Political Instrumentalization of Islam and the Risk of Obscurantist Deadlock

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Summary. — The empirical literature has established a strong link between being a Muslim country and indicators of political performance and democracy. The idea of the “clash of civilizations” put forward by Samuel Huntington and applied to Islam by Bernard Lewis and others points to unique aspects of the Islamic religion and culture that make the advent of democracy especially difficult. In this paper, I show that there is a systematic misconception about the true nature of the relationship between Islam and politics: far from being fused into the religious realm, politics tends to dominate religion. Because of some characteristics, namely the lack of a centralized religious authority structure and the great variability of interpretations of the Islamic law, there is a risk of an “obscurantist deadlock” in the form of a vicious process whereby both the religious and political elites try to outbid each other by using the religious idiom. This risk looms particularly large in crisis situations accentuated by international factors such as witnessed during the second half of the 20th century. From a short comparative analysis, it is however hard to conclude that unique aspects of the Islamic faith are ultimately responsible for the persistent autocratic feature of Muslim polities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

(a) A rapid overview of the quantitative literature

Cross-country regressions that attempt to explain differences in economic growth and political performances among countries of the world have become a familiar exploration tool to investigate the influence of particular factors, such as physical and human capital, institutions, abundance of natural resources, initial conditions. The role of religion has also been explored in this manner, and since the Muslim world has recently attracted much attention due to the widespread influence of radical Islamist movements, the disproportionate representation of Islam in religious civil wars from 1940 to 2000 (Duffy Toft, 2007, pp. 97, 98), and the perceived state of crisis in many of its parts, the possible adverse effects of Islam on economic and political achievements have been under particular scrutiny. The central lessons from these efforts can be summarized as follows.

To begin with, no clear conclusion emerges from the study of the impact of Islam on economic growth and development. For example, LaPorta, Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer, and Vishny (1997) found that countries in which allegedly more dominant hierarchical religions (Catholicism, Christianity, and Islam clubbed together) dominate are less efficient in terms of a number of political and economic indicators (pp. 336, 337). Barro and McCleary (2003) only partly agree since they found that Hinduism, Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Protestantism are negatively associated with per capita income growth relative to Catholicism. As for Sala-i-Martin, Doppelhofer, and Miller (2004), who use a larger sample, they propose a diametrically opposite result in the sense that Islam now appears as a positive rather than a negative factor for growth.

This is confirmed by Noland (2005, 2008) for whom the notion that Islam is inimical to growth is not supported by his data. If anything, the effect is positive rather than negative (at least when the sample consists only of developing countries). As for Pryor (2006), he reaches the conclusion that no special Islamic economic system can be isolated on the basis of a cluster analysis and data on 44 economic institutions used to define economic systems. Moreover, the share of Muslims in the population is unrelated to the presence or absence of most particular economic institutions and, when the sample is limited to developing countries from which Muslim countries that are too small or too rich (from oil resources) are excluded, it does not explain variations in economic growth performances.

The influence of Islam seems to be much clearer on politics than on economics. Indeed, the available evidence converges to suggest that Islam is negatively related to political performance as measured by some index of democracy. Thus, whether democracy is measured by the Polity IV index, 1 the index of Liberal Democracy, 2 or the Freedom House index, 3 it appears to be significantly less developed in Muslim-dominated countries. It bears emphasis that scores of democracy are not only lower in Muslim than in non-Muslim countries, but also in Arab than in non-Arab countries.

Thus, the so-called MENA Development Report of the World Bank focuses on comparisons between the Middle East...
and North Africa (MENA) region and other regions of the world. A salient conclusion emerging from the 2003 Report is that there exists a significant governance gap between MENA and the rest of the world, meaning that countries belonging to the former region display consistently lower levels of governance quality than would be expected for their incomes. Driving this governance gap are comparatively low scores in the area of public accountability how well citizens can access government information and hold their political leaders accountable rather than in the area of quality of public administration the efficiency of the bureaucracy, the strength of the rule of law and protection of property rights, and the control of corruption and quality of regulations. In other words, all countries belonging to MENA, whatever their income, score well below the world trend with respect to external accountabilities and access to basic political and civil rights. While some of these countries are institutionalized autocracies, others are one-party systems and those which are parliamentary democracies are generally subject to various restrictions, foremost among which is the restriction of press freedom (World Bank, 2003, chap. 1).

Among the reasons mentioned to explain the governance deficit of MENA countries, if we except cultural/historical factors to which I shall return below, oil wealth (which gives rise to the “resource curse”), geopolitics (foreign powers have generally found it convenient to work with authoritarian regimes, especially in countries possessing critical mineral resources), and interstate conflicts (which tend to concentrate power in the hands of the executive, and encourage coercive organizations) stand foremost. Regarding the latter two factors, it is striking that military spending represents a much larger proportion of Gross Domestic Product in MENA (about 6%) than in any other region of the world (about 2% in all developing countries or in all developed countries) (World Bank, 2003, pp. 65–71). Moreover, scores of democracy are lower when Arab countries have been involved in a regional conflict (El Badawi and Makdisi, 2007). Oil wealth, however, cannot provide a complete explanation of the democratic deficit in Arab countries. Indeed, scores of democracy appear to be lower in Arab oil-rich countries than in non-Arab oil-rich countries and lower in Arab oil-poor countries than in non-Arab oil-poor countries (see Weifen, 2008). On the other hand, within the MENA region no clear relationship emerges between conflict or the threat of it and the weakness of political contestability (World Bank, 2003, p. 68).

Cross-section studies of the determinants of the Arab governance deficit are fraught with serious empirical problems. First, there is the tricky problem of measuring and aggregating religious affiliations. For example, do we need to distinguish between Sunni and Shia Islam, and if yes do we need to identify all different sects within Sunnism or Shi’ism? Second, strong multilineararity exists between Islamic faith, Arab identity, and regional conflicts. This feature makes it hard to disentangle the respective contributions of each of these factors to the dismal political performances of Muslim countries, particularly in terms of political participation, inclusiveness and accountability. For example, possession of oil wealth and Islamic cultural influence have been shown not only to yield separate (negative) effects on democracy scores, but also to give rise to a significant additional (negative) effect when mutually interacted, thus suggesting a reinforcing mechanism (Weifen, 2008). But what is exactly meant by Islamic cultural influence, and is it Islam or Arab identity that matters?

Assuming that we could adequately measure religious affiliation so that it provides information about the precise norms that drive people’s behavior rather than being a generic indicator of the faith into which they were born, the problem of endogeneity of religious beliefs would immediately arise as a third sort of methodological problems. As a matter of fact, the way in which people interpret the religion into which they have been born may itself be influenced by the political and economic environment. If most econometric studies are immunized against the endogeneity bias, it is because they measure religion in a rather unsatisfactory manner, often as the proportion of Muslims (a generic, dichotomous category) in the population. In other words, an awkward dilemma arises since it seems very hard to overcome all the methodological problems simultaneously.

(b) The thesis of the “clash of civilizations”

Partly because of these problems, it is not surprising that existing econometric studies suffer from a striking lack of soundly elaborated explanations of the Arab (or Muslim) governance deficit, in the sense of explanations that go sufficiently deep into the causal mechanisms behind the effects uncovered. An exception, however, concerns the cultural/historical argument that rests upon the idea of a “clash of civilizations,” a doctrine that assumes that each civilizational group has a number of key features and values projected and protected by the core states of that group (Allawi, 2009, p. 144). According to this view, Islam is a retrograde civilization incompatible with the requirements of modern growth and development in general, and with participatory forms of governance, in particular (Huntington, 1993, pp. 22–49, 1996; Hudson, 1995). This line of argument has been most elaborately pursued by Bernard Lewis in his recent book entitled What Went Wrong? (2002). The central point is that unlike in Christianity, the separation between politics and religion, God and Caesar, Church and State, spiritual and temporal authority, has never really occurred in the Islamic world. To the Western perception of the separation of religion from political life and the assertion of individual rights, the Muslims oppose an all-encompassing view of the divine law that implies the amalgamation of religion and politics and the recognition of collective rights for all the Muslim faithful (see chap. 5, in particular). As a consequence, individual freedom, social pluralism, civil society, and representative government, were prevented from evolving in Muslim societies. Since obedience to religious tenets is inherent in Islamic religious doctrine, “Islam and democracy are antithetical” (Lewis, 1993, p. 91; see also Duffy Toft, 2007, p. 109; Lewis, 1996; Stark, 2005; Woods, 2005).

The reason behind the lack of separation between the religious and the political spheres in the Muslim world is historical: the Prophet Muhammed became the political leader of his own city (Medina), causing a complete merging of religion and politics and suppressing any move toward building a religious establishment. Unlike the Christians, Muslims had no need to isolate the religious sphere from the political one: in contrast to Christianity which rose within the Roman Empire, Muhammad was born in a context where he had to construct a political, economic and social order. As cogently put by Lewis (2002): “Since the state was Islamic, and was indeed created as an instrument of Islam by its founder, there was no need for any separate religious institution. The state was the church, the church was the state, and God was head of both, with the Prophet as his representative on earth... From the beginning, Christians were taught, both by precept and practice, to distinguish between God and Caesar and between the different duties owed to each of the two. Muslims received no such instruction” (pp. 113, 115).
The same historical logic implies that there is no room for a laity in the lands of Islam:

“The idea that any group of persons, any kind of activities, any part of human life is in any sense outside the scope of religious law and jurisdiction is alien to Muslim thought. There is, for example, no distinction between canon law and civil law, between the law of the church and the law of the state, crucial in Christian history. There is only a single law, the sharia, accepted by Muslims as of divine origin and regulating all aspects of human life: civil, commercial, criminal, constitutional, as well as matters more specifically concerned with religion in the limited, Christian sense of the word... One may even say that there is no orthodoxy and heresy, if one understands these terms in the Christian sense, as correct or incorrect belief defined as such by duly constituted religious authority... Even the major division within Islam, between Sunnis and Shia, arose over an historical conflict about the political leadership of the community, not over any question of doctrine” (Lewis, 2002, pp. 111, 112).

To sum up, Islam has been born in historical circumstances that radically differ from those surrounding the birth of Christianity, but evoke the origin of Judaism (Greif, 2006, p. 206; see also Lilla, 2007, p. 318). Because it emerged within the Roman Empire which had a unified code of law and a rather effective legal system, Christianity did not have to provide a code of law governing everyday life in creating communities of believers. By contrast, Islam (like Judaism) is a religion that regulates its adherents’ behavior in their everyday, economic, political, and social life.

(c) Alternative view

The aim of the present contribution is to question the above view that in the case of Islam religion appears as largely responsible for lack of development of a modern polity. This is done by embarking upon a detailed historical investigation of the relationship between society and politics in Muslim countries. The reasoned analysis of relevant historical events and historians’ works that is proposed is thus conceived as a complementary effort to the many econometric estimates that have been so much in vogue recently.

The central idea advanced in the paper is the following: the notion of fusion between state and religion in Islam is misleading insofar as it conceals from sight the crucial fact that politics has generally dominated religion in Muslim countries, thus preventing anything resembling theocratic states from being established. During periods of state failure, however, Islam has come into prominence either because it helps fill a dangerous power vacuum, or because it is instrumentalized by political rulers eager to legitimize an oppressive regime. The latter finding is not surprising since, as has been emphasized in a large body of literature produced mainly by sociologists and political scientists, it is common to any ideology/belief that it can be manipulated and used as an instrument to garner popular support.

