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## Islamutopia: A very short history of political Islam

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This article is an introduction to a [special series of posts](#) commissioned by LSE IDEAS exploring Islamism and the Arab Spring. The series also includes articles on [Tunisia](#), [Egypt](#) and [Libya](#), with a concluding post on [pluralism and minorities](#).

By Arshin Adib-Moghaddam.

Whenever contemporary Islamists ponder their own genealogy, there are two pivotal figures that invariably come up to invigorate their imaginings. These two reference points of contemporary political Islam are Sayyid Jamal al-din al-Afghani (or Asadabadi)(1838-1897) , and his disciple Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). Afghani and Abduh lived through a tumultuous period for the ummah whose decline as an organised political entity they tried to prevent in theory and in praxis. They were battling against the inevitable, however, and did not live long enough to witness the abolishment of the caliphate in Turkey in 1924. Now with the Arab revolts yielding a new spring for the Islamists, parallels to these pioneers of the Islamic revival are being dusted down. Are we at the dawn of a new Islamic era in West Asia and North Africa (WANA)?

With the Muslim Brotherhood fielding a candidate in the forthcoming presidential elections in Egypt, the electoral victory of Ennahda in Tunisia, the emergence of “neo-Ottoman” politics in Turkey, “neo-Shia” authoritarianism in Iraq and the continued influence of the Islamic republic in Iran the headlines almost write themselves. There is no doubt that there is something ‘Islamic’ about what is happening. But what is it exactly?

Intellectuals have been generally uncomfortable engaging with Islam as a subject matter, lest they would compromise the secular dictum of the social sciences. Few in burgeoning disciplines such as International Relations (IR) would accept that belief systems such as Islam are valid units of analysis. This bias reveals a distinctly Eurocentric orthodoxy that permeates the curricula of many of our universities. Yet a secular analysis of political discourses of Islam, systematic ideational inventions that use Islamic symbols, norms, metaphors, and imagery for ideological and political purposes, is very necessary to understand the trajectories of Muslim-majority societies. We are currently witnessing the birth of what I have called a post-modernised Islam, an eclectic experimentation, new interpretations being tried, and new forms of legislations being experimented with, all within a discursive field claimed to be authentically ‘Islamic.’ And yet in most interpretations of what is happening, from the opinion pieces of pundits in the mainstream media, to recent novels and movies, Islam as politics is either trivialised and occulted or demonised and exaggerated. As such the meanings of Islamic politics are disguised to the detriment of our understanding of what is happening in West Asia and North Africa at the very moment I am writing these lines.

It was a feature of the modernist precursor of the current experiment in the late 19th century that it yielded extraordinarily new forms of Islamic thinking even as it failed to deliver politically the utopia of a pan-Islamic renaissance. Abduh and Afghani re-opened the gates of ijtiḥād, or independent reasoning, questioning the orthodoxy of the clergy and the anti-philosophical leanings of the most prominent Islamic institutions, including al-Azhar in Cairo in the case of Abduh, and the Shia seminaries in the case of al-Afghani. Their discourse was pregnant with an ‘Avicennian Islam’, imbued with the dialectical musings of the classical Islamic philosophers, doyens of political thought such as Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd and Ibn Khaldun. And yet in Abduh and Afghani we also find the beginnings of something else, traces of the violent ruptures of modernity exemplified by their emphasis on the ideological merit of Islam- Islam din va dawla, Islam as religion and governance. It is the promise of this Islamutopia, not merely a desire to conquer the state that motivates many rank and file Islamists to venture into the realm of Machiavellian politics in many ways until today.

The decline of the Caliphate in 1924 and the emergence of authoritarian, militarised and semi-dependent post-colonial states was a caesura so traumatic that even today’s politics, Islamist and other, continue to be affected. It is not too far-fetched to generalise that for the modernist Islamists from Abduh to Khomeini, Qutb to Mawdudi, al-Banna to Iqbal, Islam was the answer to the social, political, economic and cultural decline of the ummah. These modernist Islamists invented many Islams. They were assembled to be suitable enough to function in the modernist mode, as agendas for socio-economic organisation, governance, cultural policies, or in the case of a famous fatwa of Ayatollah Khomeini to provide jurisprudential cover for transsexual surgery.

