

CHAPTER 1

Defining Concepts, Demolishing Myths

Over the last decade and a half, but especially since 9/11, three major assumptions have inspired much of the popular discussion about political Islam. These are, first, that the intermingling of religion and politics is unique to Islam; second, that political Islam, like Islam itself, is monolithic; and third, that political Islam is inherently violent. This book will argue that none of these assertions captures the reality of the multifaceted phenomenon fashionably called “political Islam.” It will do so by demonstrating that the Islamic religious tradition is no different from many others in terms of wrestling with the issue of religion in politics and politics in religion. It will also do so by exploring the multiple voices that claim to speak for Islam and the discrete national contexts that give different manifestations of political Islam their distinctive local color. It will do so further by arguing both that mainstream Islamist parties—which form the overwhelming majority of Islamist political formations in terms of numbers, membership, and support bases—by and large abjure violence and that factions that engage in violent activity often do so in response to state repression or foreign occupation. It will also argue that transnational extremist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah, are fringe phenomena that are marginal to the primary political struggles going on within predominantly Muslim societies. Finally, it will demonstrate that political Islam does not operate in a vacuum and that variables external to Islamism, principally the nature of domestic regimes and the substance of major powers’ foreign policies, have substantial impact on the emergence, popularity, and durability of Islamist movements and parties.

What Is Political Islam?

Before beginning a discussion of issues related to political Islam, one must provide an adequate definition of the terms *political Islam* or *Islamism*—that is, Islam as political ideology rather than religion or theology. At the most general level, adherents of political Islam believe that “Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world and implemented in some fashion.”¹ While correct as a broad, sweeping generalization, this is too nebulous a formulation for it to act as an analytical guide capable of explaining political activity undertaken in the name of Islam. Greg Barton points out: “Islamism covers a broad spectrum of convictions. At one extreme are those who would merely like to see Islam accorded proper recognition in national life in terms of national symbols. At the other extreme are those who want to see the radical transformation of society and politics, by whatever means, into an absolute theocracy.”²

A more precise and analytically more useful definition of Islamism describes it as “a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives.” According to this definition, Islamism “provides political responses to today’s societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition.”³ While Islamists do not necessarily agree on the strategies or tactics needed to re-create a future based on their conceptions of the golden age of early Islam, they share the yearning to “go back to the future” by reimagining the past based on their readings of the fundamental scriptural texts.

The reappropriation of the past, the “invention of tradition”⁴ in terms of a romanticized notion of a largely mythical golden age, lies at the heart of this instrumentalization of Islam. The invention of tradition provides many Islamists the theoretical tools for dehistoricizing Islam and separating it from the various contexts—in terms of time and space—in which Islam has flourished over the past fourteen hundred years. In theory, this decontextualizing of Islam allows Islamists to ignore the social, economic, and political milieus within which Muslim societies operate. It therefore provides Islamists a powerful ideological tool that they can wield in order to “purge” Muslim societies of “impurities” and “accretions,” natural accompaniments of the historical process, which they see as the reason for Muslim decline. However, context has

a way of taking its own revenge on abstract theory when attempts are made to put such theory into practice. This is exactly what has happened to Islamism, a topic I will return to later in this book.

The Islamic Conception of the Golden Age

Patricia Crone characterizes the Islamic notion of the golden age, central to Islamist thinking, as a “primitivist utopia, both in the sense that it presented the earliest times as the best and in the sense that it deemed a simple society to be the most virtuous.”⁵ This notion of a golden age, limited to the time of the Prophet and the first four “righteously guided” caliphs, is not a novel twentieth-century idea.⁶ It has existed, with certain variations, from the earliest centuries of Islam. However, what is new is the way it is used by modern Islamists. These Islamists posit that it is possible to re-create that golden age in the here and now and that the political energies of Muslims should be devoted toward achieving this goal by reshaping and reconstructing Muslim polities in the image of Islam’s first polity, the city-state of Medina.

In contrast, the classical Muslim notion of the golden age hinged on the assumption that it is unattainable in historical time. This implicitly contextualized it in seventh-century Medina and thus ruled out its re-creation in the present or future. In fact, this continues to be true of the majority traditionalist view of the golden age today. Carl Brown has pointed out: “[M]ainstream Muslim political thought throughout the ages has protected inviolate the idealized early community by resisting the temptation to relate too precisely the pristine model to stubborn reality. The model of the early community remains thus an unsullied norm, but in the terminology of modern political science the maxims derived from the idealized model are not readily operationalized.”⁷ This idealization but presumed inoperability of the golden age model helped the vast majority of Muslims to reconcile themselves to the reality of imperfect political arrangements, including unjust orders and tyrannical rulers.