This said, some characteristics of Islam give rise to a particularly nasty problem insofar as its decentralized mode of functioning (unlike in Catholicism but rather like in Protestantism, especially American Protestantism) may create a risk of “obscurantist deadlock.” This is because when despots use religion to legitimize themselves in a highly contested environment they may provoke a counter-move in the form of a religious backlash in which the ruler and his opponents compete to demonstrate their superior fidelity to the faith. The triggering process may be the opposite of the above if the ruler has closed down all possibilities for the people to express their grievances so that political opposition can only be articulated through sacred places using the idioms of religion. One obvious tactical response that the ruler can then employ to deflect criticisms is by presenting himself as a better guardian of the faith than his religious opponents. A sort of internal war based on “religious outbidding” ensues. This second scenario is more plausible if the ruler has decided to himself encourage the rise of religious movements in order to counter secular, left-wing political forces.

It is moreover argued that special circumstances that have a cumulative effect can explain both why instrumentalization of religion has become particularly salient in recent times in Muslim countries, and why the risk of religious outbidding has increased as a consequence. Interestingly, reforms toward more participatory forms of governance in MENA have stalled irrespective of the type of government regime monarchicaly or sultanates (Jordan, Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia), socialist (Syria and Iraq), Islamic (Iran), secular or nationalist (Algeria and Tunisia) and irrespective of whether they are single or multiparty systems (Lust-Okar & Jamal, 2002; World Bank, 2003, pp. 204, 205).

The outline of the paper is as follows. In Sections 2 and 3, the mechanisms of political instrumentalization of Islam are amply illustrated with the help of examples taken from all over the Muslim world. While in Section 2 the focus is on situations of state crises arising from weak, ineffective, and corrupt governments, in Section 3 attention is shifted to crises caused by the excesses of tyrannical, oppressive states. Section 4 and 5 are devoted to highlighting the doctrinal and circumstantial reasons as to why instrumentalization of religion has become more salient in many Muslim countries in recent times. In Section 4, the dominant politico-religious model that prevailed in the lands of Islam since the times of its foundation is characterized in the light of historical evidence and the Islamic doctrine that evolved over the centuries regarding the relationship between politics and religion. In Section 5, the role of the international environment and the largely contingent nature of some decisive historical factors, including the role of oil abundance in the Arabian peninsula, are brought into the picture with a view to gaining a better understanding of the forces behind the rising strength of Islamic fundamentalism during the second part of the 20th century. Section 6 is a substantial section that summarizes the results and, taking a comparative perspective, attempts to draw broad lessons suggesting that there is nothing really unique to Islam that condemns it to political authoritarianism.

2. The Rise of Religion in Times of State Crisis: The Case of Weak States

It is when the state falls into a state of prolonged crisis that religion tends to rise into prominence in Muslim countries. Two forms of state crises need to be distinguished that correspond to the polar circumstances of lawlessness and unrestrained despotism: (i) a political vacuum created by weak central power (fragile state), and (ii) an oppressive rule characterized by tyranny, ineffectiveness, and corruption of the political elite (despotic state). Under the first form, religious authorities and groups are tempted to play an active role in politics, and to assert themselves as the most effective shield against the vicissitudes of power. These authorities are then better described as “reacting to events, not directing them” (Roy, 1990, p. 50). Under the second form, the ruler whose regime is openly contested may find it convenient to instrumentalize Islam, thereby causing a risk of religious outbidding. When religious forces are engaged in political opposition, state manipulation of Islam may be a reaction to the use of religion by political opponents. Whichever is the detonator, the state
or political opposition, a cumulative process is set into motion that may eventually lead to an obscurantist deadlock. The first type of situation is illustrated in this section while the second type is the object of the next section.

In periods of power vacuum, contesting political factions vie for political power causing a state of anarchy and lawlessness under which people endure many hardships. Religious figureheads are then tempted to come out of their seclusion in order to substitute for missing central power or to help people in distress. Two illustrations are provided below, one taken from Egypt, and the other, more lengthily elaborated, from modern Iran.

Toward the end of the 18th century, the Ottoman rule in Egypt had become extraordinarily chaotic. The French conquest (1798) had shown that the Mamluks were now unable to defend the country against a foreign invasion, which was the only reason why the Egyptians put up with their continuous exactions. The Ottoman sultan responded to the crisis by aligning himself with the British forces and re-occupying the country. However, the governors appointed by the Ottomans were “rampacious, incapable, and they had little authority over their own soldiers” who treated the land as though it were conquered territory to be sucked and looted at will (Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007, p. 62). Military factions and regiments, based on ethnicity, fought with each other for power, and one governor was assassinated after another. The situation became particularly desperate when Syrian soldiers known as the Dellihs, or madmen, were imported by the Ottoman governor with a view to controlling his undisciplined army. These soldiers behaved even worse than anything the Egyptians had seen before. In desperation, the country’s ulema (jurists-cum-theologians) looked for a providential man able to restore law and order.

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They found him in Muhammad Ali (Mehmed Ali Pasha), who was the commander-in-chief of the Albanian (mercenary) regiment of the Ottoman army: “They asked him to become governor of Egypt, according to the will of the people, so long as he undertook to govern in accordance with their advice, and abide by their norms, that is, that he would agree to rule in consultation with the ulema” (p. 63). He accepted their proposal, which was also ratified by the Ottoman sultan, and he became governor of Egypt in 1805, a position which he was going to keep till 1848. Muhammad Ali immediately embarked upon establishing a centralized authority that brought back law and order, thereby reviving trade and commerce. His whole effort was aimed at modernizing the country (including the army) so as to make it a stable, independent, and prosperous political entity (pp. 65–97; see also Finkel, 2005, pp. 411, 427, 428).

The case of Iran deserves special attention in the light of the comparatively large influence exerted by the religious authorities in modern times and up to the present day. The Safavids largely succeeded in making religion subservient to their own ends, and in building a strong and centralized state that created political stability and economic prosperity in a country where a large part of the population was made of nomadic tribes equipped with powerful militia. Success was reflected in the splendors of Isfahan, designated as the new imperial capital by Shah Abbas (1598) whose reign marked the apogee of the Safavid state. Abbas managed to control the unruly Qizilbash leaders (who helped him conquer the country) by building up a standing royal army directly financed by the shah and directly responsible to him. The Safavid state could also rely on the strong support of an organized ulema bureaucracy which was committed to the regime. It directly organized or controlled Muslim judicial, educational, and social functions, thus transforming Muslim associations into “virtual departments of the state” (Lapidus, 1988, p. 88).

The collapse of the Safavids at the hands of a rebellious Afghan chieftain (1722) occurred in a context of an incipient economic decline caused by the increasing bypassing of Iran as a trade route following the development of overseas trade by Europeans (Cleveland, 2004, pp. 51–55, 109–116). There followed a long period of chaos dominated by warfare between contending tribal confederations and weak, short-lived states until the Qajar dynasty was eventually consolidated (1794) to remain (nominally) in power until the 1920s. The Qajars, however, never succeeded in recreating a strong centralized state as epitomized by the royal absolutism or the bureaucratic centralism of the Safavids (p. 55). In actuality, powerful centrifugal forces had taken root in Iran during almost the whole eighteenth century, and the Qajar shahs were never able to mobilize sufficient resources to bring them under control. Administrative instability, insecurity and low legitimacy resulting from widespread corruption and little concern for the people’s welfare were the hallmarks of most of their rule.

From an early stage in the development of Shi’ism, reverence for the imams had been particularly great, tending to turn them into more than human figures, visible manifestations of the spirit of God (Hourani, 1991, p. 184). What is noteworthy in the case of Iran, however, is that the Shi’a religious establishment rose into prominence during the chaotic times following the demise of the Safavids. Indeed, the ulema began to function independently of the government and, backed by a population which granted them extensive authority in religious and legal matters, they constituted a powerful force of support of, or opposition to, the policies of the shahs. Popular belief held that the rulings of mujtahids (learned individuals qualified to exercise jihād to give new interpretations of law and doctrine in response to new questions) were more authoritative statements of the will of the Hidden Imam than the proclamations of the shahs who made no claims to divinity (Cleveland, 2004, p. 111; Keddie, 2003, p. 28).

An intense debate took place between the Akhbari and Usuli schools regarding their precise role in society, a debate reminiscent of the opposition between Catholics and Protestants in Europe at the time of the Reformation. For adherents of the former (including some of the ulema), who wanted to lessen the ulema’s role, each Muslim believer could rely on, and interpret, the Traditions of the Prophet and imams, so that ulema were not needed to interpret religious tenets. For adherents of the latter, on the contrary, ordinary believers were not competent to interpret the foundations (usul) of the faith and, therefore, they needed to be guided by mujtahids, who were less fallible than any temporal ruler. In the course of the 18th century, the Usuli school won a decisive victory over the Akhbari school, thus laying the ground for awarding mujtahids far more power than that granted to Sunni ulema in other parts of the Muslim world. Even more importantly, “there was now a clear doctrinal basis for appeals to the ulema over the head of a ruler, and for claims by the leading mujtahids to make political decisions, provided they touched on Islamic principles, independently of temporal rulers” (Keddie, 2003, p. 20). These powers were increasingly used from the early 19th century on.

It therefore appears that the special importance of the clergy in Iran cannot be entirely or mainly attributed to the Shi’a character of Iranian Islam. The difference between Shi’ism and Sunnism appears to have developed over recent times, and “many points often made about Shi’ism are really only, or mainly, true during the past century or two” (Keddie, 2003, p. 4). It is thus useful to look into some key events that...
have shaped the historical trajectory of Iran during these recent times. As hinted at above, the rise into prominence of the clerics in the post-Safavid era must be understood against the background of the weakness of central power, its inclination to surrender to the pressures of foreign economic exploitation, severe injustices and the intense corruption of the royal court, the bureaucracy, and the judicial system. When the Qajars attempted to bring reforms, these reached only a small elite but did not touch the mass of the population (Lapidus, 1988, p. 575). A long tradition took roots in which socioeconomic and cultural grievances tend to be “expressed in the only way familiar to most people,—a religious idiom arraying the forces of good against the forces of evil and promising to bring justice to the oppressed” (Keddie, 2003, p. 3).

Especially worth stressing is the role played by several unfortunate acts of foreign economic policy, which gave the ulama the opportunity to act as effective leaders of the opposition against an unpopular regime. The first event came in 1872 when the reformist government of Mirza Hosain Khan granted to a British baron, Julius De Reuter, an extensive concession involving exclusive rights for an impressive array of economic activities. Lord Curzon called it “the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that had probably ever been dreamed of” (cited from Keddie, 2003, p. 54). This concession was granted in return of a modest royalty, but the prime minister Khan personally profited from it. Following protests by a mixed group of patriotic officials, ulama, and economic agents hurt by Khan’s reforms, the shah felt eventually compelled to annul the Reuter concession and to dismiss his prime minister. Nevertheless, a new series of economic concessions of a similar kind were soon to follow, testifying that Iran continued to fall prey to British and Russian interests. Since they brought only small returns to the government, while bribes to the shah and officials to promote them were quite large, tensions between the state and society remained high.

