Contents

Foreword

by John O. Voll

Islam, as the faith and worldview of believers for fourteen centuries, has important political dimensions, and it shapes the devotional life of Muslims. The community of believers maintains a distinctive sense of unity despite great diversity and sometimes bitter conflicts among the groups that identify themselves as Muslim. The nature of political systems established by Muslims over the centuries has reflected both this diversity and a sense of shared traditions.

The early community that developed around the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca and Medina during the seventh century CE provides the starting point for the Muslim sense of organized Islamic society. It lays the foundation for the ideals of the community of believers or *umma*. The integrated sense of communal identity included political organization as well as social and religious dimensions. In modern terminology, many people recognize this integration by saying that Islam combines "religion" and "politics" or that "church" and "state" are merged in Islam. How the *umma* should be politically organized became one of the early issues of disagreement among the believers and it continues to be a major subject of significance in the twenty-first century.

Nicholas Roberts provides a clear analysis of how the modern and contemporary Muslim visions of state and religion developed in the past two centuries. He places these modern visions within the broader framework of Muslim intellectual history and the history of modernity. Much has been written about the relationships and interactions between "Islam" and "the West," and between "Islam" and "Modernity." These relations involve tensions and conflict, but, as Roberts demonstrates, these disputes do not represent irreconcilable differences between two totally separate civilizations or two distinct ways of life. Instead, he argues that the important historical development of what has come to be called "Political Islam" is part of what modernity is in the contemporary global community of Muslims (the modern *umma*).

Roberts's approach gives recognition to the history of Muslim political thought and recognizes that modern Political Islam represents a synthesis of reinterpreted Islamic tradition and Western thought, brought together by the conditions of modern global history. It is not advocacy of a Luddite-style opposition to modernity. In many ways it reflects the political realities of world affairs of the past two centuries – adapting, redefining, creating socio-political visions that work to be both modern and in accord with the ideals presented in the Qurʾan, the sunna, and the life of the early community of Muslims. He distinguishes between the ideology of modern*ism* and ideologies and movements that may be anti-modern*ist* but are themselves modern in the way they formulate ideals and organize movements. Discussions starting with assumptions that the basic dynamic of global political and cultural relations is a "clash of civilizations" or a clash between "modernity" and "tradition" miss this significant characteristic of contemporary Muslim life.

Many observers and participants note the continued importance of religion in modern life. The old expectations, articulated as secularization theory, that "religion" would lose influence in the public sphere and become simply a matter of individual choice as a result of modernization have been proven wrong. One of the major articulators of secularization theory as it developed in the 1960s, Peter Berger, argued at the end of the twentieth century that "a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled 'secularization theory' is essentially mistaken."[1] In the twenty-first century, many analysts affirm that, globally, "religion is on the rise… The major world religions are all taking advantage of the opportunities provided by globalization to transform their messages and reach a new global audience."[2]

Muslim thinkers, activists, and organizations are significant actors in world affairs. However, while extremists regularly get headlines for terrorist acts or radical pronouncements, the larger political movements and important intellectuals get less coverage in the mass media. This situation is especially true in terms of the major trends that are included in the label "Political Islam." Militant extremists who advocate one form of Political Islam have high visibility. Roberts provides a corrective to this coverage with a remarkably comprehensive description and analysis of the broader ideas and beliefs that represent non-extremist Political Islam.

The significance of Roberts's study and approach is shown by important responses to the Arab Spring movements, which over-

threw or opposed authoritarian, basically secular modernizing regimes. Opposition to dictators like Ben ʿAli in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, and Qaddafi in Libya before the Arab Spring came primarily from groups that represented various forms of Political Islam. However, when these leaders were overthrown in the demonstrations and movements of the Arab Spring in 2011, political scientists argued that the "vast majority of academic specialists on the Arab world were as surprised as everyone else by the upheavals."[3]

In the current events analyses at the time of the Arab Spring, there was little mention of the long history of Political Islam that is presented by Roberts. Even though most scholars agreed that secularization theory had been mistaken and that religion was significant in global and regional political affairs, there was a reluctance to identify religion as an important element in the democratization movements. Political scientists tended to be surprised by the events of the Arab Spring because the perspectives of many were still shaped by an inherent acceptance of the assumptions of secularization theory.

