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AFFAIRS**

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

Published on *Foreign Affairs* (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com>)[Home](#) >

All (Muslim) Politics Is Local

How Context Shapes Islam in Power

September/October 2009

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The maxim *Islam din wa-dawla* (Islam is religion and state) is often said to describe a distinguishing mark of Islam -- the suggestion being that Islam is a religion with a political mission at its core. Both those who repeat the mantra with approving fervor and those who worry about it assert its essential truth and suggest that all Muslims must make it a part of their worldview. Some go so far as to claim that this axiom calls for a particular form of state structure or political behavior.

And yet, of course, the statement is nothing more than a political slogan -- an artifact of its time, its meaning contingent on the setting in which it is used, like any other rallying cry. This quality does not make the slogan any less meaningful for the Muslims who subscribe to it; what it does is highlight the fact that this saying reflects a preoccupation with state power in the modern world. The Muslims who adhere to it, no less than those who do not and no less than non-Muslims, are both the products and the makers of that world. This point is worth stating since much of the present debate about the role of Islam in world politics tends to downplay the political or, at least, display a one-dimensional understanding of what drives political ambition. The political behavior of Islamists, and sometimes that of all Muslims, is often treated as an exotic peculiarity that defies normal analysis and can only be explained as an extension of their faith.

Whatever one's reference point, however, the sometimes sordid business of politics has a gravitational pull that brings lofty ideals and grand sentiments down to earth with a thump. To play the game of politics is to grapple with the practicalities of power. This requires making sense of why people act as they do and when they do: why they respond to certain calls to action -- nationalist, Islamist, whatever -- and why they think their political activities are appropriate, ethically as well as practically, to the ends they imagine worthy of achievement.

Investigating these questions may be an empirical or epistemological challenge, but it does not require singling out religious motivations, Islamic or otherwise. The same searching questions should be

asked of the religiously motivated that are asked of liberals, conservatives, Marxists, fascists, nationalists, and any other group that tries to put into practice its imagined notion of the good life. One should not rely only on the players' descriptions of themselves. Yet this is precisely what has happened to the effort to understand the role of religion in shaping the political lives of Muslims. Many members of the Western media, and even many Western academics, have pointed to the most extreme of Muslim political tracts and suggested that these are what Islamism, or even Islam, is really about.

It is all the more refreshing, therefore, to encounter two serious books that avoid this pitfall: Gilles Kepel puts the "politics" back in "Islamist politics," and Ali Allawi explores the often troubled relationship between worldly power and the spirituality of Islamic beliefs. Both books indicate, in their own way, that all Muslims who seek to reshape the world according to Islamic ideals and traditions, whatever they may define those to be, are confronted by the mundane need to bend an often obdurate reality to their will.

RELIGION AND POWER

The exercise of power is bound by time and place, and it depends on the competence of political actors. These conditions determine the political impact of any Islamic ideals. It is worth contrasting, for example, the very different outcomes of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's calls for revolt in Iran in 1963 and in 1978: the first foundered; the second started a revolution. In some cases, the venality of political actors can trigger disillusionment and a reappraisal of Islamic obligations, leading some to turn their backs on an Islamic political program. (Iran might become such a case, after the unrest over the presidential election earlier this year.) A program that does not work -- spectacularly, corrosively, or insidiously -- loses credibility and purchase. It can no longer move people; it has no traction. This may be the result of various factors unrelated to religion or ideology, but these factors necessarily affect the ways in which people understand and act on calls to put their ideals into practice.

Allawi captures this point well in his account of the rise, domination, and decline of secular ideologies and their adherents in the Middle East. Having lived through Iraq's turbulent years of revolution, he witnessed thousands of Iraqis being drawn to the Iraqi Communist Party and thousands of others coming to believe that Arab nationalism and Arab socialism, Baathist or otherwise, would bring modernity to Iraq. Unsurprisingly, Allawi is wary of these fallen gods.

For him, the Islamist political movements that originally emerged in Iraq in the 1950s and gained power thanks to the U.S. occupation after 2003, came not simply from the disillusioned secularists. Crucially, he sees them as products of a distinctively Iraqi politics. They certainly identify themselves as Muslim -- Shiite or Sunni -- but they also represent what it means to be political actors in contemporary Iraq: having to deal with Kurdish secessionists, foreign intervention, and oil-based political economies. The resources of Islamist groups may be very different now than when these groups first emerged; demographics and power structures have changed. But the expression of their political imagination, no matter how self-consciously attached to distinctively Islamic markers, is similar to their predecessors'. Thus their attention to defining community and collective loyalties; the importance they attribute to territorial control and administration; their building of coalitions; their ideas of representation; their use of violence; their cultivation, with money, of patrimonial networks; their competing for political leadership -- all are familiar features of political behavior.