Only some small groups no longer politically relevant, such as the Kharijites and the early Ismailis, advocated implementing the golden age model in historical time. But they were either suppressed or unable to capture the imagination of the large majority of Muslims, who remained rooted in reality and suspicious of millenarian movements.⁸ The largest minority sect, the Imami, or Twelver Shiites, came to terms with what they considered to be unjust rule through the mechanism of the occultation of the twelfth imam, the Mahdi,

whose return is considered essential by them to usher in legitimate rule among Muslims and in the world.⁹ Had it been otherwise—that is, had the golden age been generally perceived by a substantial segment of Muslims as a model to emulate in historical time—it would have led to incessant turmoil threatening Muslim societies with recurrent anarchy. The notions of justice and equality, enshrined in the golden age model, would have attained priority over those of order and hierarchy, thus threatening the fragile stability, first, of the Umayyad and Abbasid empires and, subsequently, of the multiple Muslim polities that succeeded them. Moreover, the model of the city-state of Medina would have never worked in the context of huge agricultural and hydraulic empires that emerged out of early Muslim conquests. These needed dynastic rule to provide continuity and stability, thus rendering the quest for the ideal an exercise in futility.¹⁰

Justifying the Status Quo in Classical Islam

Political quietism, which, despite periodic turbulence, became the norm among Muslim masses living under Muslim rulers for a thousand years, was the product in part of the indefinite postponement into the far future of any attempt at replicating the imagined model of perfect justice and equality that were presumed to reign supreme during the time of the Prophet and his immediate successors. The Shiites, as pointed out earlier, achieved this by sending their twelfth imam into occultation and postponing the creation of a just order until his return. The majority Sunnis achieved the same result partly by accepting the notion of the return of their own *mahdi* toward the end of time. In greater part, however, political quietism was justified by the Sunni *ulama*, the religious scholars, with the help of two interrelated arguments.

First, they argued that the alternative to tyranny would be anarchy that could lead to the dissolution of the *umma*, the community of believers, thus throwing out the baby with the bathwater. This argument was buttressed by selectively quoting from the Quran, especially the verse “O ye who believe! Obey Allah and obey the messenger and those of you who are in authority.”¹¹ It was reinforced by reference to the maxim, often attributed to the Prophet, that “sixty years of tyranny is better than one day’s anarchy.” Carl Brown points out: “Rather than a divine right of rule, Islam came to recognize a divinely sanctioned need for rule . . . The Islamic tradition asserted, in effect, that mankind’s need for government was so overwhelming as to make the quality of that government decidedly secondary.”¹² It would not be wrong to

assert that Thomas Hobbes must have been familiar with this classical Islamic argument. His social contract theory mirrors it quite faithfully.

The second argument took as its starting point the assumption that a Muslim ruler, however corrupt and unjust, was essential to preserve and defend the land of Islam against infidels and to ensure that Muslims in the realm could practice their religion freely. The existence of less-than-perfect political orders was also justified with reference to the belief that Muslims could not perform their religious obligations unless they had an imam or caliph presiding over the community, in whose name the Friday sermons could be read and who could be deemed the leader of the caravan (the metaphor used by Patricia Crone for the Muslim *umma*),¹³ leading the community to salvation. Again, the character of the imam/caliph was deemed secondary, and Muslim theologians went to great extents to legitimize rule by caliphs who were visibly unjust, cruel, and corrupt.

Sunni theologians of Islam's classical period turned the defense of the status quo into a fine art. When the Abbasid caliph became a mere handmaiden of Turkic warrior-rulers from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, leading *ulama* devised ways to bestow legitimacy on him even though he no longer exercised power in any real sense of the term. For example, in a novel interpretation of the caliph's role, the famous theologian Al-Ghazali of the eleventh and twelfth centuries advocated a division of labor between the sultan and the caliph, with the former exercising power on the latter's behalf while the latter continued to symbolize the religious unity of the *umma*. He went to the extent of justifying usurpation of power by Turkic dynasts, who constantly overthrew and replaced each other in different parts of the nominal caliph's domain, by ex post facto investiture by the caliph of their right to rule over territories they had acquired by force.¹⁴ In fact, this practice became common in the later Abbasid period in a desperate attempt by the caliph and his advisors to make theory conform to reality. Writing two hundred years later, the Hanbali theologian Ibn Taymiyya, commonly considered to be the forebear of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his puritanical interpretation of Islam, argued: "The essence of government . . . was the power of coercion, which was necessary if men were to live in society and their solidarity was not to be destroyed by natural human egoism. Since it was a natural necessity, it arose by a natural process of seizure, legitimized by contract of association. The ruler as such could demand obedience from his subjects, for even an unjust ruler was better than strife and the dissolution of society; 'give what is due *from* you and ask God for what is due *to* you.'¹⁵

Despite the contemporary Islamists' admiration for Ibn Taymiyya, they have in theory radically reversed the traditional orientation of Islamic theological interpretation. Their position that the golden age of pure and pristine Islam can be re-created in the contemporary era has had the opposite effect of that of political quietism and stable political orders so dear, for good reasons, to the hearts of most Islamic scholars of the classical period. The Islamists' current rhetoric mobilizing popular opinion in support of their vision has capitalized on the increasingly democratic and participatory sensibilities of the modern age. It has thus helped to mobilize large segments of the population in many Muslim countries that may otherwise have remained politically apathetic. This has certainly had destabilizing effects; but, at the same time, it has contributed in substantial measure to democratizing the political culture of several Muslim countries because of the high value it places on political activism and participation. I will return to this theme when I discuss the impact of political Islam on important Muslim countries later in this book. However, it is clear that leading theologians of the classical period of Islam would not have approved the use of political Islam for objectives against the status quo.