From 1890 onwards, an important change occurred in the formation of political opposition to the shah. Whereas before most secularist reformists, typically educated people influenced by Western ideas, had been rather hostile to the ulama—which contrasts with the traditionally close ties between ulama and the bazaar classes,—they started to reconcile with the clergies willing to fight against the regime’s policies, particularly against the sale of Iran’s resources to foreigners. The opportunity was again created by an important economic concession to foreign interests considered to be a sell-out of the country’s resources. In 1890, indeed, the corrupt and inefficient government of Nasir al-Din awarded a British capitalist (G.F. Talbot) the exclusive right to produce, sell and export the country’s entire tobacco crop. Since tobacco was such a vital commodity in the economy, this decision immediately aroused tumultuous mass protests (Keddie, 1966, pp. 59, 60; Lapidus, 1988; Rodison, 1966, p. 166, pp. 576, 577).

The first major protest flared up in Shiraz and the revolutionary movement, known as the Tobacco Protest, spread like wild fire to Tabriz, Mashhad, Isfaham, Tehran, and elsewhere. These popular demonstrations were organized by members of the Shi’a ulama who “urged the population to join them in preserving the dignity of Islam in the face of growing foreign influences; they portrayed the shah’s concession as a transgression of the laws of Islam and used their independent power base to denounce the government” (Cleveland, 2004, p. 115). In December 1891, a mujahid from Shiraz issued a fatwa declaring tobacco consumption as an impious act that will be considered as unlawful till the cancellation of the concession. The Iranian people responded by boycotting all tobacco products forcing the government to cancel the whole concession in early 1892. Considerably weakened by this event, it completely reversed its policy and became openly hostile to contact with the West.

This was a significant moment in modern Iran’s history not only because the movement was the first successful mass protest against government policy, but also because it rested on the coordinated actions of ulama, secular or modernist reformers, bazaaris (especially merchants), and ordinary townspeople. The proof had been made that a religious authority could use its power of interpretation (ijtihad) to confront a government’s economic policy, and to the class of the ulama, it had become clear that “the Iranian people were receptive to calls for political activity based on Islamic frames of reference” (Cleveland, 2004, p. 115). As attested by later events, what Keddie (2003) calls “the religious-radical alliance” had shown its potential for changing the course of Iranian policy (pp. 61, 62).

On the occasion of bastinado punishments meted out by the shah to two sugar merchants (December 1905), the bazaar, and soon the whole city of Tehran, closed down expressing unrest and dissatisfaction with the Qajar government that had been growing for years. Many merchants and mullahs took sanctuary in nearby shrines and refused to return until the shah met their demands for some voice in the government. The shah eventually gave in after a month of stalemate, which marked the beginning of the first Iranian revolution (Mottahedeh, 2000, pp. 35, 37). The next demonstration of popular anger was directed against new concessions granted to the Russians. In protest, a great mass of mollahs and bazaar merchants left Tehran to take refuge in the city of Qom (1906), bringing business to a standstill in Tehran. Later on, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the alliance between religious clerics, merchants, and radical reformers was re-activated again, and fatwas were issued for the purpose of nationalizing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (Lapidus, 1988, p. 591; Rahman, 1982, p. 105). The protest movement eventually culminated in the 1978–79 revolution which brought to political power a leader of the regular clergy.

3. THE RISE OF RELIGION IN TIMES OF STATE CRISIS: THE CASE OF DESPOTIC STATES

(a) Political instrumentalization of Islam and the risk of obscurantist deadlock

Under normal circumstances to be further elucidated in Section 4, Muslim rulers concede some measure of autonomy to religious scholars and institutions in order to gain Islamic legitimacy and consolidate their temporal power. (This strategy is actually reminiscent of the practice that many European rulers followed in the Christian world before the advent of modern democratic systems.) Politics dominates religion yet the latter serves the function of a safeguard against possible despotic excesses indulged by the ruler, and as a shock absorber whenever the regime’s actions spark dangerous tensions in the society. Such a politico-religious equilibrium is inherently unstable, however. Indeed, using his double quality as both a political leader and the guardian of the faith, the ruler may be tempted to confer upon himself the legitimacy accorded by Islam with a view to getting rid of countervailing forces and concentrate the whole power in his hands.
A first sort of circumstance favoring the concentration of religious and political powers into the hands of an ambitious ruler arises when the banner of Islam is used to extend his control over a rebellious territory, or to unify a fragmented political space. For example, when Timur (1336–1405), known as Timur Lane or Tamburlaine, began to reconquer the old Mongol territory, he not only claimed Mongol descent, but also developed a bigoted version of Islam that bore little relation to the conservative party of the ulema: “he saw himself as the scourge of Allah, sent to punish the Muslim emirs for their unjust practices” (Armstrong, 2001, p. 91). A similar tactic was observed in the ancient kingdoms and empires of West Africa, such as when an ambitious warlord, Askia Muhammad Ture (1493–1528), who became one of the most renowned rulers of the Songhai Empire, took the title of “Caliph of the Soudan” upon his return from a pilgrimage in Mecca (in 1496). Using his new Islamic credentials, he embarked upon a jihad and quickly displaced political contenders (Davidson, 1991, p. 106; Lapidus, 1988, p. 494). In the early 10th century, El Hadj Oumar Tall, at the age of 23, went on pilgrimage to Mecca, and came back with the title of “Caliph of the brotherhood Tidjaniya for the Soudan.” After taking temporary refuge in the Fouta-Djalon (in today’s Guinea), he launched a jihad which ended with the destruction of the Muslim kingdoms of the Khasso and the Masina (Fage & Tordoff, 1995, pp. 209–211).

To cite a last striking example, the first (internationally recognized) king of Afghanistan, Emir Abdul Rahman Khan (1880–1901), worried about the threats to his central power coming from the main tribes of the country, constantly referred to Islam as a way to establish his authority and legitimize his power. In order to pacify the northern opposition and to extend his authority to the east and the center, and to overcome the profound sense of tribal identity among Afghans, he took the title of “Protector of the nation and of the religion” (Zia-ul Millat wa Din), thus claiming spiritual leadership of the Afghan millat, a subdivision of the umma (the community of all the Muslim believers, which transcends physical boundaries). Ruling by “grace and will of Allah,” he fulfilled the dual role of leader and interpreter of Islamic law (muftahid). Leaning in the theory of the divine rights of kings for the first time in Afghan history, he enlisted high-ranking ulama in defense of the country, and took various measures aimed at undermining the power of the ulema as a class. He also decided that he was the only person habilitated to declare the jihad, a necessary precaution in the face of so many rebellions from different quarters in his kingdom. Rahman was eager to guard himself against the possibility of fatwas for jihad issued by religious figures close to his enemies, such as happened when he was driven into war with Ishaq Khan in the north (Magnus & Naby, 2002, pp. 89, 90; Rasanayagam, 2005, pp. 11, 12). It was, of course, the duty of all good Muslims to support their king in his efforts to unify and strengthen the country against the infidels, for example, by dutifully paying taxes (all taxes collected locally were to be remitted to the center) and delivering fighting men (a responsibility that accrued to village and clan leaders). The central principle buttressing Rahman’s rule was that, to overcome the factionalism of tribal life, the leader must appear as coming from outside the tribal world, having its legitimacy in the umma which transcends all the differences between the Muslims (Magnus & Naby, 2002, pp. 36, 89; Rasanayagam, 2005, p. 12; Roy, 1990, pp. 15, 16, 59, 1993, p. 493).

Since in the above-described circumstances religious instrumentalization comes into open conflict with ethnic, tribal, or regional/linguistic mobilizations, success is far from guaranteed as attested by the experiences of Afghanistan and Pakistan. On the other hand, even when a country is politically integrated and independent, instrumentalization of Islam may be an attractive option for contested rulers willing to quash opposition and establish an autocratic system rid of all genuine countervailing powers or buffers. Here again, the growing role of religion is the outcome of a deliberate strategy of the political ruler. Recent history actually offers us many striking examples to the effect that cynical political rulers, often with a secular background, use Islam as a readily available ideology and instrument of legitimacy to deflect criticisms, entrench their power and privileges, or bolster their nationalistic credentials. They are thus able to escape the consequences of their misrule, which includes an almost complete absence of channels of communication between the rulers and the ruled, and to avoid the hard task of trying to understand the causes of their country’s predicament and undertake the necessary reforms, or else quit power.

This is dangerous game, though. Indeed, if autocrats can refer to Islam as a justifying ideology, political opponents to their misrule may also avail themselves of such a possibility. When both opposition groups and the state thus invoke Islam as the main justification for their actions, thus triggering a religious bidding war, an obscurantist deadlock is created in which all political opinions and judgements have to be expressed in the language of religion. Religious reference is used by rulers in self-defense, or as a counter-attack tactic, against opposition groups frustrated at the failures of corrupt, secretive, authoritarian, and ineffective states which did not deliver on what they promised (Hourani, 1991, pp. 452, 453; Lutfi al-Sayyid Marist, 2007, pp. 166–172). The situation is particularly absurd when Islamist movements have been actually nurtured by despotic rulers eager to quash secular, left-oriented opposition, much in the same way that ethnicity-based extremist movements have often been used by such rulers in order to tame political opposition (see, e.g., Lemarchand, 2009; Posner, 2006). Clearly, therefore, rather than a conflation of religion and politics, the problem appears to be the easy manipulability of religion by the state.

Before turning to concrete examples, it is important to bear in mind three central characteristics of Islamic law and jurisprudence that make the obscurantist deadlock a possible outcome of authoritarianism in Muslim countries (for more details on these characteristics, see Bowen, 2003; Coulson, 1964; Kuran, 2003; Kuran, 2004a, 2004b; Platteau, 2008, in press; Rahman, 1982). To begin with, the Quran does not cover constitutional law, and it contains only two points about the proper system of government—consultation (meshverret) and obedience to authority (ula’s emr)—, and does not insist on any particular form of government (An-Na’im, 2008, p. 199). This leaves religious authorities relatively free to pronounce judgements that carry political implications as they see fit, whether in support of (the most frequent case), or in opposition to (in the case of state crises) the ruling elite.

Relatedly, Islamic jurisprudence as it has been crystallized in the tenth century contains a few precise legal injunctions, and they are all concerned with private matters (family relations and civil transactions, in particular). In the words of El-Affendi (2008), “...not only did Islam nor have a rule for every conceivable situation, but it is moreover a fundamental rule of Islam nor to have such rules. This leaves the widest possible margin for initiative and fresh thinking on the most appropriate ethical conduct in all areas...” (p. 20). Moreover, there is great scope for variations, owing not only to the existence of four different schools in Islam (Hanefite, Malekite, Shafeite, and Hanbalite), but also to differences of opinion...
within each school and to “hybridization” of Islam through incorporation of local customs that sometimes blatantly violate Islamic tenets. Here again, more flexibility exists than is usually thought for expressing differentiated views and accusations in the public arena.

This appears especially true in the light of the last characteristic: there is no such centralized institution as the Vatican in the Muslim world. As rightly pointed out by Lewis (2002), in Islam no ecclesiastical body exists nor any vertical chain of command to direct the believers (except in Iran): Muslim believers directly refer to God and its law on earth, the sharia (pp. 113, 115). Religious dignitaries may indulge in preaching and teaching the faithful in the numerous existing madrasas and mosques, which implies that the messages conveyed can vary considerably from one place to another. Fatwas are thus opinions or judgements which just carry the legitimacy of the ulama, or the group of ulama, issuing them, so that their influence depends on the number and prestige of those ulama involved (Filiu, 2008). The absence of centralized religious establishment facilitates the task of rulers with authoritarian tendencies who want to secure the allegiance of some religious authorities to back unpopular policies.