In examining the Arab Spring, scholars across a broad spectrum emphasized the "Arab" nature of the regional movements. Gregory Gause, for example, argued that most "Middle East scholars believed that pan-Arabism had gone dormant…. Academics will need to assess the restored importance of Arab identity to understand the future of Middle East politics."[4] Fouad Ajami, from a different part of the spectrum of scholars, said much the same: "Arab nationalism had been written off, but here [in 2011], in full bloom, was what certainly looked like a pan-Arab awakening."[5] In this context, the series of election victories by Islamist-oriented political parties in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere, came as another surprise to those observers and participants who had underestimated the continuing strength of religious identification in the Arab and Muslim world. However, as Roberts shows, important intellectual and theological foundations for the political appeal of the Islamist groups in the second decade of the twenty-first century had been laid by the development of Political Islam in the preceding two centuries.

An important element in the thinking of historic Political Islam is the recognition of the community of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE as the model for Islamic state and society. The first generation of Muslims is identified as the *salaf* (the pious "ancestors") and "Salafi" became the term for people who advocated following the example of the salaf. In recent years, journalists

have used the term "Salafi" to apply to extremist Muslim militants who are literalist in their understanding of medieval legal teachings, but the term has a broader meaning of working to follow the example of the early Muslim community in Mecca and Medina. As Roberts shows, much of the thinking of modern Political Islam is "salafi" in taking the early *umma* as a model. However, as he also shows, the major articulators of Political Islam are modern thinkers and activists who are not advocates of a violent militancy. They are part of the long tradition of renewal and reform in Muslim history.

Nicholas Roberts provides a clear survey of that stream of modern Muslim political thought that is modern in form and self-identified as Islamic in content that came to be called Political Islam in the second half of the twentieth century. Roberts provides a useful corrective to those theorists who think that the Islamic tradition is primarily not compatible with modernity. He shows how Political Islamists have reinvented tradition or reframed the narrative of Islam to create an effective and powerful worldview for the post-secular world of the twenty-first century.

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Introduction

Contemporary Western scholarship has largely assumed that despotism or absolutism is inherent in Islam and the political systems of Muslim societies. The historian Bernard Lewis articulated this standard line of thinking when, in 1958, he wrote that the political history of Islam is one "of almost unrelieved autocracy." "For the last thousand years," wrote Lewis, the "political thinking of Islam has been dominated by such maxims as 'tyranny is better than anarchy' and 'whose power is established, obedience to him is incumbent.'"[1]

Granted, depending on how one chooses to define "Islam," Lewis's claims can be supported by history. However, this narrative ignores the vibrant resistance to despotism and absolutism that forms a significant part of modern Muslim intellectual history. The efforts to establish "Islam" as a faith and worldview which contains within it a blueprint for governance that is representative and accountable in nature is an important component of Muslim religious and political activism in the modern and contemporary eras.

For example, in the same year (1958) that Bernard Lewis wrote that, in political terms, Islam knows nothing but "the sovereign power, to which the subject owed complete and unwavering obedience," a source meant to serve as an introduction to Islam for Muslims, printed in the "al-Azhar Official Organ," quoted various Qurʾanic verses to reach a conclusion quite different from that of Lewis. "Such were the principles on which the political system of Islam was grounded," concluded the al-Azhar scholars. "It was thoroughly democratic in character. It recognized individual and public liberty, secured the person and property of the subjects, and fostered the growth of all civic virtues."[2]

One theme of modern world history is that the linguistic norms of the West – the United States and most of Europe – form a package

from which non-Western societies draw to frame their intellectual debates. Accordingly, many contemporary Islamic activists seek to demonstrate that certain concepts assumed by the West to be Western in origin and nature, such as democracy, are essentially Islamic. The Egyptian writer Ahmad Shawqi al-Fanjari, for example, after presenting what he interpreted as the major rights and liberties of democracy, concluded, "What is called freedom in Europe is exactly what is defined in our religion as justice (*ʿadl*), right (*haqq*), consultation (*shūra*), and equality (*muwasat*)." He continued: "This is because the rule of freedom and democracy consists of imparting justice and right to the people, and the nation's participation in determining its destiny."[3]

Al-Fanjari's statement is representative of the strand of Muslims who seek to use religious activism to inform their political thought. These activists form the movement of Political Islam. Political Islamists are those Muslims who believe that Islam contains within it a distinctive and comprehensive political program for all aspects of human existence, and thus call for the establishment of an Islamic state. This book analyzes the Sunni Islamic reformist movements beginning in 1798 that helped shape the emergence of Political Islam in the second half of the twentieth century. It explores the ideas of Islamists regarding concepts of power and authority in their theoretical conceptions of an Islamic state to demonstrate that the vision of Islamic government at the core of Political Islam is one founded upon a social contract between rulers and ruled.