Colonialism and the Emergence of Islamism

As we know it today, Islamism, or political activity and popular mobilization in the name of Islam, emerged in response to a set of factors that were introduced into the Muslim world as a result of the latter's encounter with the West from the eighteenth century onward, when the West became increasingly powerful and the lands of Islam became progressively weak. This, in Muslim perceptions, was a reversal of the normal and presumably divinely ordained order of things, at least as it had persisted for a thousand years before the beginning of European ascendancy. Thus it needed both explanation and remedy. One of the most powerful explanations of Muslim degeneration was provided by those who came to be known as Salafis (meaning emulators of the *salaf al-salih*, the "righteous ancestors"). They argued that the primary reason for Muslim decline lay in the fact that Muslims—rulers and subjects alike—had deviated from the model set out for them by their righteous ancestors. The Salafis advocated that the remedy for Muslim degeneration lay in their return to the original path of Islam and in the re-creation of the model that had prevailed in the presumed golden age of the Prophet and the first four caliphs.

To be fair to the original proponents of the idea of returning to the pristine Islam of the earliest centuries, leading figures among them, such as the nine-

teenth-century theologian and jurist Muhammad Abduh of Egypt, advocated such a course because they believed the original teachings of Islam to be in total accord with the scientific positivism and rationality that underpinned modernity. Eminent historian Albert Hourani explains things from Abduh's point of view: "[T]he mark of the ideal Muslim society is not law only, it is also reason. The true Muslim is he who uses his reason in affairs of the world and of religion; the only real infidel (*kafir*) is he who closes his eyes to the light of truth and refuses to examine rational proofs."¹⁶ Abduh's aim and that of his peers who thought on similar lines was to rescue Muslim societies from backwardness and superstition, which they saw as consequences of un-Islamic accretions introduced in the later centuries of Islam.

However, this modernist interpretation of the golden age was overshadowed by those among the revivalists, such as Abduh's Syrian disciple Rashid Rida, who interpreted the return to the golden age in literal terms and advocated the creation of an authentic Islamic polity based on their imagined model of the Islamic society at the time of the Prophet and his immediate successors in seventh-century Arabia. Paradoxically, Abduh himself was responsible for opening the way for such a revivalist interpretation. Malcolm Kerr has argued convincingly: "[B]y asserting that Muslims must look back to their earliest history to discover the principles of their faith, he encouraged others to reexamine traditional institutions of government and law as they had presumably existed in the great days of the Rashidun [the righteously guided] and to explain in what respects they had become corrupted. 'Abduh's stimulus thus made the almost forgotten classical theory of the Caliphate and the resurrection of the Shari'a as a comprehensive legal system live options for such men as Rashid Rida."¹⁷

Abduh's ideas, therefore, not only generated much of the modernist thinking in the Arab world but also inspired what came to be known as the Salafi movements in the early decades of the twentieth century. H. A. R. Gibb has pointed out: "In the matter of doctrine he [Abduh] had made a stand against uncritical acceptance of authority, or *taqlid* [imitation] . . . [But] his theological followers, led by a Syrian disciple, Shaikh Rashid Rida, continued the process with a characteristic glide toward extremism. By carrying the rejection of *taqlid* back beyond the founders of the schools [of jurisprudence] to the primitive community of the *salaf*, the 'great ancestors,' and combining with this the quasi-rationalism of scholastic logic, but without Muhammad Abduh's ballast of catholicity, they naturally gravitated toward the exclusivism and rigidity of the Hanbali outlook."¹⁸ Scriptural fundamentalism and the rejection

of accumulated tradition emerged out of this rigid literalist and decontextualized version of Salafism that has spawned much of contemporary Islamist thinking. Thus Abduh's prescription about returning to pristine Islam to rediscover the rational roots of the Islamic faith turned out to be a double-edged sword. It inspired both modernist and rationalist discourse within Islam as well as a more literal call to return to Islam's golden age and re-create it in the modern world.

The replacement of Muslim rulers by European colonial powers also reopened the whole question of legitimate authority in the Muslim world. As long as Muslim potentates ruled over Muslim subjects, the fiction of religious legitimacy for such rule could be maintained even if the rulers did not measure up to the original yardstick set up by the Prophet and his immediate successors. Colonialism, by replacing Muslim rulers with infidel ones, changed the entire paradigm on which authority was based in the Muslim world. Fundamental religio-political questions, including whether Muslim countries under European rule were any longer *dar al-Islam*, "the abode of Islam," began to be raised. It was argued that if they were not, then it was the right of all Muslims, collectively and individually, to restore them to their Islamic status. If they were, then it was by definition illegal under Islamic law for them to be ruled by infidels, and it became the duty of all Muslims, individually and collectively, to strive to overthrow colonial regimes.