But this is a two-edged sword which can backfire. While in the Catholic church the right to excommunicate is monopolized by the Vatican, in the lands of Islam any judge can issue a fatwa against an individual, a group or a political regime considered to be impious or infidel: “the decision to oppose the state on the grounds that it is insufficiently Islamic belongs to anyone who wishes to exercise it” (Zakaria, 2003, pp. 124, 125, 144). Since Muslims can turn to preachers of their own choice, and these preachers are not subject to the rigid rulings of a priestly caste acting as the representative of God, the possibility of both anarchy and manipulation of religion by despotic rulers is distinctly wide in these lands. Such a possibility is all the more serious as preachers can always accuse imams to have unduly interposed themselves between God and the believers, and/or to have sold themselves to worldly power-holders. To illustrate, the first criticism is raised by rich Wahhabite merchants against the marabouts of Sine-Saloum (Senegal) who behave like feudal lords and are used to refer to their religious position to justify their monopoly position (Miran, 2006, p. 250). As an example of the second criticism, think of the indictment of Shukri Mustafa, the Egyptian leader of the Society of Muslims, against the ulama whom he accused of being “no more than lackeys of the prince, ‘pulpit parrots’” (Kepel, 2005, p. 101).

(b) Examples

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an extensive review of situations of political instrumentalization in Islam (see Platteau, in press for such a review). For our purpose, it is sufficient to stress that these situations have multiplied in recent times and involve important Muslim countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Pakistan, Indonesia Algeria, and Iraq. Especially worth emphasizing is the fact that the process of Islamization of politics and society has often been initiated by secular leaders who did not hesitate to adapt or completely change their ideology for the sake of suppressing dissent and achieving absolute power. In the following, attention is restricted to a few particularly striking episodes that illustrate this blatant form of political opportunism.

The first case study is Egypt. When King Faruk came to power in 1937, he perpetuated the conflict between the palace and the majority party in parliament, the Wafd, that his authoritarian father (king Fuad) had initiated. To silence the liberal opposition, he was advised by his entourage to get closer to the men of religion in al-Azhar (Egypt’s leading mosque and university), and attempt to use them as a lever against the Wafd (Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007, p. 117–118). Anwar al-Sadat followed suit when he resurrected the Muslim Brethren (gradually releasing those who had been imprisoned under the regime of Nasser), officially “to cooperate in the service of the country,” in reality because he wanted to use them against two political forces that threatened his power: the forces of the political left (Socialists, and Nasserites) which criticized his economic liberalization policies, and the forces of the extreme religious right (the takfir organisations). Thus, the reformist and pragmatic faction of the Brethren represented by the magazine al-Duwa, known as the neo-Muslim Brethren, were in complete accordance with the official ideology of Sadat when they fought against communism (which is tantamount to atheism) in all its forms (Kepel, 2005; Ramadan, 1993, p. 167, 16, 105–131, 150).

However, after Sadat accepted a peace treaty with Israel (1979), the enemy against which both the left and the Islamists wanted a revenge, this climate of cooperation suddenly deteriorated, and it became impossible for the neo-Muslim Brethren to refrain from consistently challenging this decision of the regime. As for more radical Islamist groups, such as the Islamist student associations (the Jama’at Islamiyya) which rapidly developed after 1972 thanks to discreet, tactical collaboration with the regime keen on breaking the left’s domination of the campuses, they went much further by openly questioning the Islamic legitimacy of the “iniquitous prince” (Kepel, 2005, pp. 137, 148). And when, under the impulse of the Muslim Brotherhood, a coalition of Islamic groups came together to form a consolidated organizational framework (the Permanent Islamic Congress for the Propagation of Islam), it became clear that Sadat’s policy of balancing the political left had created a counterforce endangering his foreign policy and threatening his regime: the regime had nurtured “the snake that would later strike it” (p. 138). Sadat was assassinated in October 1981 by an extremist from the al-Jihad (Sacred Combat) group, of which many members previously belonged to the Jama’at (Ramadan, 1993, pp. 164–178; Ibrahim, 1995a, chap. 5, pp. 53–68; Kepel, 2005, pp. 51–59, 105–168; Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007, chaps. 6–7).

Mubarak, who succeeded Sadat, learned the lesson halfway. He followed the twin tactic consisting of heavy-handedly clamping down on the Islamists while keeping a tight control over the official religious establishment (al-Azhar) which continued to produce fatwas suiting him and his close entourage. Some of these religious edicts are so explicit in their underlying political intent that they reflect an attitude of almost obsequious submissiveness. Such was clearly the case when the grand imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Sayyed Tantawy, cited a passage of the Quran as support for his opinion that those convicted of libel should be sentenced to 80 lashes. This occurred after several journalists had been tried and convicted of publishing false information about members of the ruling National Democratic Party and the president in 2007. Another patent example is a fatwa issued during the same year by the grand muti, Ali Goma. It provided that a driver who runs over and kills someone deliberately standing in the path of the vehicle is not to blame. This judgement happened a few days after a woman was killed by a minibus under the control of the police as she tried to stop them from arresting her sister-in-law (Daily News, Cairo, December 29–30, 2007).

The situation in neighboring Sudan is also revealing. A new constitution established Sudan as a secular state in 1973, implying that in civil and criminal matters civilians’ behavior...
was governed by a secular law, while personal and family matters were covered by Sharia law for Muslims and customary law for tribal populations of the south. At the command of a deeply corrupt patrimonial system which imposed a huge foreign debt on the country, Nimeiri aroused bitter political opposition in both the north and the south. Liberalization policies resulting in abrupt increases in the price of oil, bread and sugar prompted widespread riots by students and angry consumers, and sparked political activism among parties that had always been opposed to Nimeiri (Jok, 2007, pp. 72, 73). Confronted with such a determined opposition, his reaction was a rapprochement with Islamic factions and, in 1977, the entry into his government of two prominent Islamic politicians, including Hassan al-Turabi, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and founder of the National Islamic Front (NIF) whom he had previously imprisoned.11 Appointed attorney-general, Turabi exerted steady pressure for the Islamic reform of the legal system (Jok, 2007, p. 74; Ladipus, 1988, p. 859). In 1982, at the risk of losing his secular support base, he began to dismantle the accord of Addis-Ababa (1972) which had ended the first north-south civil war triggered by the brutal Arabisation and Islamization policies of Ibrahim Abbud (1958–1964). He actually wanted to please Islamist groups such as the NIF which regarded the south as a challenge to Islam and therefore believed that allowing secularism in the south was not an acceptable compromise. In September 1983, Nimeiri completely reversed his previous policy by declaring an “Islamic revolution” and transforming the Sudanese state into an Islamic republic to be governed by Islamic law, with no exemption for non-Muslim regions. Sudanese law was to be immediately reformed according to the Sharia, and the so-called September laws gave rise to highly publicized public executions, amputations of limbs for theft, and lashing for alcohol consumption (Jok, 2007, pp. 74–76). In his quest for absolute political power, Nimeiri attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to proclaim himself as Imam accountable only to Allah. Moreover, he demanded an oath of unconditional allegiance from all members of the civil service and judiciary, thereby causing the departure of prominent secularists and the dominance of the civil service, the army and the financial sector by Islamists (de Waal, 1997, p. 88). Members of the NIF and Muslim Brotherhood were thus left free to gain influence within the civil service, intelligence, and institutions of government that deal with education and welfare. More ominously still, Nimeiri let Turabi draft the Criminal Bill (presented to parliament in 1988) which included an ominous provision for outlawing apostasy sufficiently vague to allow its application to be politically determined (de Waal, 1997, p. 91; Meredith, 2005, pp. 356, 357). Nimeiri’s execution of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, the founder of the Republican Brethren, on the charge of apostasy (1984), offers a perfect illustration of the cynical use that can be made of such a Bill. The fact is that “opposition to an Islamic government can be, and has been, defined as an act of apostasy,” and this was directed not only against secular Muslims and other political opponents (e.g., communists), but also against other Islamic sects (such as the Khatmiyya, Ansar, and Ansar-Sunna) that were regarded as a threat to the ruling clique (Johnson, 2003, p. 129).

Brigadier (later General) Omer el Bashir, who seized power in 1989, immediately professed his goal of creating a theocratic rather than a democratic state, in the mist of the mounting influence of the party of the Muslim Brethren. The important point is that in no time he re-created the apparatus of Numayri’s police state in more extreme form, and he promulgated the Sudanese Penal Code of 1991, which included the aforementioned provision on the crime of apostasy. Bashir also formed his own Islamic militia, the People’s Defence Force (PDF), and its training was made compulsory for civil servants, teachers, students, and higher-education candidates. All rights of free expression and belief were outlawed, and public protests in objection to the government’s policies were considered not only as a treasonable offence, but also as an insult to Islam. A major famine again occurred in 1990–91 (de Waal, 1997, p. 98; Johnson, 2003, p. 128; Jok, 2007, p. 162; Meredith, 2005, p. 589).

In Algeria, the radical Islamist movement known as the FIS (the Islamic Salvation Front) has actually been encouraged by President Boumediene when his hold on political power was seriously challenged in 1968 by a rising opposition made up of intellectuals, students and trade unions represented, in particular, by the UGTA (Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens) and the UNEA (Union Nationale des Etudiants Algériens). As early as 1965, on the occasion of the state coup which brought him to power, a bizarre alliance was sealed between the new socialist, anti-imperialist regime and the ulama (represented by the Conseil Supérieur Islamique), granting to the latter the right to lead the arabization of the country and to manage the education system (including the right to rewrite the school textbooks). It is thus in complete agreement with the regime that the religious dignitaries started to spread the message of a conservative Islam through the creation of a wide network of Islamist institutes directly governed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Radical views inspired by Taymiya, Qutb and Mawdudi were diffused in all legality and an idea which gained increasing currency is that colonization of Algeria had been possible only because of the degeneration of the pre-colonial state. The solution had to rest on a return to the sources of Islamic culture (Bouamama, 2000, chap. 3; Chouchoua, 2001, pp. 271, 272).

When secular, democratic opposition intensified, the regime gave more leeway to the ulmas and to the more reactionary forces among them. They started to assert more aggressively and to meddle openly in matters of social policy. The idea of a “renaissance” of the country based on the Islamic tradition was explicitly taken over by the government, and the Islamic character of the Algerian state was embedded most explicitly into the National Charter considered as the ideological and political programme of revolutionary Algeria. Islam was thus “nationalized” and cynically used by the state for the legitimation of repressive policies and mobilization (Layachi, 1995, p. 180; Owen, 1992, p. 41).

The case of Pakistan is the best documented in the literature. Especially well-known is the disastrous role of a Muslim devout, General Zia ul-Haq (1977–1988), in fostering the unhealthy alliance between the army and the intelligence services (ISI), on the one hand, and a reactionary strand of Islam—the Deoband school, close to Wahhabism—and extremist Islamist movements, on the other hand. What is less well-known is the compromising tactic adopted by some of his predecessors. In particular, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, who had been a modern, left-oriented politician with social democratic ideas, was involved in the designing of the 1973 constitution, which declared Islam to be the state religion (Article 2), provided that all existing laws were to be brought into conformity with the injunctions of Islam (Article 227), and prescribed that the tenets of Islam and the Quran should be taught in schools (Article 31).

