Nation-State Islam after the Islamic State

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The Spring revolutions that swept through the MENA region heralded nearly two decades of unprecedented (if sporadic) open elections (2002-2019). As part of this opening, political Islamist parties rose to their peak visibility and power in Turkey, Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Morocco. Two inflection points indicated a new appraisal of Islamist challenges — first Ikhwanism on audiotape and Salafism via satellite, then al Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS) online -- when anti-sectarian tactics and professionalization met. This trend interacted with different national scenarios. Morocco and Turkey (2002-2004) experienced it before Algeria and Tunisia (2011-); these countries' physical and spiritual contiguity exposed them to the same succession of ideological assaults.

The state attitude may be summarized thus: if they did not standardize religious education and strengthen the training of Imams, Muftis and ulema against an array of politicizing influences, they risked Islamic spaces and personnel becoming factional tools or channels of influence for external agents. An international Salafi movement tried to nudge public practices and opinion towards a fundamentalist Islamic order. The declaration of a Caliphate in Iraq and al Shams also deeply spooked states in the region. On the fourth day of Ramadan in the Islamic year 1435 (July 2014), a former U.S. prisoner of war and recent theology doctorate from Saddam University strode up to the *minbar* (pulpit) of the medieval al Nuri mosque in Iraq's second largest city, Mosul. He called upon Muslims to make hijra — return migrate — to the new Islamic State. Barring that, he said, they should wage violent jihad upon infidels wherever possible. He spoke with the authority of Salafi and Prophetic pedigrees — *Abu Bakr al Baghdadi al Husayni al Qureyshi* — and declared war on the colonial borders of the greater Muslim world.

Like Martin Luther 500 years earlier, he articulated grievances against a corrupt religious hierarchy. "Your rulers," he intoned, using Saudi Arabia as a stand-in for the Sunni world, are complicit with the "plots and schemes" of infidels to further carve up the map and "remove Allah's rule from this earth."[i] The Islamic State minted license plates, currency, and a map of the coming Caliphate. Two generations after King Hussein's abortive declaration in 1924 Mecca, and one generation after the Shi'a Revolution restored Islamic rule in 1979 Iran, al Baghdadi became the world's best-known pretender to the mantle of the Prophet in the cradle of Sunni Islam. The dour doctor in the black turban offered a simple solution, but his merciless and context-less shari'a justice did not have wide appeal, whereas his regime was actively offensive to many – foremost the guardians of official religious institutions in the nation-state era.

Within weeks of the Mosul sermon establishing the Islamic State, the leaders of 126 official and nongovernmental Islamic institutions — the Sheikh of al Zeitouna, the Mufti of Jerusalem, the leader of the Nigerian Fatwa Council, eminences from al Azhar and al Qaraouiyine, et al. — fired back a heavily footnoted Open Letter to the would-be Caliph. Addressing him by his civil title and given name without the added plumage, the international guild served notice to *Dr. Ibrahim Awwad al Badri* to cease and desist operating a caliphate without a license. Like the Council of Worms refuting Luther's Wittenberg theses, the official representatives and scholars from Egypt, Turkey, Dubai, Palestine, Tunisia, Indonesia, Sudan, France, etc. laid out the Iraqi's twenty-four errors, including: "It is forbidden to issue fatwas without […] the necessary learning requirements; To oversimplify matters of Shari'a; To ignore the reality of contemporary times; To kill the innocent; To declare people non-Muslim; to harm […] any 'People of the Scripture' [Jews or Muslims]."[ii]

The scholars and officials were united in support of the rule of law over competing interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The last two lines drove home a nation-state-friendly message: "Loyalty to one's nation is permissible in Islam" and "Islam does not require anyone to emigrate anywhere."[iii] The would-be Caliph was outgunned by the hundreds of diplomas arrayed behind the letter, which were the tip of a broad geopolitical and military and ideological alliance against the Islamic State. The hodgepodge of ulema — listed phonebook-style at the end — underscored the lack of a single repository of Islamic authority.