Therefore, out of the colonial experience emerged the equation of the Islamic concept of jihad with "striving" and "struggle" for freedom and independence in the modern political sense. Jihad, in this sense, provided the motive and the justification for many anticolonial wars and uprisings from British India, through the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Italian Libya, to French Algeria. Consequently, the defense of the homeland and the religious obligation to defend *dar al-Islam* became inextricably enmeshed with each other in the popular Muslim imagination.¹⁹ Resistance against non-Muslim foreign domination and encroachment, whether direct or indirect, thus became the paradigmatic jihad of modern times. The use of the term *jihad* today by Islamists denoting resistance not merely against direct foreign occupation, as in Iraq, but more generally against an iniquitous international order dominated by the United States and its allies has emerged as a logical corollary of the jihads waged against European colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, political Islam as a major vehicle for resistance against occupation and domination receives its legitimacy and credibility to a large extent from this equation of the term *jihad* with resistance to foreign domination of Muslim lands and peoples.

However, while it would be extremely difficult for common Muslims to disentangle the political and religious dimensions of resistance to foreign domination, there was and continues to be a clear distinction for hard-core Islamists between merely throwing out the foreign occupier and the creation of a state based on their imagined model of the pure and pristine age of Islam. The former was perceived as but the first step toward attaining the latter. Earliest instances of anticolonial jihad, such as those in Algeria, India, Sudan, and Libya, also witnessed attempts by the leaders of the premodern Islamist resistance movements to establish Islamic polities based on their conceptions of sharia law on territories liberated from colonial powers.²⁰ Contemporary Islamist political formations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan, are heirs both to the Salafi intellectual tradition and to the practical endeavors on the part of those nineteenth-century anticolonial leaders in the Muslim world who strove to create Islamic polities (as opposed to merely independent Muslim ones) in zones liberated from colonial occupation.

Contemporary Islamism

As the preceding discussion suggests, political Islam as we know it today is a relatively modern phenomenon, although not a very recent one. Its roots lie in the nineteenth-century Muslim encounter with European domination and in Muslim reactions to subjugation by infidel powers. It is no wonder, then, that political Islam speaks the language of resistance to foreign domination not only in the political but in the cultural and economic spheres as well. This is true of most manifestations of this religio-political ideology and of the movements that represent it. The Islamic Republic of Iran, despite its Shia heritage that sets it somewhat apart from the Sunni majority, has best epitomized this phenomenon in recent times.

It is also clear that the Islamists' totalistic bent betrays a very modern sensibility. Robert Hefner has pointed out: "Rather than fidelity to prophetic precedents . . . , the Islamist dream of an all-encompassing religious governance bespeaks a modern bias, one all too familiar in the twentieth-century West. It is the dream of using the leviathan powers of the modern state to push citizens toward a pristine political purity."²¹ The twentieth-century concept of the "Islamic state," which has become the central focus for Islamist energies, emerged out of this preoccupation with capturing the state in order to change society. This emphasis on the importance of the state as the instrument of God's (and the Islamists') will sets the Islamists apart from Muslim

traditionalists, who are usually wary of too much state interference in matters of religion.

The use of religious vocabulary as the vehicle for resistance against oppressive rule has given contemporary Islamists (as it did their nineteenth-century precursors) a powerful tool for bonding with and, thus, successfully mobilizing Muslim masses. Islamists speak the language of the people by using religious idioms that the common Muslim can relate to because he or she has been socialized in it since childhood. This is one of the major reasons why Islamism has garnered so much emotive appeal in the current era and is able to capture the imagination of ordinary Muslims suffering under foreign domination or oppressive and autocratic rule.

Moreover, as stated earlier, Islamists argue that Muslim societies declined the more they moved away from the model of the golden age that can be found in their romanticized version of the early years of Islam. Their prescription is to return to the primitive utopia of early Islam. The model of the “strangers” having failed, there is a strong tendency to revert to a highly romanticized model of the “ancestors,” despite such warnings as Fouad Ajami’s that the “people who surrender to the ancestors are, strictly speaking, surrendering to strangers” and that “[a]uthenticity can be as much an escape as dependence and mimicry can be.”²²

Religion and Politics in Islam

Does the conception of a religiously inspired golden age and the striving on the part of some groups to turn this imagined model into reality mean that politics and religion are inextricably intertwined in Islam? Furthermore, does it mean that the politicization of religion is unique to Islam and that other religious traditions are immune to this “malady”? These two questions, while closely inter-related, are analytically distinct and therefore need to be answered separately from one another.