Bhutto’s proclivity to appeal to Islam and advocate the Islamization of the country out of political expediency became increasingly apparent when he surrendered to the demands of...
a radical Islamist movement, the Jamaat-i-Islami (founded by Mawdudi), to exclude the Ahmadi sect from the Muslim community (Abbas, 2005, pp. 81, 82). He took over the religious parties’ agenda, encouraged the expression of sectarian opinion, and tilted toward an obscurantist interpretation of Islam, partly for reasons connected to his economic and national security agendas (Haqqani, 2005, pp. 107–109). In an attempt to defeat the political opposition (united under the so-called Pakistan National Alliance) which rebelled against its arrogant authoritarianism and called for the enforcement of the Islamic system of government, he declared gambling and horse racing illegal, banned the sale and use of alcohol, and declared Friday as the weekly holiday (Abbas, 2005, pp. 84, 85). In order to destabilize the regime of Muhammad Daoud who seized power in Kabul through a state coup on 17 July 1973, Bhutto also decided to use right-wing Islamic dissidents from Afghanistan (Abbas, 2005, p. 81; Roy, 1990, pp. 74–76; 1993, p. 495).

This political tradition of instrumentalizing religion was maintained even after the demise of Zia. After he took power a second time (toward the end of 1996) from Benazir Bhutto, the daughter of Zulfiqar, Nawaz Sharif opted for policies that went dangerously along the slope of supporting religious radicalism for the cynical purpose of consolidating his power. In August 1998, he proposed before the National Assembly to enforce rule by Islamic law, but on the understanding that his government would have ultimate authority in deciding the interpretation. In the same amendment to the constitution, he proposed that “the directives of the government in this sphere would be beyond the jurisdiction of courts and judicial review,” so that any impediment in the enforcement of sharia would be removed. Clearly, the move was “a bid to acquire unfettered power,” following constant efforts to transform the judiciary, the police, the bureaucracy, and finally the army into partisan bodies infiltrated by political influence and patronage (Abbas, 2005, pp. 164, 165). He had even planned to make further amendments to the Constitution, declaring himself the absolute leader of the Muslims, Amirul Mominin (Hussain, 2008, p. 31). When he realized that he was short of the support needed to get his bill passed through the Senate, however, Nawaz Sharif shamelessly resorted to the kind of hooliganism and religion-based violence that had recently accompanied the besiegings of the Supreme Court, encouraging the mullahs to lay siege to the Senate. It is miraculous that the Senate actually held out in such circumstances when Pakistan was teetering on the brink, within an inch of becoming a caliphate (Abbas, 2005, p. 165).

Despite the appearances, the above analysis also applies to the deceptively secular ideology of Baathism, which despite its somewhat mystical and vaguely socialist tenets, is essentially based on an authoritarian pan-Arabist model whose spirit is Islam. The core element of this model always resided in its own past, and the consciousness of pan-Arabism has been ideological in such a way as to borrow virtually nothing of the constellation of values associated with the European Enlightenment (Makiya, 1989, pp. 189–212; Polk, 2005, p. 109). In Iraq, especially, such ideology stressed the exceptionalism of the Arabs whose national awakening was bound up with a religious message and obligation (Makiya, 1989, pp. 198–211; Tripp, 2000, esp. chaps. 5–6; see also Dawisha, 1999; Hourani, 1991, pp. 452, 453).

Like in Syria, the problem of religious opposition in Iraq has been compounded by the blatant discrimination of the majority of the population (the Shi’ites in Iraq and the Sunni Muslims in Syria) at the hands of a violent authoritarian regime. This discrimination did not prevent Sunni ulama from joining with Shi’a ulama on several occasions to protest against the harshly repressive policies of the country’s rulers. Saddam Hussein was especially adept at combining measures of control, repression, and seduction to strengthen his power in such antagonistic conditions. Thus, the contents of the ulama’s sermons were strictly supervised while all Shi’i shrines and mosques were brought under centralized control by transforming all Shi’i ulama into salaried employees of the state (as their Sunni counterparts had been for some time). Repressive measures included the harassment, imprisonment and execution of thousands of important Shi’i leaders, especially clerics, as well as the expulsion from Iraq of tens of thousands of alleged “Iranian” Shi’a, and the provision of special financial incentives for Iraqi men who would divorce from their alleged “Iranian” wives (Polk, 2005, p. 120; Tripp, 2000, pp. 208, 213, 221, 225).

More seductive tactics were based upon the appointment to positions of responsibility of Shi’a clerics whom Saddam Hussein wanted to draw into the network of his patronage, and the simultaneous exploitation of themes of Arab identity and superiority combined with the official adoption of more overtly Islamic postures from the summer of 1977 onwards. Paying lip service to Islamic values was actually seen by the despotic ruler as part of a strategy using both patronage and intimidation (Tripp, 2000, pp. 209–211). In Saddam Hussein’s narrative of the mythical Iraqi nation, “a continuous line of political succession was established between the rulers of the ancient kingdoms of Mesopotamia, the Abbasid caliphs and Saddam Hussein himself... no distinction was made between pre-Islamic and Islamic rulers and any lingering unease about the implications of this for Arab identity was met by transforming all the previous rulers of Mesopotamia into ‘proto-Arabs’. The imaginative entity, ‘Mesopotamia-as-Iraq’, was thus Arabised...” (Tripp, 2000, p. 217).

Interestingly, the significance of religion, together with the primacy of Iraq, was stressed with special vigor, on the occasion of the 9th Congress of the Regional Command of the Bath (1982), when Saddam Hussein’s position was shaken as a result of his catastrophic miscalculation in the war with Iran (Tripp, 2000, p. 228). In particular, his fear of the allegiances of the Shi’a footsoldiers who formed the bulk of Iraq’s conscript army prompted him to resort to stress the Arab identity of the Iraqi Shi’a and the Islamic credentials of the regime. His seductive tactics now included rebuilding Shi’ite mosques and places of pilgrimage, making the birthday of the fourth caliph, the imam Ali, a national holiday, and even proclaiming that he was a descendant of this central figure for all Shi’ite Muslim believers (Polk, 2005, p. 120; Tripp, 2000, p. 238).

At the same time, he never tired of clamping down in the most brutal manner on the members of underground (Shi’i) Islamist organisations, such as al-Dawa (p. 208).

4. THE DOMINANT POLITICO-RELIGIOUS EQUILIBRIUM

When a retrospective look is taken at the deep political history of Muslim countries, it becomes apparent that authoritarian political regimes were dominant throughout, and that in these regimes politics and religion co-existed as separate entities linked through an asymmetrical relationship of mutual recognition. The above-described rule of the Safavids in Iran and that of the Ottomans in Turkey offer good illustrations of this canonical model. The question naturally arises as to why such a dominant politico-religious equilibrium seems to have collapsed in important parts of the Muslim world today, and
why were countries like Egypt, Sudan, and Pakistan suddenly trapped into an obscurantist deadlock opposing autocrats to Islamist movements. The following discussion proceeds in two parts. In the first part presented in this section, the dominant politico-religious model is characterized in the light of historical evidence and the Islamic doctrine that evolved over the centuries regarding the relationship between politics and religion. In the second part, presented in the next section, I discuss the circumstantial reasons for why instrumentalization of Islam has become more salient in recent times.

(a) A retrospective look into early Islamic history

Lewis’s point regarding the historical origin of the conflation of religion and politics in the lands of Islam is undeniably correct. Unless we adopt a deterministic approach to history, however, the implications of these initial conditions for the destiny of Muslim countries are far from clear. Historical evidence actually shows that the ideal has been impossible to achieve since the time of the Prophet for the simple reason that “no other human being can enjoy the Prophet’s combination of religious and political authority”... That experience was unique and cannot be replicated, because Muslims do not accept the possibility of prophets after the Prophet Muhammad” (An-Na’im, 2008, p. 53).

The central lesson to draw from the history of early Islam points to the essentially political nature of the whole process of consolidation of power throughout the Arabian Peninsula. As attested from the very beginning by the murders of three of the four caliphs who succeeded Muhammad, the history of Islam is full of violent confrontations between various factions vying for power and adhering to different interpretations of the Quran, each claiming legitimacy for its own version of inheritance from the Prophet. What appear at first sight as conflicts between various religious factions or interpretations of the faith often conceal more down-to-earth struggles between different clans or tribes over access to political power and the economic privileges that go with it.

During the first centuries of Islam, the core conflict opposed the group of Muslims who migrated with the Prophet from Mecca, those belonging to Muhammad’s clan, to those who welcomed and supported him in Medina by converting to the new faith. In other words, claims of early conversion and close links with Muhammad clashed with claims to the nobility of ancient and honorable ancestry. The Umayyad state, which moved the capital city from Mecca to Damascus in 657, sought to maintain the fiction that the authority of their caliphs was an extension of the authority of the Prophet. Yet, it established an hereditary dynasty and resembled the Sassanian and Byzantine models of monarchical rule (An-Na‘im, 2008, pp. 61, 62; Lapidus, 1988, chap. 4). Again, rather than originating in a doctrinal conflict, Shi‘ism (the Shia are the followers of Ali) began as a movement of support for the leadership of certain Arab candidates in the caliphate, in opposition to the hegemony of Syrian Arab tribes ruling from Damascus.

The Abbasids (from Bagdad) destituted the Umayyads on the ground that they were unrighteous and had turned their authority into secular kingship. Founding their claim to rule on shared lineage with the Prophet, the early Abbasid caliphs attempted to revitalize the sacred function of the caliphate, and to return to the model of the unity of religious and political leadership. Yet, the inherent contradictions of their claims to this dual leadership were soon exposed and, as early as the middle of the 10th century, the institution of the caliphate declined after less than two centuries of glory (Meddeb, 2002, pp. 96–99).

The separation on an institutional level of state institutions and religious associations became the norm for the late Abbasid caliphate, the Seljuq and Mamluk sultanes, the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires, and other Muslim regimes. It became a landmark of pre-modern Islamic societies that, contrary to the Muslim ideal, the caliphate transformed itself into “a largely military and imperial institution legitimated in neo-Byzantine and neo-Sassanian terms”, while the religious elites developed “a more complete authority over the communal, personal, religious, and doctrinal aspects of Islam” (Lapidus, 1996, p. 12; see also 1988, p. 881). In the worst circumstances, such as toward the end of the Abbasid period, the caliphs were mistreated by their praetorian guards who did not hesitate to depose, maim, and blind them at will (Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsof, 2007, p. 11). In the most benign circumstances, such as happened occasionally under Ottoman sultans since Murad II, the title of caliph was used “in a rhetorical sense rather than as a straightforward political-legal assertion of sovereignty over the Muslim community” (Finkel, 2005, p. 111).