The missing Caliphate after the end of the Ottoman Empire left one elemental premise of state legitimacy open for debate in the nation-states of the Muslim-majority world. In other words, should Islamic resources be mobilized in service of the state, or vice versa? Abu Bakr al Baghdadi promised that ISIS would end the purgatory of "humiliation under the Sa'ud family and finally fully implement Shari'a law."[iv] After centuries spent as insurgents against Ottoman rule, the Wahhabi-Saud alliance had to defend its own revolution, in the early 21st century, with state institutions of its own. Two days after al Baghdadi declared a worldwide Caliphate, the Saudis deployed thirty thousand troops along the border with Iraq; ISIS forces arrived within 60 miles.[v] Al Baghdadi's fortunes soured in 2017 when the Islamic State was militarily defeated by a mix of Syrian, Russian, Iranian, American, Kurdish and Turkish air and ground forces; he was killed two years later during a US raid on his Syrian hideout. While his replacement was announced almost immediately, the loss of his charismatic figure and after losing a territorial foothold signaled a bloody end to the two thousand-day Caliphate.

Certain truths about Islam and the state remained the same as before the Caliphate. Islam was the official, semi-established religion for those living in the former Ottoman area, notwithstanding varying regime types and ethnic groups. Religious exercise remained subject to a state monopoly, and there were no recognized private Islamic spaces outside the home, i.e. no religious civil society, whose impulses took the form of movements and educational programs. Since the end of the Cold War there had been breakthroughs in religious professionalization and the "soft" restoration of religious and cultural rights. But they hardly compensated the earlier evisceration of religious institutions. The various compromises, large and small, made by national governments made it impossible for the guardians of the *Takfiri* flame to condone the nation-state format.

Like Martin Luther, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi had a point about the degenerated state of the clergy and religious scholarship in many corners of the realm. Bureaucratization was no guarantee of service quality. In certain countries, half of imams were appointed by virtue of memorizing the Qur'an, whereas others were the fruit of patronage networks. Even if there was little appetite for al Qaeda or ISIS, their charismatic *mahdis* drew attention to state weaknesses in the Islamic arena — and to the Caliph's empty seat. The 20th-century secularist governments – Kemalist or Bourguibian at their extreme -- had not left behind conditions to reproduce future generations of an *ulema* and *imamat*. Their unprepared successors had to fend off basic interrogations of their very purpose and legitimacy.

Institutional Growth

Nation-State Islam thrived under all shades of government -- its growth outpaced that of any other bureaucracy, extending coverage over the entire national territory and frequently beyond it. Governments in Turkey and across North Africa devoted growing resources to Nation-State Islam in the first decades of the 21st century. To hold off a rising tide of defections of religious (and, implicitly or explicitly, political) loyalty, governments raised a counter-reformation effort reminiscent of 16th-century Rome's protection of its traditions and interests. After 2011, across the board, per capita Islamic affairs spending rose by more than 60%. The counter-movement empowered an army of clerics to educate and defend the faithful against modern religious fundamentalism. Algeria, for example, decided to include in all new mosques an Imam training seminary (*Dar al Imam*) and a Qur'an school for children.[vi] The bureaucracies grew into mini-Leviathans.

In each formerly Ottoman-administered land, newly endowed Ministries of Religious Affairs improved the national religious corps under civilian oversight to shield a specific brand of Islam. Each became a *spiritual* defense ministry for the post-9/11 and post-ISIS world at home and abroad. Repression still played an important role: authorities closed down bookstores, dismissed insubordinate imams, prohibited unlicensed Qur'an courses. But after years of playing whack-a-mole — imprisoning unregistered clerics and raiding unapproved religious schools — governments shifted to long-term planning and invested in institutional breakwaters. A typical Islamic Affairs ministry's activities included responsibility for the country's inventory of mosques; training, employment and quality control of imams; the foundations (*waqf*) and charity (*zakat*); public education campaigns (spreading literacy and prophetic *hadiths*); and Islamic broadcasting: religious channels broadcasting in the Arab world

increased by 50% between 2011 and 2014.[vii] There is variety in the timing of the rehabilitation of the Islamic establishment and the related reorganization of the national ministries of religious affairs. Sultan Tepe cautions against models which "reduce state-religious relations to the one-dimensional interaction of control or contestation."[viii] In terms of per capita spending, and as a percentage of GDP and national budget, Turkey and Morocco outspent Algeria and Tunisia in the Islamic affairs sector by 2:1. This was reflected in religious education, with the number of schools and students differing from one country to another, as did the duration of compulsory courses and the job prospects of graduates.