In much of the popular analysis and even in a substantial portion of academic discourse, it is frequently assumed that there is no separation between the religious and political spheres in Islam. This is a myth to which Islamist rhetoric has contributed in considerable measure, especially by making constant reference to the sharia and the concept of the “Islamic state.” Consequently, an image has been created not merely of the indivisibility of religion and state but of religion being in the driver’s seat determining the political trajectory of Muslim societies, including their inability to accept the notion of

popular sovereignty and implement democratic reforms. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Anyone familiar with the historical record of Muslim polities would realize that, in practice, the religious and the political spheres began to be demarcated very soon after the death of the Prophet in 632 CE. This was inevitable because, according to Muslim belief, revelation ended with the Prophet's death. His immediate temporal successors, the first four "righteously guided" caliphs, while respected for their piety and closeness to the Prophet, could not claim that their decrees were divinely ordained. Several of their actions and interpretations were openly challenged, and religious and/or political dissenters assassinated three of the first four caliphs. Civil war often loomed on the horizon, and two major intra-Muslim battles were fought during the reign of the fourth caliph, Ali, largely as a result of intertribal rivalry. Intra-Muslim strife culminated in the massacre at Karbala in 680 CE of Ali's son and the Prophet's grandson Hussein (himself a claimant to the caliphate) and his seventy-odd companions, by forces loyal to the newly established Umayyad dynasty. The religious schism between Sunni and Shia dates back to this supremely political event, a war for the throne. Politics was clearly in the driver's seat.

The fiction of the indivisibility between religion and state was, however, maintained, primarily to legitimize dynastic rule so as to uphold the unity of the *umma*—even though, as stated earlier, leading theologians had to incessantly engage in intellectual acrobatics to demonstrate such unity. In short, the fiction of the inseparability between religion and politics provided a veneer to the reality of not merely the chasm between religion and state but, not infrequently, the subservience of the religious establishment to temporal authority. Criteria established by Muslim jurists to determine the legitimacy of temporal rule were minimal. There was a consensus that as long as the ruler could defend the territories of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) and did not prevent his Muslim subjects from practicing their religion, rebellion was forbidden, for *fitna* (anarchy) was worse than tyranny, since it could threaten the disintegration of the *umma*. The lessons of internecine conflict during the early years of Islam were well learned. As stated earlier, political quietism was the rule in most Muslim polities most of the time for a thousand years, from the eighth to the eighteenth centuries.²³

The distinction between temporal and religious affairs and the temporal authority's de facto primacy over the religious establishment continued throughout the reign of the three great Sunni dynasties—the Umayyad, the Abbasid, and the Ottoman. The Ottomans not only succeeded in combining in the same person the title and functions of both sultan and caliph (which had

been divided during the latter part of Abbasid rule) but also institutionalized the subservience of the religious establishment to temporal authority by absorbing the religious functionaries into the imperial bureaucracy. The Sheikh al-Islam (Şeyhül İslam in Turkish), the highest religious authority in the empire, was appointed by the Ottoman sultan and held office at his pleasure. The Turkish Republic became heir to this Ottoman tradition and has continued to exercise authority over a highly bureaucratized religious establishment through the Directorate of Religious Affairs, this time in the name of secularism. The Arab successors to the Ottoman Empire also continued to uphold the tradition of the state's domination over the religious establishment but have not been able to control religious institutions and discourse as effectively as Turkey has been able to do.²⁴

The link between religion and state in the Muslim parts of South and Southeast Asia has been more complex as well as even more distant, thanks to the greater prevalence of Sufism and syncretism that have allowed religion to carve a sphere almost completely distinct from the state and autonomous of it in most respects. In the case of the Indian subcontinent, the presence of a large non-Muslim majority over whom Muslim potentates ruled for several centuries created a very special situation. In such a context, statesmanship demanded creative compromises that turned Mughal emperors into near deities for their Hindu subjects and that made the Hindu Rajputs into the sword arm of the nominally Muslim empire. Islam could only act as a periodic brake on this process, but it was certainly never in the driver's seat. Attempts to apply puritanical Islamic precepts in matters of state usually turned out to be extremely shortsighted and counterproductive because they alienated large segments of the Hindu military and civilian elites, whose allegiance and collaboration was critical for the maintenance of an empire already suffering from imperial overstretch.²⁵

Muslim polities are therefore heirs to the twin traditions of the separation of the political from the religious arena and, where the two intersect, temporal supremacy over the religious sphere. The history of Saudi Arabia, considered to be the most fundamentalist of Muslim societies, demonstrates that when it comes to the crunch, the balance between the House of Saud and the Wahhabi religious establishment tilts decisively in favor of the former. Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud's suppression of the Ikhwan revolt during the early years of the kingdom provides overwhelming evidence of the primacy of the state over religious ideology in this most puritanical Muslim polity.²⁶ I will return to this topic in chapter 3.