(b) The evolved doctrine regarding state-religion relations

As the foregoing account suggests, and as confirmed by Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im (2008), the states under which Muslims lived in the past were never Islamic: “the state was inherently political and not religious because of differences between the nature of religious authority and political authority” (p. 49). The fact that rulers often deemed desirable to claim a measure of Islamic legitimacy to sustain their political authority over Muslims did not make the state they controlled Islamic (p. 52). They just followed a long tradition in which political power in Muslim lands is exercised by military who dress themselves as emirs. Throughout history, political rulers tended to have the upper hand in their dealings with religious authorities, and the principle of non-attachment of the ulama to worldly affairs seems to have generally prevailed. While accepting the necessity of political order, the latter disdained political involvement and withdrew into communal and personal religious affairs (Lapidus, 1988, p. 882; Saint-Prot, 2008, pp. 312, 313). According toHourani, 1991, p. 145–145, 458, if rulers had to negotiate with the ulama, and if their authority was legitimate only if used to maintain the Sharia, and therefore “the fabrics of virtuous and civilized life” (a caliph’s main duty was to watch over the faith), a powerful tradition among the ulama (among both Sunni and Sh’ia Muslims) provided that “they should keep their distance from the rulers of the world” (p. 458). This implied that they ought to avoid linking themselves too closely with the government of the world while preserving their access to the rulers and their influence upon them. Such a passive approach of religious authorities toward political power, it may be noted, was legitimated by the fact that the jurists of Islam were primarily concerned to regulate the relationship of the individual Muslim with his God. This led them to formulate standards of conduct which represented a system of private, and not of public, law (Coulson, 1964, pp. 120, 123). As pointed out earlier, the Quran does not cover genuine constitutional or administrative law. It just mentions that it is the duty of the ruler to ratify and enforce the standards of conduct prescribed by the sharia, and that consultation and obedience to authority constitute the two pillars of proper government. Even if the ruler was unjust or impious “it was generally accepted that he should still be obeyed, for any kind of order was better than anarchy” (Hourani, 1991, p. 144). Accommodation with the existing power was thus seen as desirable by the ulama for whom denouncing a ruler who
claimed to be a good Muslim was unjustified. In the words of Coulson (1964): “Might, in fact, was right, and this was eventually recognized by the scholars in their denunciation of civil disobedience even when the political authority was in no sense properly constituted. Obviously the effective enforcement of the whole system of sharia law was entirely dependent upon the whim of the de facto ruler” (p. 83). Also revealing is the fact that the classical doctrine according to which a ruler ought to be a genuine descendant of the Prophet “was really of no consequence”: what mattered most was military strength and financial wealth of the willing ruler (Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007, p. 14). This is in stark contrast to the view of Islamists for whom no compromise can be struck with any state whose foundations are not thoroughly Islamic (Roy, 1993, p. 495). Thus, if the merger of religion and politics is a classic Islamic ideal, it is only recently that they have actually been brought together (Lapidus, 1988, p. 889).

In a striking manner, the traditionalist and most influential philosopher al-Ghazali (1058–1111) wrote, on the one hand, that “the jurisconsult serves as master and director of conscience for political authority in administrating and disciplining men that order and justice may reign in this world,” and, on the other hand, that “the tyranny of a sultan for a hundred years causes less damage than one year’s tyranny exercised by the subjects against one another... Revolt was justified only against a ruler who clearly went against a command of God or His prophet” (cited from Kepel, 2005, p. 238; and from Hourani, 1991, p. 144). In short, communal strife (fitna) or chaos (fauwda) is the most abhorred state and, to prevent it from emerging, despotism is justified. Religious authorities thus tolerate an oppressive or even an illegitimate political ruler as the lesser of two evils (An-Na‘im, 2008, p. 52).

Kepel (2005) conveys the same Hobbesian idea when he writes that “the excommunication of the prince, be he the worst of despots, was pronounced only exceptionally, for it opened the prospect of considerable disorder and created dangerous jurisprudential precedents” (p. 59). Excommunication was deemed an especially dangerous weapon because “it could all too easily fall into the hands of sects beyond the control of the ulama and the qadis” (Kepel, 2005, p. 56). It bears emphasis that this tradition developed in spite of the professed aim of Islam to establish a righteous world or-
To sum up, let us again cite Coulson:

“The wider and supreme duty of the sovereign was the protection of the public interests; and in pursuance of it he was afforded an overrid- ing personal discretion to determine, according to time and circum- stances, how the purposes of God for the Islamic community might best be effected. . . . Doctrine had granted the ruler such wide discre- tionary powers on the assumption that he would be ideally qualified for office. But it is precisely here that the idealistic nature of the doc- trine is at its most apparent; for there existed no constitutional machin- ery, and in particular no independent judiciary, to guarantee that the ruler would be so qualified and that those powers would not be abused. . . . [the doctrine] never seriously challenged the ruler’s au- tocratic power to control the practical implementation of that law; and it finally reached the point of abject surrender and recognition of its total impotence by acknowledging the principle that obedience was due to the political power whatever its nature, and that even the most impious and tyrannical regime was preferable to civil strife . . . the only limits upon the de facto power of the ruler were those that he found in his own conscience (pp. 129–130, 133–134).

It is now evident that in the dominant type of politico- religious equilibrium prevailing in the lands of Islam, political rulers have had their way, implying that religious leaders were either seduced into cooperating with the political agenda of rulers or coerced to do so to avoid facing harsh consequences (An-Na’im, 2008, p. 56). If rulers needed to concede the auton- omy of religious scholars, it is precisely because they were eager to gain Islamic legitimacy from these scholars’ endorse- ment of the state: “rulers needed to balance their control of religious leaders by conceding their autonomy from the state, which is the source of the ability of religious leaders to legiti- mize the authority of the rulers” (p. 52, also p. 81).

In all what has been said above, it is hard to detect genuine differences between Islam and Christianity. In particular, the principle “render unto God that which is God’s and unto Cae- sar that which is Caesar’s” (Matthew 22:21) appears to apply to the former civilization as well as to the latter. As for the strat- egy of seeking religious legitimacy in order to buttress political power, it was not only followed by Muslim despots but also by ambitious European rulers. 17

5. THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT AND THE RISE OF ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS

Given obvious space constraints, a detailed answer to the question as to why religion has come to play such a prominent role in many Muslim countries in recent times cannot be offered here. Suffice it to say that such an answer must necessarily rest on a combination of internal and external circumstances. Since the latter tend to be underplayed, primary emphasis is put on them in the short discussion below.

The first point to stress is the economic importance achieved by Saudi Arabia in the second part of the 20th century thanks to its immense oil reserves. Indeed, abundance of a commodity so critical for the world economy combined with the espousal by the Seoudi tribe of the puritanical doctrine of Wahhabism— inspired by Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792)—, have allowed this country to exert an enormous ideological influence across the entire Muslim world. The Saudi royal family is essentially a secular polity, an elite whom Meddeb (2002, p. 125) did not hesitate to call “a bunch of hard-nose reapers eager to provide an Islamic façade behind which to hide their unrestrained capitalist practices” (my translation). Much like the Safavids had done in adopting (Twelver) Shi’- ism as the national religion of modern Iran (Keddie, 2003, pp. 10, 13), the Seouds co-opted a religious elite and used Islam to consolidate a Saudi national identity and thereby reinforce their own legitimacy (Al-Rasheed, 2002; Nevo, 1998). But the key point is that many Muslims migrated to Saudi Arabia to work as migrants and later returned to their country of origin, while the government of Saudi Arabia used its considerable financial resources to disseminate Wahhabism throughout the Muslim world and beyond. 18

The influence of Wahhabism was all the stronger as the puri- tanical interpretation of Islam was revived in two Muslim countries subject to extremely severe internal tensions, Egypt and Pakistan. While the latter has never settled its problem of national identity and internal cohesion in a satisfactory manner (particularly vis-à-vis its arch-enemy and neighbor, Indi- dia), since the time of Faruk the former’s regime has not opened any channel for communication with the population, nor tolerated any expression of dissent. The key thinkers are Abu al-Ālá Mawdūdī (1903–1979) in Pakistan and his fervent disciple Sayyid Qutb (1929–1966) in Egypt, both of whom ex- erited a profound influence on the present-day radical Islamist movement (for more details, see Platteau, 2008, pp. 341, 342). It is thus in continuous go-and-return movements from one bank of the Red Sea to the other that the first operational link between radical fundamentalism and Wahhabism has been woven during the 1970s. Another, far more critical conjunc- tion of events was to happen in the early 1980s in Afghanistan and Pakistan, when Islamist movements supported by Paki- stani army and intelligence services, the American CIA and the government of Saudi Arabia ousted the Soviets from Afghanistan, eventually leading to the takeover of this country by the Taliban.

The second factor that critically impinged on Muslim poli- tics and encouraged the radicalization of Islamic ideology is a deep economic, social and military crisis faced by Muslim societies. According to Ferjani (1991), the Arabs are torn away between two models of civilization, the European civilization which challenges them, and the Arab-Muslim civilization which provides them with a response to that challenge. The choice between the two models is made especially difficult because of a psychic tension amplified by the acute awareness of the reality of decadence of the Arab world. Most contempo- rary political Arab writings, whether left- or right-oriented, are thus obsessed “with past grandeur,” which prevents any strand of thought from envisaging progress, modernization and development in terms of a rupture with the past. Instead of “progress,” Arab authors prefer to think of a “renaissance” (“reviving the past grandeur”), that is, they prefer to think “in magical and mythical terms”: “It is as though the present and the future cannot have legitimacy if they are not rooted in the historical and cultural patrimony” (pp. 133, 134—my translation). As for the Islamists’ view of the past, it is polarized by a “golden age” that ended fourteen centuries ago (Kepel, 2005, pp. 234–236). 19

Other regions of the world have actually gone through such a modernization crisis, and eventually succeeded in resolving it. What makes the present predicament of the Muslim world, and the Arab world in particular, so persisting and vicious is the fact that it is sustained by humiliating military setbacks, and an openly declared support of the Western superpower in favor of a small-sized enemy embedded in the body of the Arab world. In the words of Albert Hourani:

“The events of 1967 [a crushing military defeat of the Egyptian Army at the hands of the Israelis, and the processes of change which fol- lowed them, made more intense that disturbance of spirits, that sense of a world gone wrong, which had already been expressed in the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s. The defeat of 1967 was widely regarded as being not only a military setback but a kind of moral judgement. If the Arabs had been defeated so quickly, completely and publicly,
might it not be a sign that there was something rotten in their societies and in the moral system which they expressed?... the problem of identity was expressed in terms of the relationship between the heritage of the past and the needs of the present. Should the Arab peoples tread a path marked out for them from outside, or could they find in their own inherited beliefs and culture those values which could give them a direction in the modern world?” (Hourani, 1991, pp. 442, 443).

To the extent that the first option appears as a surrender of independence to the external world, preference tends to be given to the second option. This helps explain why after 1967 there was a sudden reversal of the common opinion that the Arabs were determined to catch up with the West’s material and technical progress: “Secular Arab nationalism had been proved a failure and was dead; the masses would reject Western progress and turn to fundamentalist Islam as their only hope” (Mansfield, 2003, p. 325). Such a reaction was reinforced by the realization that something was morally wrong with the West which was adept at applying double, or even multiple standards depending upon its own selfish interests. Were not Western powers brutal exploiters of dominated nations, particularly those possessing natural resources (oil in the case of the Middle East) needed by their advanced industrial states, although each of them could boast of nurturing a liberal democracy at home, and defending increasingly tolerant and humanitarian values or ideals (Rahman, 1982, p. 55)? In the same manner that the concept of jihad was heavily relied upon to arouse the sentiments of the general public against colonial rulers, it started to be used in order to protest against what is perceived as iniquitous international political standings on the part of rich countries of Europe and North America. It is thus correct to say that the West has inadvertently helped to unify and radicalize Islam (Duffy Toft, 2007, p. 110).

In a situation of protracted crisis such as that experienced by the Muslim world, a radicalization of religious beliefs has taken place at the urging of disgruntled urban groups (often newcomers from tribal and rural origins) and, as we have seen earlier, often by political rulers themselves (as a counter-attack tactic or not). Recourse to puritanical beliefs is more tempting when people can associate the failure of their governments in meeting the challenges of modernity with the failure of secularism and the Western path (most notably in Egypt, Syria, Sudan, and Iraq where socialism, nationalism, and secularism were the dominant ideologies of the post-independence ruling elites), and when military defeats are added to disappoointing economic performances, corruption and inefficiency of the rulers. In the process, the achievements of Arab secularism in the field of education and legal development (civil and commercial laws were made secular early on, toward the end of 19th century, in countries like Egypt and Syria), for example, are ignored or, worse, considered a liability.