Moreover, opening up the gates of ijtiḥād de-monopolised the authority of the orthodox clergy. Suddenly, lay men such as Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), the founders of the Ikhwan in Egypt, proclaimed an authentic Islam that would transgress the interpretation of the clergy questioning their institutionalised power and sovereignty. Likewise,



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Ali Shariati (b. 1933) in Iran and Mohammad Iqbal (1877-1938) in the sub-continent deemed their poetics of politics intellectually superior to the prevalent clerical jurisprudence. Centuries of tafsir, the interpretation of the Quran, and fiqh or Islamic jurisprudence were superseded by the necessities of the politics of the day which required formulations of Islam that were amenable to ideological mobilisation, almost as if Islam is what one makes of it. Trends in the opposite direction were discernible too. Clerics such as Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq, tried to galvanise the clerical class into political action in opposition to the quietist tradition in Shia politics. This was also an effort to close down the epistemic community, to monopolise authority in the hands of the clerical class, to control the anarchy of ijihad that Abduh and al-Afghani's intellectual revolution inadvertently brought about.

Modernist Islam had a radical connotation, expressed in what may be called a 'Qutbian' syntax. For Qutb, Islam 'is a revolutionary concept and a way of life, which seeks to change the prevalent social order and remould it according to its own vision.' In response to western imperialism and authoritarian states in the Arab world, Qutbian Islam did away with philosophy in favour of ideology. In a radical twist of meanings, 'the word Muslim became the name of an international revolutionary party that Islam seeks to form in order to put its revolutionary programme into effect.' Jihad was not the individual's spiritual path to God. In the Qutbian discourse it 'signifies that revolutionary struggle involving the utmost use of resources that the Islamist party mobilises in the service of its cause.' Islam as revolution; Iran in 1979 experienced it.

The molar shifts from the apostolic, intransigent, opprobrious postulations of 'Qutbian Islam' that were geared to radical change, if not revolution, to the post-modernised mode is not absolute. Quite literally there are residues of modernity in post-modernity. But the context of politics in the Arab and Islamic world has changed and so has the forms of political expression and organisation. US hegemony is very different from British imperialism. There is no formal control of what is happening in the Arab and Muslim world. The current leaders of Ennahda in Tunisia and the Ikhwan in Egypt do not have to fight British and/or French colonialists as Abduh and Afghani felt compelled to do during the Urabi rebellion in Egypt (1881-1882) and the Tobacco revolt in Iran (1891) respectively. And yet, US power, more abstract, clandestine, molar and eclectic (and thus more difficult to detect), impinges on much that is happening in West Asia and North Africa.

The second difference between today's Islams and their precursors is that they are being nurtured in functioning civil societies that are well equipped to articulate civil politics and to disseminate their message in the networked spaces of the world-wide-web. As a consequence, current inventions of 'Islam' revert to what may be called an Avicennian 'realism' that is characterised by pragmatic politics, quite contrary to the radical upheaval demanded by people like Mawdudi, Khomeini and Qutb. If for the latter, Islam was a revolutionary panacea to western imperialism and tyrannical regimes, Ghannouchi talks about dialogue, pluralism, democracy and women's rights, for instance in his first interview when he returned from exile to Tunisia in 2011 after the successful ouster of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali: 'There is no limit to political pluralism other than the condition of rejecting violence, and giving anyone the right to found the party. There is full acceptance of the full legal rights of women. ... We recognise that Tunisians have the freedom to believe in anything, to leave or embrace any faith, as faith is a personal matter. ... For the Tunisia that we are working towards, one in which women enjoy equality, people can establish and join any party and they have the freedom to adopt any faith.' Islam as Avicennian relativity. Differences notwithstanding but I think it is this type of post-modernised Islam that fuels the politics of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, that rules in Turkey in the form of Erdogan's AKP, that governs Tunisia and that feeds into the reform process in Iran and elsewhere in the region too.

In tone and syntax this type of Islam is different from Muslim politics of the 20th century and the revolutionary Iranian variant. And yet, the regional impact of the Iranian revolution may be compared to the political opportunity that the Cuban revolution in 1953 afforded to 'Latin' Americans. The emphasis on national independence may have been a symptom for the future politics of the region but it did not determine the emergence of the Chavezes, da-Silvas, Moraleses, and Ortegases of this world. So while the revolution in Iran was a symptom of a potential post-American future of West Asia and North Africa, the current revolts in the Arab world are geared to different dynamics. Consequently, they have yielded politics that are less radical than Iran's in 1979.

What seems to be certain in all of this, is that the utopia of Islam, re-imagined by those yearning for it centuries later in the tumults of their own time, has been cast by generations of Islamists as one of justice, prosperity and power, animated by spirituality, and by the mythical bravery of heroic figures. This Islamutopia still irradiates the politics of the Arab and Muslim world today.

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This article benefitted from recent public lectures in Madrid and Cordoba.

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