In essence, therefore, the historical trajectory of religion-state relations in Islam, in terms of separation of the two and/or state domination over and instrumental use of religion, has not been very different from that of Western Christianity. However, since there has never been a single locus of religious authority in Islam (unlike in Christianity prior to the Reformation), the religious class did not pose the sort of challenge to temporal authority that the religious hierarchy presided over by the pope did to emperors and kings in medieval and early modern Europe. The dispersal of religious authority in Islam therefore normally prevented a direct clash between temporal and religious power, as happened in medieval Christendom. Simultaneously, given the diffuse nature of religious authority, it prevented the total control, except sporadically, of the religious establishment by temporal rulers. It also helped preclude the establishment of a single orthodoxy that, in alliance with the state, could suppress all dissenting tendencies and oppress their followers, as happened in Christian Europe during the medieval and early modern periods. Wars of religion and persecution of “heretical” sects were therefore infrequent in Islamdom in contrast with Christendom.²⁷ At the same time, it promoted the creation of distinct religious and political spheres that by and large respected each other’s autonomy. This did not mean that the state in classical Islam desisted from using religion to buttress its political legitimacy. Such attempts were made on occasion, particularly under the Sunni caliphates. But the state was never very successful in intruding massively into the religious arena, which largely retained its autonomy from the temporal sphere.

It is interesting to note in this connection that the major schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) that have come to form the basis of what is known as *sharia* originated and evolved outside the sphere of the state and in the arena of theological scholarship. Theologians and jurists interpreted and applied Quranic injunctions and prophetic traditions within the realm of what would now be called civil society. As Wael Hallaq points out, “Islamic law did not emerge out of the machinery of the body politic, but rather arose as a private enterprise initiated and developed by pious men who embarked on the study and elaboration of law as a religious activity.”²⁸ Although the *ulama* and the *fuqaha* worked largely in tandem with the state, especially through the offices of the *qadi* (religious judges) appointed by the state, this relationship was not free of tension. This was the case because the codification of Islamic law was in substantial part aimed at formulating rules based upon Islamic teachings that would have the moral and legal capacity to constrain temporal authority in its dealing with its subjects. Sharia, as we know it today, evolved in a Janus-faced

fashion, restraining both individual and state behavior. It was not an instrument of the state created by the state to serve the interests of temporal authority. It is ironic that many contemporary Islamists consider the state to be the principal agent for the production and enforcement of the sharia. This reflects the changed role of the state, which has become much more powerful and intrusive in modern times, and the acceptance of this role by the Islamists far more than it follows the practice during the classical era of Islam. It also demonstrates the Islamists' modern sensibility, which is very much at variance with that of the theologians and the jurists of premodern times who were much more wary of state intrusion than the Islamists are today.

Despite the de facto separation of religion and state in classical Islam, the two spheres could not be completely insulated from each other, both because of the initial combination of temporal and religious authority in the person of the Prophet and the righteously guided caliphs and because, as in any society, moral concerns, often couched in religious vocabulary, intruded into the political sphere. Furthermore, political and religious identities often overlapped significantly, thus making religious affiliation a marker of political identity. This provided religion another entry point into politics, and vice versa. Finally, Muslim rulers attempted to use religion and religiously sanctioned titles and institutions as instruments to legitimize their rule.

However, these features are not unique to Islam, even if they manifested themselves in Islamdom in distinctive ways. Islam is no more politicized than Judaism and Christianity, as anyone conversant with the Hebrew Bible and the religious roots of Zionism, on the one hand, and with the Crusades and the political role of the papacy, on the other, will immediately recognize. Examples demonstrating the inextricability of religion and politics abound from non-Judeo-Christian traditions as well. Hindu nationalist organizations in India blatantly use religious terminology to spread their message. The Buddhist Sangha (monastic order) in Sri Lanka has played an important role in defining the national identity of that country in Buddhist and Sinhalese terms. Politics and religion can be a heady mixture; this is demonstrated in all religious traditions, not merely in Islam.

The Myth of the Islamic Monolith

The mixing of religion and politics is no Islamic monopoly. Religion has been used for profane purposes in all religious traditions. This continues to be true in contemporary times as well. The assumption that Islam is unique in this

regard is no more than a myth. The same is the case with the assumption that political Islam is a monolith. Despite some similarities in objectives and even more in the rhetoric they employ, no two Islamisms are alike.²⁹ Political activities undertaken by Islamists are largely determined by the contexts within which they operate. What works in Indonesia will not work in Egypt; what works in Iran will not work in Turkey. Anyone familiar with the diversity of the Muslim world—in terms of socioeconomic characteristics, culture, political system, and trajectories of intellectual development—is bound to realize that the political manifestation of Islam, like the practice of Islam itself, is to a great extent context specific and is the result of the interpenetration of religious precepts and local culture, including political culture. To quote a leading scholar of political Islam, “[I]t is intellectually imprudent and historically misguided to discuss the relationships between Islam and politics as if there were one Islam, timeless and eternal.”³⁰

It is true that there is an Islamic vocabulary that transcends political boundaries. However, such vocabulary is normally employed to serve objectives specific to discrete settings. In the process, while the Islamic idiom may continue to appear similar to the uninitiated observer, its actual content undergoes substantial transformation. As Eickelman and Piscatori have pointed out, politics becomes “Muslim” by “the invocation of ideas and symbols, which Muslims in different contexts identify as ‘Islamic,’ in support of . . . organized claims and counterclaims.”³¹ Since the borders of the sovereign, territorial state normally circumscribe such claims and counterclaims and the contestations that accompany them, much of the politics that goes on in the name of Islam is also confined within those boundaries.