A significant part of this book explores the intellectual history of Muslim resistance to despotism and absolutism in the modern era. This historical contextualization refutes the oft-cited cliché that Islam and Islamists are hostile to representative and accountable government and seek a return to some distant, barbaric past. To the contrary, many Islamists (some of whom prefer to be labeled as Islamic activists) have made innovative contributions to Islamic thought and political philosophy by reinventing the ways in which many traditional Islamic concepts are understood in the context of contemporary political issues in Muslim countries. The culmination of this is the invented tradition of an Islamic state founded upon a social contract between rulers and ruled. This vision of government is one framed as indigenous in tradition and Islamic in character – not simply a product of Western imitation.

One of the problems for any scholar attempting a study of this movement is that we do not really have the proper labels for describing persons such as Rachid Ghannouchi or Yousuf Qaradawi.

In this work, I describe the intellectuals under study interchangeably as "Islamists," "Political Islamists," or "Islamic activists." Each of these labels describes the same basic idea. However, it must be clear to the reader that these individuals – though they are "Islamists" in the sense that Islam is their basic conceptual framework for life – are not, in any way, similar to the *takfiri* militants, who – at the time of this writing – refer to themselves as "Islamic State." These *takfiri*, al-Qaʿida -type figures also use Islam as their conceptual framework and are thus often (poorly) described as Islamists; however, they act upon that framework through violent and radical means. To consider al-Ghannouchi the same as Ayman al-Zawahiri or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi simply because they share the same faith is an insult to scholarship as well as a great world religion and civilization.

One reason why this work's focus on Muslim intellectual history is important is because it is impossible to properly understand the successes or failures of Political Islam in the contemporary, post-Arab Spring Middle East without first understanding the history of ideas from which Political Islam emerged. Accordingly, I begin Part One by contextualizing for the reader the crisis facing Muslim intellectuals and reformers in the modern era. I then build upon this context to establish a conceptual framework linking the four modes of renewal and reform in the modern era to changing Muslim evaluations of the West in that period. Each of these modes was a function of shifting Muslim evaluations of the West and modernity.

Based upon this framework of crisis and shifting evaluations of the West, Part Two is a history of Sunni Islamic reformist movements beginning in 1798, primarily in the Arab Middle East. This is a history that elucidates the Muslim intellectual's sense of crisis and focuses on reformers' resistance to despotism and increasing concerns for representative and accountable government. I then demonstrate in Part Three how prominent Islamists have reinvented certain Islamic concepts to invent the tradition of an Islamic state based upon a social contract.

By nature of their doctrine, Islamists view the Prophet and his companions as the ideal model of human endeavor. Furthermore, all invented traditions are expressed by their inventors as being rooted in a particular place in the past. Therefore, in Part Four I provide examples from the historical period surrounding the Prophet Muhammad at Medina that are drawn upon today by Islamists in providing foundation for their political philosophy and the invented tradition of an Islamic state.

This is a study of Political Islam from the perspective of the movement itself. While any modern Islamic movement should, and must, be interpreted in the context of the interaction of Islam and the West in the modern era, too often this is the only context in which such studies are written. This tendency has led to the proliferation of market-driven, sensationalist, or superficial literature on the subject. Much of this literature is consumed by issues that have little practical significance – such as trying to explain what is "wrong" with Muslims, or whether democracy is compatible with religiously informed political thought, especially Islam. Certainly, some scholars will be unsatisfied that in this work I do not attempt to engage with Western philosophers' concepts of social contract or even democracy.

Granted, that many Islamic activists today claim democracy as Islamic in origin encourages scholars to become mired in comparisons. However, the significance of such claims is not whether they are accurate in terms of history or political theory. Rather, the significance is that they are even being made in the first place, and, furthermore, that they form the basis of a movement that garners massive followings and has a profound impact on the world stage and its players. Political Islam is an innovative and dynamic movement seeking to answer the most pressing issues facing Muslims today, and it continues to play a decisive role in the world; it is, therefore, crucial to understand its actors as they understand themselves.