Self-consciously Islamist movements and parties, no less than the secular nationalist ones, to which they bear a strong family resemblance, are preoccupied with what works and how.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Grounding Islamist organizations and their sympathizers in a local political reality shaped by the histories, predicaments, and preoccupations of the people they seek to mobilize is a central theme of Kepel's wide-ranging study of various Islamic political movements, chiefly in the Middle East. Part of his intention is to demonstrate how political movements that define themselves based on their readings of Islamic traditions are best understood through a close analysis of the contexts that produced them; they are not the generic symptoms of "resurgent" or "radical" Islam.

Looking at Islamist organizations from Afghanistan to Iraq, from Palestine to Lebanon, Kepel gives a convincing account of the failure of what he says are the two "grand narratives" that have dominated common understandings of political Islam over the past decade or so. The first is the narrative of the "war on terror." Put forward by the Bush administration and its circle of ideologues, it implied that the U.S. military would clear the way for the establishment of democratic politics across the Middle East. The second is both the target and the mirror image of the first: propagated by Osama bin Laden and his right-hand man, Ayman al-Zawahiri, it holds that jihad directed against the "far enemy," is the best way of establishing Islamic rule in Muslim-majority states and elsewhere. As Kepel points out, both theories are delusions, have equally improbable goals, and have inflicted horrific damage -- damage that has often provoked local resistance and left the United States and al Qaeda bogged down in the intransigent politics of place, facing criticism, fragmenting alliances, and isolation.

Quite apart from the ethical revulsion these two narratives have provoked among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, another problem, as Kepel points out, is their remoteness from Muslims' actual, and diverse, experiences. Both narratives so reify religion as to turn political behavior into the mere reflection of an individual's attachment to a timeless set of prescriptions called "Islam," as if these were removed from the contexts in which Muslim principles and identities drive political actors. They also suggest that Muslims' politics can -- or, in the case of bin Laden, must -- be understood in relation to their faith. Yet the truth is more complicated, contested, and contingent than these two narratives allow. Neither can explain why at a given time and place a given group of Muslims chooses the prescriptions it does from Islam's vast and rich tradition to guide its political behavior. And neither can account for why other groups of Muslims act on very different understandings of Islam or why still others see their engagement with power as having only the most tenuous connection, if any, to their religious beliefs.

What does explain these differences is political context. Kepel's account makes sense of the diversity of Muslims' politics, not simply in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia but also in western Europe, where a series of violent incidents and symbolic confrontations over the past decade has prompted talk of a fundamental incompatibility of values and a "clash of civilizations." A cursory glance at political reality makes clear that most of the conflicts involving Muslim immigrants in, for example, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom owed more to the policies pursued by these states' governments than to the Islamic identities or even Islamist proclivities of the protagonists. For Kepel, the policy eschewing integration in the Netherlands ("pillarization," which sees religious communities as separate pillars that help hold together the Dutch republic) and its

counterpart in the United Kingdom ("multiculturalism," whereby the state lets people of different cultures regulate their own affairs) created fertile ground for the growth of radical Islamist political sentiments among Muslim immigrants in those two countries.

These approaches have roots in the Netherlands' and the United Kingdom's imperial pasts: overseas, Dutch and British colonists favored ruling indirectly and cultivating native leaders to ensure order locally. In the Netherlands and the United Kingdom today, policies shaped by these traditions have prompted the authorities to be hands-off when it comes to their Muslim communities -- at least until state security is threatened, at which point the state takes clumsy measures that many Muslims interpret as discrimination.

Kepel holds up the contrasting example of France, which has pursued clear and, according to some, highly intrusive policies designed to impose secularism in public life. He does concede that France's "assimilation" policy has been a good deal more successful at integrating Muslim immigrants civically than economically -- hence, the politics of contestation, including riots involving French citizens with Muslim backgrounds, that has erupted periodically. But as Kepel's account makes clear, this is better understood as the rebellion of bored, out-of-work, and marginalized French youths living in dreary suburbs than as anything remotely resembling Islamist politics.