De-Politicization

Why did Islamic Affairs ministries persist – even exponentially increase – during the decade of the Arab Spring, regardless of whether democrats or Islamists take power? The main reason, articulated in interviews with Islamic Affairs officials, was a shared aim to achieve *de-politicization* — i.e. to avoid *fitna* (religious strife) within the national community. Nation-State Islam was wielded against political and religious extremisms, regionalisms and other splinter movements.[ix] Governments did not *Islamicize* the public sphere in service of divine conquest or a theocratic endgame. Rather, they preempted and co-opted hostile takeovers by strengthening schools, mosques, seminaries and faculties to act as a buffer from the ground up**.** The institutions are used to compete directly with non-state actors who have filled a vacuum, i.e. the Brotherhoods active domestically and abroad.

Such a benign reading of State Islam challenges the predominant understanding of Islam's return to the public sphere. Indeed, the state was frequently accused of politicizing religion selectively. The scholar Nathan Brown quotes an imam who "observed wryly [...] 'If I endorse the constitution, that is not political. But if I oppose it, that is political.'"[x] Indeed, much of the political science literature has expressed the view that more resources for Nation-State Islam simply meant more flunkies spouting more propaganda. The state mosque is variously portrayed as a "regime mouthpiece" by Quintan Wiktorowicz; the ulema as "servile to power" by Stathis Kalyvas; and official imams as a contributing factor to religious radicalization and violence by Jocelyne Césari and J. Klein. Prominent scholars of the previous generation like Bernard Lewis and Elie Khadourie dismissed institutionalized religion as just one more clumsy tool in the arsenal of state repression.

On the other hand, to portray Disestablishment and Establishment as Manichean alternatives does not capture the reality of religious regulation. The point of civilian rule in the context of state-military relations, one scholar wrote, is simply to "subordinate [it] to the larger purposes of a nation, rather than the other way around. The purpose … is to defend society, not to define it. While a country may have civilian control of the …. without democracy, it cannot have democracy without civilian control."[xi] Meir Hatina has argued that official ulema have been done a "historical injustice" by the pantheon of Middle East scholars who "depicted ulema as religious mercenaries in the service of heretical regimes."[xii] After all, as Dale Eickelman writes, "Muslim politics *is* the competition […] over the interpretation of symbols and control of the institutions that produce and sustain them."[xiii] Religion scholars Ann Marie Wainscott and Michael Driessen have established the role that religious regulation has played in nation-state consolidation in Muslim contexts.[xiv]

Across the region, the call of the *muezzin* was indeed at some point put to work, alongside other public servants, to quell a political crisis in unsafe or potentially revolutionary conditions. For example, to urge public calm during riots; to discourage separatism and to generally promote the institutions of the state — e.g., getting out the vote — or against material threats, such as helping put down a coup. State oversight is depicted as uniformly heavy-handed and its surface is mine-laden. In Egypt, no mosque under 860 square feet may hold a Friday sermon,[xv] and authorities set up a toll-free line for prayer-goers to report "discourse undignified of a mosque."[xvi] In Algeria, a police car stood vigil outside every Friday-sermon mosque every week, as much to keep an eye on worshippers as to protect them from others. Tunisia considered punishing those not fasting during Ramadan; *ulema* have insisted that "the state had the duty to supervise social morality."[xvii] Underneath that surface, however, the Ministries and Directorates of Religious Affairs seemed to be earnest in their attempts to

provide politically neutral religious services in a highly-charged environment. Whether that amounted to illegitimate control or legitimate protection was in the eye of the beholder.

