes encouraged people to support faith-based parties. In the public imagination, religion became the trademark of movements that challenged authoritarian rulers. These religious groups' defiant stance brought them popularity that was further augmented by their charity and



social work, evidence that religious movements were best able to provide relief for social and economic ills.

This image – combined with access to foreign funds – gave the Islamists an advantage in the ensuing elections. Meanwhile, liberal and secular parties lost ground for not opposing the former leaders strongly enough, and they too were embroiled in corruption and political intrigue.

But as quickly as they rose, the Islamist parties fell. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood formed a political party – and won a parliamentary plurality and then the presidency. This last achievement was radically reversed. Additional friction between the Islamist and non-Islamist factors was also visible in the constitution-making process. (Jermanová 2020) Between 2012 and 2013, the government collapsed after a military coup. This pattern extended across the region, and the revolutions driving the Arab Spring petered out. What has remained is violence and instability. In a recent *Washington Post* article, one Esraa Eltaweel, 28, partially paralyzed after a bullet fired by security forces sliced through her abdomen and chipped her spine during a protest in Cairo in 2014 claimed: »We didn't achieve anything we aimed for. Things got worse [...] We believed we could change the system. But it is so rotten that it can't be changed.« (Sly 2021)

What is the relationship between politics and Islam in the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring? From Turkey to Morocco, using religion in the service of the nation-state has brought familiar complications, as most Islamists simply mimicked their predecessors, the secularist bourgeoisie, rather than bringing a deeper, epistemological revolution. The Turkish experience under Erdogan's Justice and Development Party is a good example. The party's social justice slogan never materialized in a form of Islam sensitivity to environmental justice issues or workers' rights; instead, it has become a right-wing populism with a new oligarchic elite of its own. (Öztürk and Baser 2022)

The results of the Arab Spring have been felt much more deeply by those outside the sphere of politics. A recent Council on Foreign Relations report noted that the Arab Spring brought about a worsening in democratic progress, standards of living and internet and press freedom; youth unemployment; corruption, and especially in displacement. The only



positive impact, according to the report, was in the freedom of women. (Robinson and Merrow 2020)

The impact the Arab Spring has had on the relationship between religion and politics in the Middle East has been to harden what has always been a traditionally fluid relationship. Islam has hardly left the political realm, however. While Islamist parties and electoral politics experienced a general regional collapse, there is still political contestation about the role of Islam in public life. This contestation does not take the form of electoral competition, but has rather moved into different realms, some of them clearly defined and others amorphous, but none of them irrelevant.

### **3 The Shia – Sunni struggle**

In stark contrast to the more liberal, modernizing approach of the Gulf states, Iran, the world's most powerful Shia state, remains a firmly Islamist theocracy (with democratic elements, it must be noted). Politically, Iran's adherence to the Shia branch of Islam has often set it at odds with its Sunni neighbours, especially since the region was divided by colonialists.

From the very beginning, three things have characterized the split between Shiite and Sunni Muslims: doctrine, legitimacy, and power. All are connected. Doctrine confers legitimacy, legitimacy confers power, religious and political (though this split might seem artificial). In the political struggles that have often marred the region, that order has been reversed.

Before examining the role this issue plays in the relationship between religion and politics, it is important to remember that large Shia populations are found in many countries other than Iran, where they, for the most part, have lived peacefully alongside their Sunni co-religionists. In Iraq and Bahrain, they constitute a majority, in Lebanon a plurality, whilst in Syria, Bashar Al-Assad draws his support from the ruling Alawite clan, who practice a heterodox form of Shia Islam. Shi'ites are present in many other countries as sizeable minorities.

What makes the relationship between the two sects pertinent, is once again their relationship to regional politics, and by politics we mean power.



For example, while Iran aims to protect the Shi'a faith around the world, it ultimately benefits socioeconomically as long as it maintains the role as a quasi-beacon or a leader for Shi'a Muslims. In turn, the same can be said for Saudi Arabia, which serves as the leading Sunni majority state. With Iran and Saudi Arabia currently conducting proxy wars in places like Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria, relations between the two are solely indirect. The more prominent and current case of the three is that of Yemen, where the Iranians support the Houthi Shi'a rebels, and the Saudis the fractured Yemeni governance. Yemen serves as a contemporary, ongoing example of the political rivalry that has been incorrectly deemed religious sectarianism, for it serves as more of a battleground for regional supremacy. Having used the essence of religion in order to mask political agendas, both states are left in a zero-sum game.

Political hegemony and the extension of the Saudi or Iranian sphere of influence in the Middle East takes priority in each country's respective foreign policies. Shi'a and Sunni leaders see political potential in exploiting this divide, willing to take advantage of anxieties on the ground to defend their rule and protect their interests. There is no true effort amongst leaders to close the divide, heal the wounds, and put forth a shared vision of an inclusive future, as the aforementioned history suggests. (Nasr 2006; Mabon 2013)

## Conclusion

The three issues laid out in the introduction which are key to understanding the relationship between politics and religion in the Middle East, are, more deeply, concerned with merely one issue: power.

The push and pull between secularism (and/or modernism) and Islamists advocating the establishment of a political Islam has been inherently concerned, especially since 2011, with access to power. As indicated, the region's political leadership have sought to exploit societal cleavages, pitting secular citizens against more religious ones. More often than not, these political elites, with all the economic and power-related privileges that came with their status, were far from conservatively religious themselves. Pulling in the opposite direction, towards the establishment of an Islamic



polity, were the region's Islamists who finally thought their moment had come in 2011/2012. Following decades of oppression and poverty, protesters and voters chose the Islamists, who were, by and large, unprepared for power, politically inexperienced and facing relatively intact state apparatuses that had traditionally served the previous masters. Whilst this generation of Islamists might have failed, it would be a mistake to say their ideals are no longer relevant or wanted. In the meantime, however, more secular leaderships seem to have returned to power, and Islamist groups are once again, marginalized.

Alongside this, the political aims of the respective Sunni and Shi'ite groups, led by the regional forces, Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively, were based on the cleft between the two sects, providing them with weapons. These political aims are currently being realized via proxy wars – and thousands have died as a result.

Balancing the relationship between secularists, Islamists and power is precisely that, an ongoing balancing act without any permanent solution. In 2011, the balance tipped briefly in favour of the Islamists, but that experiment was short-lived. Nor does the ongoing conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran have any end in sight. The relationship between politics (power) and religion will continue to be fluid, characterized by expediency and pragmatism more often than faith. We should not be surprised if, at some point, the secularist drive collapses and the pendulum of power and popular sentiment swings back towards Islamism. The harder the secularists push, the greater the reaction will be.



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