An important outcome of the perceived failure of secularism is that Islam has little competition when it comes to articulate popular opposition to corrupt and inequitable governments. This is patently true under the strongly authoritarian regimes of the Middle East where the religious idiom is the only one left that people, especially the young, educated, lower-middle class people, can use to communicate criticism and protest “against repression, social injustice, hardening of the political arteries, and the threat to collective identity” (Ibrahim, 1995b, chap. 5, p. 90; Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007, p. 164). In the words of Zakaria:

“The Arab world is a political desert with no real political parties, no free press, and few pathways to dissent. As a result, the mosque became the place to discuss politics. As the only place that cannot be banned in Muslim societies, it is where all the hate and opposition toward the regimes collected and grew. The language of opposition became, in these lands, the language of religion. This combination of religion and politics has proven to be combustible. Religion, at least the religion of the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), stresses moral absolutes. But politics is all about compromise. The result has been a ruthless, winner-take-all attitude toward political life. Fundamentalist organizations have done more than talk. From the Muslim Brotherhood to Hamas and Hizbullah, they actively provide social services, medical assistance, counseling, and temporary housing. For those who treasure civil society, it is disturbing to see that in the Middle East these illiberal groups are civil society... If there is one great cause of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, it is the total failure of political institutions in the Arab world” (Zakaria, 2003, pp. 142, 143).

The above interpretation confirms the idea that resurgence of puritanical religious feelings tends to occur in periods of collective self-doubt sparked off by severe military defeats and economic crises combined with high-level corruption. Although the scale of today’s rebellion is huge, mainly because, as we have seen earlier, Islam has now been extensively globalized (Roy, 2004), it is not a new phenomenon in Islamic history. This is attested by the Kadizadeli rebellion led against the Ottoman government in the early seventeenth century by young and idle students from religious schools. Their leader, Kadizade Mehmed, was a gifted preacher whose puritanical message calling for a return to the fundamental tenets of the faith and its uncorrupted morality fell on receptive ears during the chaotic early years of bitter factionalism of Mehmed IV’s reign (Finkel, 2005, pp. 214, 215, 254, 255). The followers of Kadizade considered the Ottoman military and high Ottoman society as inept and morally bankrupt, and they attributed the recurring debacles on the battlefield (in Europe and the Indian Ocean) as well as the persistent palace scandals to a cultural and religious decay, to deviation from tradition, and a turn away from true Islam (An-Na’im, p. 185). As pointed out by Daniel Goldmann: “In important ways, they constituted a forerunner to Islamic reformers in later centuries who, whether Ottoman, Egyptian, Wahhabi, or Iranian, consistently have argued that the West has defeated Islamic states only because their ostensibly Muslim leaders have forgotten their religious roots. Bring back the Muhammedan state, they all argue, and Islam will again take up its leading rank in the world order” (Goldmann, 2002, pp. 118, 119).

The origins of Afghan fundamentalism can likewise be traced back to the 17th–18th centuries when Indian domination under the Moghul emperors and British incursions into Afghan territory gave rise to strong reactions based on the idea that resistance against the infidels was a religious duty and submission a sin. The thesis was indeed advanced that “it was only the rejection of Islam that had permitted the infidel to triumph, and that the way to liberation was through a return by the whole society to its former faith” (Roy, 1990, p. 56). Interestingly, the same argument was used several centuries earlier by the famous Islamist thinker Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), whose determination to counter the Mongolian threat against Damascus led him to proclaim that Muslim leaders bore much of the responsibility “for not encouraging the proper faith and attitudes among the people and thus for the political divisions which had facilitated the Mongol advance” (Bonney, 2004, p. 114). That radical ideological movements, including religious movements, are likely to develop within the body of societies subject to foreign domination is borne out by many other historical episodes, including experiences of modern colonial rule.”
6. IS ISLAM A SPECIAL PROBLEM?

(a) Summing up

The various strands of the complex argument developed in the paper can now be woven together so as to provide a compact answer to the question raised in the introduction. 1. It is misleading to see Muslim societies as predisposed to authoritarianism because of a unique feature of Islam, namely the conflation of politics and religion that has allegedly characterized the Muslim world since the time of its birth. To hold such a view is to consider that the moment of origin of Islam has uniquely determined the historical trajectory of Muslim countries. Historical evidence shows that, in these countries like in Western European Christianity, politics has been separated rather early from religion, and the former has generally subdued the latter. 22 It is only under conditions of state crisis, when the state is weak or excessively oppressive and corrupt, that Islam comes into prominence. When the state is weak, religious authorities tend to assert themselves and gain ascendancy in order to shield the popular masses against the adverse effects of unstable, corrupt and ineffective government. When the state is tyrannical and its excesses arouse strong political opposition, it is tempting for the ruler to manipulate Islam for the purpose of suppressing dissent and crushing rebellions, and thereby achieve absolute power.

When the state is tyrannical and the ruler wants to unify a society highly fragmented along tribal, ethnic, or linguistic lines, he may refer to Islam and the transcendental nature of the umma to justify taking strong actions toward national unity. Religious instrumentalization then comes into conflict with ethnic, tribal, or regional/linguistic mobilizations and, as epitomized by the histories of Afghanistan and Pakistan, success in such circumstances is far from guaranteed. It is even less so if Islamization is attempted in a country where ethnic differences coincide with religious ones, in which conditions religious instrumentalization accentuates the country’s polarization, as attested by the north-south civil war in Sudan. If, on the other hand, ethnic heterogeneity coexists with religious homogeneity, the outcome of Islam’s instrumentalization will (partly) depend upon whether the ruler also instrumentalizes ethnicity and how. For example, the fact that Bashir has emphasized both the Arab and the Islamic character of the Sudanese state had a dramatic impact on the province of Darfur where Arab nomadic tribes coexist with non-Arab Muslim sedentary tribes.

While the characterization of Muslim countries in terms of fusion between state and religion mistakenly suggests that political systems are theocracies, the idea that the state dominates religion and can even instrumentalize it points to autocracies led by absolute monarchs who are able to obtain religious approval whenever needed. Because of an important feature of Islam, the lack of a centralized religious authority structure, the great variability of interpretations of the Islamic law, and the absence of constitutional law, it is, indeed, relatively easy for an autocratic ruler to obtain legitimizing opinions from a number of religious scholars. But precisely for the same reason, it is extremely hard for him to achieve complete control of all the religious voices (such as happened in Eastern Christianity, first in Byzantium, later in Moscow). Hence the threat of an obscurantist deadlock in the form of a vicious dynamic process whereby both the ruler and his political opponents try to outbid each other by using the religious idiom.

While the ruler increasingly presents himself as the true guardian of the faith with accounts to give only to God, the radical opposition portrays him as a decadent, impious and sinful monarch who has strayed away from the true path of Islam. With a strong repressive apparatus at his disposal, the ruler continues to sink his country into an ever more deeply entrenched autocratic regime pervaded by Islamic puritanism and rising anarchic tendencies. Unlike in the state of the dominant politico-religious equilibrium where there is an asymmetric but stable pattern of cooperation between political power and religious authorities, the regime is feeding a dangerous process that risks leading to social disintegration, civil war, and its own eventual demise. The assassination of Sadat in Egypt, the dissolution of the state in Pakistan, the eruption of civil wars in Sudan, and the outbursts of violence in Algeria thus epitomize the most ominous possible consequences of the religious outbidding game. It is true that, by courting the Islamists, the despot may succeed in maintaining himself in power (e.g., Boumedienne in Algeria, Zia ul-Haq in Pakistan, Nimeiri and Bashir in Sudan), yet he then imposes an impressive long-term social cost on his country. 23 24

It is impossible to properly understand the salience of religion and the strength of Islamic revivalism in many Muslim countries today without bringing the international context into the picture, and without taking due account of the largely contingent nature of some decisive historical events. Several elements of this context are highly relevant: (i) the coincidental combination of the Seoud tribe’s successful conquest of the Arabian desert, its espousal of Wahhabism as the national ideology of the new state, and the abundance of oil resources in Saudi Arabia’s soil; (ii) the acute problems of nation-building in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region, and the unfortunate meddling of Russia and the Western superpower in its affairs; and (iii) the unwillingness and inability of the Western countries, the US in particular, to bring about a just settlement of the Israel–Palestine conflict at the heart of the Middle East. In areas with a living memory of past glory, accumulated frustrations at the inadequacy of ruling elites in meeting the hard challenges of modernization were combined with feelings of victimization engendered by a series of crushing military defeats at the hands of a small neighbor strongly supported by the West.

(b) A comparative perspective

1. Instrumentalization of religion by political rulers is not a specific feature of Islam. History of the Western world, for example, is replete with examples in which European rulers used Christianity to strengthen their position when their power was highly contested or they wanted to conquer foreign territories to build strong empires. In this regard, religion is not different from ethnicity or any other ideology that appeals to a largely constructed or imagined collective identity and is mobilized by a would-be despot out of political expediency. Whether based on religion, ethnicity, language, or other cultural traits, violence-prone extremist groups become important only when rulers decide to use them cynically to achieve selfish and narrow political ends.

2. Instrumentalization of Islam is different from instrumentalization of Catholicism or Orthodox (Greek and Russian) Christianity because unlike the latter religions Islam is institutionally decentralized. When a political ruler wants to mobilize the catholic faith, he must bargain and broker a deal with the catholic Church which is a hierarchical organization with a well-identified leader at the top. If the negotiation is brought to a successful conclusion, political instrumentalization of religion leads to a stable tactical alliance. In Islam, by contrast, no
such stability is guaranteed owing to the risk of unleashing a religious outbidding process. This is true even when the ruler constructs an alliance with an Islamic establishment (e.g., al-Azhar in Egypt) because this establishment is typically run by conservative religious dignitaries who are liable to be criticized (and denounced as “lackeys of the prince”) by dissenting religious figures who escape their control. Of course, if the political leader is strong enough, he can succeed in both seducing the conservative religious group into cooperation and mollifying all dissenting religious voices as well as non-religious political opposition (as the examples of present-day Morocco and Tunisia attest). In this case, however, the regime is more likely to share the characteristics of the dominant politico-religious equilibrium because it gives enough attention to people’s welfare and does not indulge too much in corruption and iniquitous practices.

3. An implication of the above conclusion is that the effects of instrumentalization of Islam most closely resemble those of the instrumentalization of ethnicity. Indeed, destabilization of the country and its descent into chaos and lawlessness are most likely to occur when there exists free entry into the political arena of competitors able to mobilize people around divisive religious or ethnic mottos. In other words, nationalist or ethnic outbidding is very similar to religious outbidding when no religious establishment is available to strike agreements between the contending parties. To take just one example, Milosevic who was never personally interested in the predication of the inhabitants of Kosovo (whether Albanians or Serbs) suddenly became a champion of the cause of Kosovo’s Serb minority when his hold on power was shaken. His triumph at Kosovo Polje “turned him instantly into the foremost Serbian politician,” defeating moderate Serbian politicians (Udovički & Torov, 1997, p. 88). The ultranationalism of the Croat Franjo Tudjman turned out to be a decisive factor behind the rise of Milosevic as an uncontested Serbian leader. Allying himself with the most conservative forces inside the republic of Croatia and abroad, he “chose to exacerbate tensions and to use the displeasure of many Croats at the rise of Serbian nationalism as a lightning rod for his own ascendancy”, thus lending authenticity to Milosevic’s warnings (pp. 93, 95; see also Popov, 1996). The tactic worked for a while but eventually caused the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

4. Institutional decentralization is a feature that is not unique to Islam, but is also shared by both Protestantism and Hinduism. We would therefore expect to observe phenomena of religious outbidding in Protestant and Hinduist countries. 24 Regarding the former, it is interesting to note that such phenomena seem, indeed, to have happened during the English Civil War, when political differences among various factions were typically expressed and legitimated within an exclusively religious discourse, as masterly shown by Hill (1975). Eventually, however, the Thirty Years’ War was ended by the Treaties of Westphalia (1648) which closed the era of absolute monarchs used to rely upon religious approval and divine right as source of legitimacy. A new era of progressively more secularized types of polity was ushered in (Duffy Toft, 2007, pp. 107, 108).