Whether these differences in policy provide the key explanation for the variety of political views among the Muslim immigrant communities of Europe is still up for debate. Some argue, for instance, that the explanation has more to do with these communities' links to the politics of their countries of origin. Nevertheless, Kepel's analysis is valuable for taking the trouble to scrutinize the micropolitics of different groups. He shows that the closer one looks, the more either irrelevant or troubling grand narratives about Islam and civilization become.

THE PRIVATIZATION OF ISLAM

Allawi's otherwise erudite and thoughtful book is, for its part, haunted by the kind of generalization that Kepel eschews. Allawi is writing about Islam as a faith on the stage of world history, and as the book's title suggests, his central concern is "the crisis of Islamic civilization." By this, he means a number of things but principally the fragmentation of authority, the loss of unifying cultural referents, and the divergence between the spiritual and the material in Muslims' conduct. Together, these fractures have deprived Islam of the kind of autonomous, self-rejuvenating drive that Allawi sees in other civilizations (say, China or the West) and have made it more vulnerable to domination by the forces of globalization, be they powerful governments, capitalism, or cultural hegemons. From Allawi's perspective, Islam has become privatized, an article of interior faith nothing like the framework for public life that he believes it has been historically and should continue to be. If for Kepel the privatization of religion is a recipe for social harmony and a goal of the secular state, for Allawi it is the beginning of the end.

This position presents Allawi with something of a dilemma. On the one hand, he pleads for Muslims to reconnect with the powerful spiritual essence of Islam and to reestablish Islam as a major player in world history. On the other, he is intensely wary of, indeed repulsed by the sight of, political Islamists scrambling to use any means available -- graft, corruption, violence -- for political advantage, thereby cutting themselves off from the "wellsprings of Islamic ethics." The targets of his anger include

organizations such as al Qaeda and the Islamist parties of Iraq, which he sees as symptoms of the crisis of Islamic civilization rather than as part of the solution. As he rightly says, these groups reflect the politics of those they are fighting in all its ruthlessness, not the spiritual values at the heart of Islam.

The question is, how can one have any impact on the existing order without in some way succumbing to the logic of political practicalities? The harsh truth is that however sublime or spiritual the ideals -- and Islam, no less than any other great religious tradition, can provide a dazzling array of such ideals -- their champions will need to engage with the politics of place in order to realize them. There may be many ways of doing this, and disputes about which ways are best are inevitable, but at the heart of this task lies the old political conundrum of how to engage effectively the existing power structure without compromising one's core ideals. Reflecting on this question, one realizes that political discourse is the very antithesis of civilizational discourse, even if the latter can sometimes be used polemically in political debates. The closer one looks at the multitude of hopes, prejudices, fears, and activities that constitute political life, the harder it is to meaningfully apply to a political order an overarching, homogenizing, and essentializing term such as "civilization."

MODERNITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

It should be little surprise, then, that Allawi is at his best when he turns to the particular. Some of his book's most powerful passages concern the corruption of governments in the Middle East and, in his memorable phrase, the "sinister cities" of the Persian Gulf, which have embraced materialism and an "oppressive modernity." These grim facets of globalization form the reality of the modern world, as inhabited and created by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Much of Allawi's concern, in other words, is not really about Islam as a religion, or even about Islam as a civilization, but rather about what has been happening to Muslims. They have had various responses to modernity and in the process have created new ways of being Muslim. Some of these responses -- peaceful or violent, accommodating or rejectionist -- could become an inspiration for millions. But even those will catch on not simply because of Muslims' professions of faith; if they do spread, it will also be because they help Muslims make sense of power, in all its forms.

This is the most important message of these books. Kepel and Allawi are at their strongest when they examine the intellectual and political trends that have shaped the experiences of Muslims across the globe. As Kepel and Allawi demonstrate, these trends have made Muslims full actors in the evolving story of world history, whether they act self-consciously with reference to their Muslim identities or not. To be a Muslim in the modern world is both to be shaped by that world and to take part in its shaping. Modernity, with all its ambiguities and sometimes contradictory impulses, is a composite affair, constantly refashioned by those who engage with it. Kepel's and Allawi's books are reminders that politics is rooted in time and place, and that at the same time it nonetheless follows a remarkably similar logic in all its various settings. Understanding this logic, while also grasping the full significance of context, helps one understand the behavior of political actors -- and not just Muslim ones.

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