The model of the sovereign territorial state, which had its origins in early modern Europe, was adopted by Muslim countries, as well as by the rest of the Third World, following decolonization. Like the rest of postcolonial societies, Muslim state elites also went about cultivating a sense of territorial nationalism (often a mix of ethnic and religious identities) among their populations, to legitimize the colonially crafted boundaries of their state as well as their right to rule over the state in the name of the nation. In some places—above all, in parts of the Arab world—these attempts at nation building were complicated by the existence of pan-nationalisms.³² But overall—and including the Arab world—these efforts at nation creation based primarily on territorial criteria have succeeded in large measure, although they have had to often accommodate religious and ethnic loyalties that go beyond the territorial confines of the nation-state.³³

That the Islamist political imagination is determined in overwhelming measure by the existence of multiple territorial states becomes very clear when one looks at the political discourse of Islamist movements and, even more, their political action. The Jamaat-i-Islami has a Pakistan-specific agenda, just as the Islamic Salvation Front had an Algeria-specific agenda. Even the strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood—which, although founded in Egypt, has branches in various Arab countries—are largely determined by particular contextual characteristics. Thus the branches in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Kuwait, and Palestine have adopted radically different political strategies in response to specific challenges posed to them within their respective national boundaries. Indeed, as chapter 4 of the present study will demonstrate, the Muslim Brotherhood's parent organization, in Egypt, has itself mutated over time, with its leadership in the early 1980s unequivocally rejecting the more radical and militant ideas associated with Sayyid Qutb, its chief ideologue of the 1960s. Islamist political formations are governed by the same logics of time and space as their more secular counterparts.

If there are several Islamisms operating within discrete political contexts determined by the existence of sovereign, territorial states, why do most pundits, especially in the West, consider political Islam to be a monolithic phenomenon bent on implementing a single grand strategy? This is in part a function of the lack of knowledge of Muslim societies and polities on the part of many analysts in the West, especially those who dominate the media and have made it a habit of expounding their views about political Islam with a degree of self-righteousness that has an inverse relationship to their knowledge of Muslim societies. It is equally a function of the rhetoric employed by Islamists around the world, which appears to most outsiders to be very similar, if not identical.

The various Islamist movements take recourse to similar vocabulary because they draw their inspiration from the same sources and also because this vocabulary is familiar to their audiences. However, once one begins to scrutinize the political objectives and actions of discrete Islamist formations, as will be done throughout the rest of this book, it becomes clear that they are engaged primarily in promoting distinct national agendas, not a single universal agenda. Even the shared preoccupation of various Islamist groups with creating the "Islamic state" makes it very clear that they desire to do so within the territorial confines of existing states. Their objective is to Islamize existing states, not to join them in one single political entity. This demonstrates very clearly that, despite ostensible denials by some of them, Islamists have inter-

nalized the notion that the international system is composed of multiple territorial states—and that it will continue to do so into the indefinite future. It also implies that they are acutely aware of the ethnic and cultural divisions within the Muslim world and concede, even if implicitly, that “Islam” is but one—and not necessarily the most salient—among the numerous identities that peoples in Muslim countries value. The idea of re-creating a universal caliphate is cherished only by the most fringe elements, such as al-Muhajiroun and Hizb ut-Tahrir, which are most active among Muslim émigrés in Britain but without any significant political base within Muslim countries. I will return to a discussion of these groups in chapter 7.

Violence and Political Islam

The assumption that political Islam is inherently violent cannot be farther from the truth. The extremist transnational organizations that purport to act politically on behalf of Islam, such as al-Qaeda, are fringe groups, which, while they capture the West’s imagination by their dramatic acts of terror, are marginal to the large majority of Islamist movements and irrelevant to the day-to-day political struggles within Muslim countries.³⁴ Most mainstream Islamist movements operate peacefully within national boundaries and attempt to influence and transform their societies and polities largely through constitutional means, even when the constitutional and political cards are stacked against them.³⁵ In this sense, mainstream Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i-Islami, are reformist, rather than radical, in nature.