5. The question then arises as to why religious outbidding eventually led to secularism and representative government in England while it did not so far have that effect in Muslim countries. Here is a complex question that is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, but for which we can provide a few final insights in the light of the literature. The most common explanation for why absolute monarchies in Europe were succeeded by gradually more liberal political regimes is the fact that fiscal needs of European sovereigns, especially in times of war, forced them to bargain with merchants and bankers who demanded the respect of fundamental liberties and accountability of government in return for their financial support through loans and taxation (see, e.g., Bates & Lien, 1985; North & Weingast, 1989; Tilly, 1992). 25

The context confronting developing countries potentially subject to the risk of religious outbidding is radically different, however. Exploitation of great power rivalries during the Cold War period and after enabled many non-representative governments of the developing world to obtain valuable support from abroad, including substantial aid flows that have had the effect of reducing the need to bargain with domestic groups for revenue and to mobilize their cooperation for the purposes of internal stability and effective rule. As pointed out by Charles Tilly, many Third World states “have acquired their military organization from outside, without the same internal forging of mutual constraints between rulers and ruled.” As a result, “the new states harbor powerful, unconstrained organizations that easily overshadow all other organizations within their territories” (Tilly, 1985, p. 186). Moreover, the need for resources to be bargained over with business groups is even smaller when considerable mineral resources are available that provide an alternative tax base to capitalist production or mercantile wealth. This argument (known as the “resource curse” thesis) applies with special force to countries of the Middle East which are largely endowed with petroleum reserves. Finally, states even when they are weak or their regimes contested are nonetheless recognized (“juridically”) by the international system and derive significant resources from that recognition. By granting formal recognition irrespective of de facto control (effective control of territory and populations ceased to be the de facto condition for recognition by other states), this system rewards juridical, not empirical statehood. As a result, capable administrations and effective national political communities that are required to achieve economic development are prevented from arising (Leonard & Straus, 2003, pp. 11, 20; Moore, 1999, p. 178).

6. Is Islam an obstacle to development, and to evolution toward representative government, in particular? It should have by now become clear that the answer to that question is negative. Islam does not appear different from other religions in regard of the risk of political instrumentalization. Like any ideology, it is subject to manipulation by opportunist and ambitious political rulers. The fact that the historical conditions of its foundation were different from those of Christianity does not imply that it was bound to remain determined by these initial conditions, and historical evidence amply attests that this was not so. (The project of restoring the fusion between state and religion belongs only to Islamists.) Compared to hierarchical religions, however, Islam seems to be more prone to religious outbidding because of its decentralized institutional characteristics. Yet, this feature does not distinguish it from Protestantism (and other, Asian religions) and, moreover, it does not distinguish it from other ideologies based on non-religious factors, such as ethnicity or language. It is true that in Muslim countries Islam remains an important source of guidance for many people, and that such religious sensitivity exposes them to the possibility of political instrumentalization. However, this was also true of European countries till well into the 19th and early 20th centuries (Kaplan, 2007) and, rather paradoxically, it remains true of the most economically advanced Western country (the United States) even today.
1. The Polity IV index provides ratings of the standards of democracy along several dimensions including openness of executive recruitment, constraints on the chief executive, and competitiveness of political participation.

2. The index of Liberal Democracy measures the extent of political rights and the degree of political competition.

3. The Freedom House index measures political rights and civil liberties.

4. Note incidentally that the simultaneous presence of a statistically significant relationship between, say, being a Muslim-dominated country and political performance, on the one hand, and the absence of relationship between the former and economic performance, on the other hand, is not really surprising since we know that there is no simple robust relationship between democracy and economic growth (see, e.g., Bardhan, 1999). More particularly, in the MENA region the association between public accountibility (measured by the Index of Public Accountability) and income is not clear on the empirical level, unlike the association between the quality of administration (measured by the Index of Quality of Administration) and income which appears to be strong and robust. Such a pattern is actually consistent with worldwide trends (World Bank, 2003, p. 83).

5. We leave aside the work of Kuran (2004a, 2004b) who addresses more specifically the role of Islamic institutions as an impediment to capital accumulation and a cause of retardation of economic growth.

6. This term has been coined almost simultaneously, and in parallel, by Duffy Todt (2007) and Platteau (2008). The underlying argument is actually inspired by the theory of nationalist outbidding put forward by Snyder (2000). In his approach, a nationalist bidding war is triggered when rising alternative elites seize upon a nationalist rhetoric and try to turn it against the old elites in order to gain nationalist prestige in the eyes of the domestic audience and thereby gain access to power. All elites then attempt to outbid each other to enhance their nationalist credentials (pp. 68, 69).

7. The ulama establishment comprises the individuals trained in the Islamic law, that is, the scholars who compiled the sharia, the judges who applied it in the Islamic courts (the qadis), the legal experts who advised the judges (the mugitis), and the teachers who educate the Muslim community (the mudarris) (Cleveland, 2004, pp. 27, 28; Gleave & Kermeli, 1997).

8. In Egypt, for example, if the ulama belong to institutions designed to control access to religious status, in reality room for expression has always existed for Muslim thinkers whose initial training was not controlled by the institutions officially in charge of dispensing religious knowledge (Kepel, 2005, pp. 57, 58).

9. For the cases of Sudan and Algeria, we rely on Platteau, 2008).

10. It is, therefore, not surprising that on several occasions the government authorized them to organize meetings to denounce Assad, the president of Syria, or to support Muslim fighters in Afghanistan. Even more strangely, al-Dawa’s demand for the gradual Islamization of the Egyptian state was taken up by the state itself when Abu Talib, the president of the People’s Assembly and a close ally of the regime, went on repeating that Egypt would apply the sharia some day soon.

11. Hassan al-Turabi, a Western-educated legal scholar with strong ties to the Muslim Brethren in Egypt, returned to Sudan in 1965 and created the Islamic Charter Front, which eventually changed its name into National Islamic Front.

12. On the occasion of the Arab oil embargo (1973), Bhutto wanted Pakistan to benefit from the flow of petrodollars, which required that the country’s Islamic identity be emphasized.

13. For example, in fiscal law, ulama were primarily concerned with those limited aspects of public finance which were deemed to constitute a man’s obligations towards God, such as the payment of the zakat tax (Coulson, 1964, p. 124).

14. In Afghanistan, for example, the ulama advocate the implementation of the sharia “but do not care who is in charge of the state, provided that he supports the sharia and protects the religion” (Roy, 1993, p. 494).

15. Sufism, an important strand of Islam often manifested under spiritualist and syncretic forms, generally adopted an attitude of detachment from worldly powers, which brought Sufi masters much social prestige and spiritual authority. For example, the Chistis who played such a major role in the pattern of Islamization of India (see supra) “implicitly accepted the political cadre of the Sultanate and indirectly validated the authority of the Sultans by advocating a concept of universal hierarchy which Sultans could use to validate their claims to be the heads of a temporal world order” (Lapidus, 1988, p. 451).

16. When al-Muizz arrived in Egypt in 973, and the ulama asked him to present them with his credentials and his genealogy so that he could be accepted as a descendant of the Prophet, al-Muizz is reported to have shown his sword and said: “here is my genealogy”. “Then he showered the floor with gold coins and said: ‘here is my lineage’. The ulama had nothing further to say” (Lutfi al-Sayyid Lufti al-Sayyed Marsot, 2007, pp. 16, 17). One of Muizz’s successors, Hakim, who was obviously an eccentric man, went so far as pretending to be the incarnation of the godhead (p. 19).

17. Thus, for example, Friedrich II (1194–1250), a Hohenstaufen, obtained the title of king of Jerusalem to enhance his powers in Europe in the same manner that the Mamluk sultan al-Zahir Baybars used the prestigious figure of the caliph to sanctify his own worldly glory (Meddeb, 2002, Chaps. 16–17).

18. This feature probably explains why variation in the political and military strength of Islamist groups, both between and within countries over time, does not appear to correlate closely with the level of political and civil liberties permitted by MENA governments (World Bank, 2003, p. 204).

19. Ali Allawi (2009) has recently cast the problem in a similar fashion. According to him, many Muslims “feel that the modern West ‘excludes’ Islam”, and this feeling “feeds on the collapse in self-confidence which Muslims have undergone over the past two centuries” (p. 145). The denial in the Western public mind of the significance of the historical interchange between western civilization and Islam, and its refusal to countenance a role for Islam on the world stage have reinforced the idea that the West sees Islam as a retrograde civilization supported by a backward faith. The response of the Muslim world oscillates between “a fawning desire to be acknowledged as worthy of joining the club of civilised peoples and nations,” on the one hand, and “the angry rejection of those who had denied them ‘respect’,” on the other hand. It is the latter impulse that “drives the politics of resentment and envy, which at its edges feeds into nihilism and terrorism” (p. 146).

20. It is interesting, here, to draw a parallel with the experience of other countries, for example, India where “it is economic stagnation, wastage, and corruption of the old [dirigiste] policies, as seen clearly in the 1980s, that have discredited secularism”, and facilitated the rise to power of the Hindu Right (Desai, 2005, p. 260).
21. For example, the creation in India of the reformist college of Deoband (by Maulana Nanautawi in 1867) was essentially a reaction of a fraction of the ulama to the imposition by the colonial power of the English language and Western education. The objective of the new school was to unite Indian Muslims around the leadership of the ulama, using the Urdu vernacular to issue all sorts of legal opinions on proper Islamic practice (Lapidus, 1988, p. 725).

22. In fact, the separation between the state and the Church in Western Christianity did not seriously start until the Gregorian reforms of the 11th century (LeGoff, 2003, p. 86).


24. In the discussion below, the case of Hinduism is left aside because, unlike the Abrahamic religions, Hinduism is not an essentialist faith. That is, it is not based upon an articulated doctrine expressed in sacred texts which are considered as an essential reference by all the believers, and it does not contain prescriptions amounting to a code of conduct in private and public life. In contrast, the texts of the Old Testament, New Testament, and Quran all serve as a guide of conduct approved or mandated by a supreme being. For this reason, as stressed by Duffy Toft (2007, p. 100), Abrahamic religions tend to be uncompromising.

25. Religious tolerance was also gradually increasing, and was initiated by the elites and the highest official authorities toward the end of the 18th century only. In England, growing prosperity, increasing population and mobility, both social and geographic, as well as urbanization and the emergence of new centres of social life alongside the parish church created an environment congenial to the development of broader outlooks and more open attitudes toward different people among the upper and upper-middling strata of urban society (Kaplan, 2007, pp. 347–350). These basic trends developed in parallel with the Enlightenment ideas. Bear in mind that the Protestant Reformation initially arose as a radical and puritanical reaction to Catholicism (the religion of the powerful), much in the same way as Islamist movements today (for example, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt).

REFERENCES