Religious Affairs and Religious Identity

Opinion surveys suggest that governments have succeeded in the short term in reducing the superficial incompatibilities between religious and national belonging. Despite the high extent of state intervention in Morocco and Turkey, more than 90% of Moroccans, Tunisians and Turks reported that they felt free to practice their religion; only 2-4% felt "not free at all." Slightly more Turkish respondents thought that Turkey would be *worse* off separating religion and state (40% to 37%) — presumably because of the fundamentalist forces they feared the freedom of deregulation would unleash. The proportion in Tunisia was higher — 3:1 (62% to 19%). On the one hand, 97% of Turks affirmed that "everything in the Qur'an is accurate and timely," and nine out of ten respondents in both Turkey and Tunisia agreed "the Qur'an has correctly predicted all the major events that have occurred in human history" and that "Islam is the only true religion." But Turks and Tunisians were far less likely than others to desire the Qur'an as the source of civil or criminal law.[xviii] Only around 10% of Turks wanted shari'ah law. This contrasts with 82% of Moroccans — where shari'ah is interpreted by a national ulema council presided by the King and Commander of the Faithful (who may have considered they already had shari'ah law).

Tunisians responded paradoxically: they were 15% more likely to believe in the importance of separating religion and politics than Algerians and Moroccans, but 10% *less* likely to support equal rights for all religious groups. Their intolerance was higher than average in both directions: Tunisians also have the highest proportion in favor of banning the face veil (84%). In a country where half claimed to frequent mosques while half did not, equal measures (20%) thought religion and Islamic texts should *either* be "completely absent" *or* "form all foundations" of policy and lawmaking.[xix]

In Algeria, the Arab barometer found that 90% agreed government "should implement only laws of the sharia"; but 30% thought democracy and Islam are compatible.[xx] Close to two-thirds stated that "men of religion should have an influence on decisions of government," a vast majority said they felt Muslim above all (70%); followed by 20% Algerian; and 6% Arab. Asked about social or geographical identity, however, only 12% chose "Islamic World." A slight majority believe women are required by Islam to wear the hijab; less than half (42%) believed that "Islam requires non-Muslim rights be inferior." Tunisians and Turkish citizens are far likelier to allow the possibility that non-Muslims are going to heaven. Around two-thirds of Turks and Tunisians support equal rights for other religions.

Counterintuitively, the relative number of mosques decreased under AKP rule, and so did the number of Turkish citizens saying that they felt "Muslim first." They declined from 64% in 2001 to 39% in 2013 while those saying "above all, I am Turkish" rose from 34% to 44%. Another survey comparing opinions in 2018 and 2008 found fewer respondents described themselves as religious (51% versus 55%); and an even steeper drop-off for those who said they were "strictly religious." In the same survey, the number of atheists and non-believers increased from 2% to 5%.[xxi]

Could the government's effort to lessen the incompatibility be credited for the uptick in patriotism? The risks of disestablishment — removing Islam from government ministries — included the many revolutionary non-governmental religious organizations (Hezbollah, Hamas, Shi'a proselytizers, ISIS) who stood ready to fill any vacuum. Authorities warned citizens against the dangers of frequenting "parallel" structures. In Tunisia, the warnings were against the "parallel hajj"; in Algeria, against "parallel fatwas"; in Turkey, against "parallel Diyanet." There were tens of thousands of young men across the region who felt no national loyalty and attempted to make *hijra* (emigrate) to the Islamic State. Was there a relationship between the strength of Nation-State Islam and support for Salafism or the Islamic State?

