

What is Political Islam?

Written by Muqtedar Khan

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MUQTEDAR KHAN, MAR 10 2014

Islam and the Loss of Past Glory

Many Muslim intellectuals and scholars, since the beginning of the colonial era and the beginning of the enduring domination of the West over Muslim countries, have been lamenting the loss of Muslim Empire, Muslim power and Muslim glory. The key moment when the decline of Muslim power was crystallized in the Muslim psyche was when the Ottoman Empire disappeared and the Islamic Caliphate as an institution was abolished in 1924. Many Islamic movements have since emerged with the explicit goal to revive the Muslim *Ummah*, reform Muslim societies and restore them to their past glory[1].

There is no consensus about what was the primary reason for the decline, but remarkably there is a near global consensus that the Islamic World has been in decline for centuries. Some intellectuals have argued that the reason why Muslims have lost their *mojo* is because they have abandoned the path of the *Shariah*, Islam's revealed divine law. They hypothesize that if Muslims implemented the true *Shariah*, they would once again be glorious like their Muslim forbearers. They believe that the best way to order society is according to the divine *Shariah* and because Muslims have departed from this divinely ordained path to success, they declined. This is the basic premise behind movements that are broadly defined under the rubric of political Islam, such as *Jamaat-e-Islami* in South Asia, and the Muslim Brotherhoods (*Al-Ikhwaan al-Muslimeen*) in the Arab World[2]. They believe that a systematic implementation of the *Shariah* will once again restore global leadership and moral sovereignty to Muslims. They envisage an Islamic state as the vehicle that will re-implement *Shariah* in the lives of Muslims and re-establish Islam as a global force[3].

Political Islam is a Composite of Diverse Movements

There are many revivalist movements in the Muslim world and Muslim communities in the West, such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), but they do not qualify as *political Islamic movements*. Only those groups who believe that not only does Islam have a built-in political system but also that all Muslims are required by their religion to follow this system qualify as political Islam. These movements can be global and seeking to establish a global Islamic Caliphate, such as the *Hizbut Tahreer*, or they can be country-specific seeking to establish an Islamic state such as *Hamas* in Palestine or *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) in Pakistan. There are also regional movements; the most prominent one is the *Ikhan al-Muslimeen*, the Muslim Brotherhood, whose ultimate goal is to establish an Arab Islamic State. But the Brotherhood is now divided into many countrywide movements and they have lately settled to either acquire power through democratic means as in Egypt under President Muhammad Morsi in 2012 or share power with secular and liberal elites as in Tunisia after the Arab Spring[4].

Clearly there are many groups that are seeking to establish some kind of Islamic polity, which then can become an instrument for global Islamic resurgence and even political unification. Islamic polities, states or caliphates are not the endgame. They are to become means and instruments of global Islamic resurgence. Political Islamic movements can also be divided according to the means that they wish to employ in order to realize their first goal – the Islamic polity. I submit that there are two types, those who seek the Islamic polity through force and violence, even terrorism, and those who seek it through peaceful means including democratic processes. Those who use force are now widely referred to as *Jihadis*, and those who don't use force are identified by academia and media as *Islamists*[5].

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Political Islam and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring – region wide mass uprisings — in 2011 transformed Arab politics by bringing to an end long enduring dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, precipitated reforms in Jordan and Morocco and brought civil war to Syria[6]. The initial euphoria of revolution and early transitions to democratic governance underscored the immense popularity, organizational acumen, and depth of support for political Islam as they won elections in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco. In 2012 it appeared as if the future of the Arab World was political Islam in power, empowered with democratic legitimacy through electoral victories. Across the region political Islamic parties were getting the opportunity to shape the political future by writing constitutions and shaping regimes. Turkey's ruling party, the AKP, led by the charismatic Recep Erdogan had for years denied that it was an Islamist party. But as political Islam began to triumph in the Arab World, AKP leadership began to openly show their affinity to political Islam and even presented themselves as a model for Islamism in the post Arab Spring Middle East. Towards the end of 2012, political Islam was in charge of the Middle East, from Turkey to Iran with the notable exception of GCC countries.

But with the counterrevolution of 2013 in Egypt that removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power and outlawed it, and sustained protests that forced Al-Nahda to relinquish power in Tunisia in favor of an interim technocratic government, political Islam is once again back in the bunker, fighting for legitimacy and struggling to play a role that it deserves in the shaping of Muslim political futures[7]. There are many Muslims who feel that Islam has much to say about the role of ethics and values in the public sphere. The Muslim philosophical tradition has never developed an indigenous secular ethical tradition therefore all Muslim ideas about ethical and just governance either come from Islam or are imported from the West.

As Muslims begin to assert their religious and cultural identity, they seek authenticity in social structures and it is this search for authenticity that serves as rejection of Western cultural and normative hegemony[8]. Regardless of the success or failure of political Islam, Muslims will seek to politicize Islam in search for cultural independence. Islamic modernism, and some limited Sufi incursions into politics may serve as viable alternatives, but at the moment for those Muslims who seek cultural and political independence from the West, political Islam is the only alternative.

[1] For a comprehensive bibliography on the subject see Yvonne Y. Haddad, John o. Voll, and John L. Esposito, *The Contemporary Islamic Revival: A Critical Survey and Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991).

[2] See Shahram Akberzade (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Political Islam* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2012). Also see "The Political Philosophy of Islamic Resurgence," *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 13, No. 2. Summer 2001.

[3] See Ahmad Mousalli, *Moderate and Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Quest for Modernity, Legitimacy, and the Islamic State* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida (Gainesville), 1999). Also see M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "Islamic States" in Mary Hawkesworth and Maurice Kogan Eds. *Encyclopedia of Government and Politics* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2004).

[4] See Kamran Bokhari and Farid Senzai, *Political Islam in the Age of Democratization* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

[5] See M. A. Muqtedar Khan, *Debating Moderate Islam: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West* (Salt Lake, University of Utah Press, 2007).

[6] See Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003).

[7] See Muqtedar Khan, Islam, "Islamism and Democracy after the Counterrevolution in Egypt", *Middle East Policy Journal*, (Spring 2014).

[8] See Peter Mandville, *Global Political Islam* (NY: Routledge, 2007). Also see M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "Living on Borderlines: Islam Beyond the Clash and Dialogue of Civilizations," in Zahid Bukhari et al, *Muslim's Place in the American Public Square: Hopes, Fears and Aspiration*. (New York: Alta Mira Press, 2004).

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