The consequences of the "absence of an organizational gatekeeper in the Islamic sphere," religious scholar Sebastian Elischer explains, was that "the state missed the opportunity to establish steering capacity in the Islamic *milieu.*"[xxii] Where governments did not adequately nationalize the practice

of Islam, the state was at best extraneous and at worst an obstacle to citizens' religious sentiments. Governments with strong Nation-State Islam, Elischer points out, reaped dividends from a state apparatus that was built up in 1980s and 1990s, when Saudis first expanded transnationally and satellite dishes became widespread. In his study of sub-Saharan Africa, he writes that those "states that chose institutional regulation as their primary strategy *prior* to the emergence of Saudi Arabia as a major international player in the mid-1970s successfully undermined the spread of political and jihadi Salafism in later decades."[xxiii]

By a similar logic, does the survival of the Middle East state system now depend on intact Nation-State Islam? State involvement with Islam is neither theologically predetermined nor is it always the blunt instrument of social control, Each of the Sunni post-Ottoman states found it necessary to oversee and control Islam, a pattern that was reinforced (not weakened) by democratization. There was some attendant increase in autonomy and religious self-governance within certain realms, all within the ambit of state employment. The next step would be towards semi-autonomy: elected muftis, ulema, and cases where Turkish imams were given civil powers of marriage in distant borderlands. This was not exactly government by shari'ah law, it was religion overseen — *encadré* — by state law, the gilded cornice that frames a *tableau vivant*.

Endnotes

[i] Graeme Wood, "The 'Caliph' speaks." *The Atlantic*, November 4 2016.
[ii] "Letter to Baghdadi." Open Letter to Baghdadi. September 19, 2014.
[iii] "Letter to Baghdadi." Open Letter to Baghdadi. September 19, 2014.
[iv] *Al-Taqrir,* 15 Aug. 2014, altagreer.com.
[v] "Saudi Arabia Deploys 30,000 Soldiers to Border with Iraq: Al-Arabiya TV." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 3 July 2014.
[vi] Inspector General of Religious Affairs, Personal interview, February 2014
[vii] "Religious TV MENA Media Industry." Northwestern University in Qatar.
[viii] Sultan Tepe. "Contesting Political Theologies of Islam and Democracy in Turkey." *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 2, no. 2 (2016): 175-92.
[ix] Robert J. Barro and Rachel McCleary, "Which Countries Have State Religions." *Quarterly Journal of Economics,* 120 no 4 (n.d.): 1331-370.
[x] Nathan Brown, "Official Islam in the Arab World." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Paper, May 2017
[xi] Richard H. Kohn, "An Essay on Civilian Control Military." Kohn: Civilian Control. N.p., 1997. Web.
[xii] Meir Hatina, "The Clerics' Betrayal? Islamists, 'ulema' and the Polity," in Meir Hatina, Ed., *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: 'ulema' in the Middle East.* Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009. pp. 250-251.
[xiii] Dale F. Eickelman, and James P. Piscatori. *Muslim Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. p.5.
[xiv] Michael Driessen. *Religion and Democratization: Framing Religious and Political Identities in Muslim and Catholic Societies*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014; Ann Marie Wainscott. *Bureaucratizing Islam: Morocco and the War on Terror*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
[xv] Matt Bradley, and Leila Elmergawi. "Egypt Cracks Down on Radical Muslim Clerics." The Wall Street Journal. September 11, 2013.
[xvi] Jacob Wirtschafter, and Amr El Tohamy. "Fearing Extremist Violence, Egypt Silences 20,000 Storefront Mosques." Religion News Service. May 28, 2018.
[xvii] Meir Hatina, "The Clerics' Betrayal?" p.253.
[xviii] "Religious Nationalism, Islamic Fundamentalism & Trends in Values in the Middle East." *Religious Nationalism, Islamic Fundamentalism, and Trends in Values in the Middle East*. N.p., Feb. 2015.
[xix] "Survey of Tunisian Public Opinion." International Republican Institute. N.p., 22 June 2014-1 July 2014. p. 31.
[xx] Michael D. Driessen. "Sources of Muslim Democracy: The Supply and Demand of Religious Policies in the Muslim World." *Democratization* 25, no. 1 (2017): 115-35.
[xxi] Konda Institute, "Turks Losing Trust in Religion Under AKP", *Al-Monitor*, 09 Jan 19
[xxii] Sebastian Elischer, "How Jihadism Ends: The State, Critical Antecedents, and the Demobilization of Violent Salafism in East Africa." Unpublished Manuscript, 2017, p. 26.