The major Islamist political formations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt, the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) in Pakistan, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia, the Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) in Malaysia, and the Islamist parties in Turkey (in their various incarnations) have all played the game by and large according to the rules established by regimes normally unsympathetic to the Islamist cause. Several of them have performed credibly in elections, despite the fact that the dice has usually been loaded against them. Others have learned to function within the parameters set by authoritarian regimes. Some, such as the JI in Pakistan, have not shrunk even from collaborating with military dictatorships. Others, such as the MB in Egypt, lie low when suppressed, then bounce back organizationally and politically when autocracies liberalize under domestic or international pressure, but in all cases try to keep their constituencies and organizations

intact as far as possible. I will examine the cases of Islamist political formations in several important Muslim countries in greater detail in subsequent chapters, both to establish their largely nonviolent character and to demonstrate that they are prisoners of their own national contexts and, consequently, that their policies and actions are shaped by the discrete settings in which they operate.

One cannot deny that national Islamist movements have on occasion spawned militant groups that have engaged in violence to attain their objectives. However, these are exceptions rather than the rule. Sometimes, as in Algeria in the 1990s, they have been products of regime policies that have been deliberately provocative from the Islamists' perspective, resulting in armed responses on their part. However, such violent activity has invariably been counterproductive as far as achieving the political objectives of these groups is concerned. Islamist violence has begotten counterviolence on the part of authoritarian regimes whose forces are usually far better equipped and trained than the Islamist groupings. While such recourse to violence and counterviolence has on occasion led to great loss of life and property, it has hardly made a dent in the political status quo that the militant Islamists have sworn to overthrow. Examples ranging from Algeria to Egypt demonstrate the veracity of this assertion.

The most appalling example of violent Islamist activity has been in Algeria, where splinter groups from the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) launched an armed insurrection in the 1990s following the military-backed regime's decision to cancel the second round of elections in 1992, which the FIS looked set to win. While it is true that the so-called Algerian Afghans returning from fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan contributed to the escalation in violence, the annulment of elections was the key to some Islamists turning to violence, in an act of political desperation. These groups were not able to change the status quo even after more than a decade of violent insurgency. They lost support among the general populace because of their indiscriminate use of violence that led to retaliatory killings, often by vigilante groups acting on behalf of the regime. The insurgency petered out without achieving any of its political objectives.

Militant Egyptian factions, such as the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, have suffered the same fate, although their violence, while sometimes dramatic (as in the assassination of President Sadat), never reached the levels attained by the Algerian insurrection. Some of these factions (notably the Egyptian Islamic Jihad), disillusioned because of their inability to overthrow autocratic and un-Islamic regimes at home, decided to make common cause with transnational

groups, such as al-Qaeda, to target the “far enemy”—the West in general and the United States in particular. These groups see the “far enemy” as the principal supporters of un-Islamic and repressive regimes at home, the “near enemy.” Therefore, they believe that hitting the United States or the West would undermine support in America and Europe for authoritarian pro-Western regimes in the Arab/Muslim world, leading to the collapse of these regimes. In truth, however, such a shift in the strategy of these groups is an admission of their failure to achieve results where it matters most—namely, at home.³⁶ I will return to a detailed discussion of this subject in chapter 7.

There are a couple of major cases where Islamist political groupings that can be considered mainstream clearly straddle the violent and nonviolent worlds. The foremost examples of this phenomenon are Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in Israeli-occupied Palestine. However, the violence that both have engaged in is context specific and principally in the nature of national resistance to foreign occupation. Hizbullah was born as a result of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and flourished during the two-decade-long Israeli occupation of predominantly Shia south Lebanon, when it fought a guerrilla campaign against the occupation forces. The end of the civil war in 1990 led to its transformation from a radical, clandestine militia to a mainstream political party with a resistance wing committed to ending the Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory. Hizbullah is represented in Lebanon’s parliament as one of the two major Shia parties, the other being Amal. It has become an important player in Lebanon’s political game, thanks largely to its vast network of social services that caters to the needs of the most underprivileged and vulnerable sections of Lebanese society.³⁷

The withdrawal of Israeli troops from south Lebanon in May 2000 augmented Hizbullah’s prestige as the only Arab force capable of compelling Israel to cede conquered Arab territory. Paradoxically, it also made Hizbullah largely redundant as a military force, a factor that may have contributed to its decision to capture two Israeli soldiers in July 2006, which triggered a full-scale Israeli assault on Lebanon. Moreover, the compromises it has had to make in the process of parliamentary participation have diluted its originally stated vision of turning Lebanon into an Islamic polity à la Iran. Nonetheless, Hizbullah continues to be ambivalent regarding its role in the Lebanese polity, refusing to surrender arms, because it sees them as an essential component of its popularity among its constituency, which, while primarily Shia, includes non-Shia elements as well. I will return to this subject in chapter 6.

The Hamas movement is the political wing of the Palestinian Muslim

Brotherhood. Ironically, the Israelis were responsible in part for building up the MB in occupied Palestine in the 1980s, in order to divide Palestinians who, until that time, overwhelmingly supported the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The PLO, dominated by the mainstream nationalist and secular Fatah and led by Yasser Arafat, had been the principal force resisting Israeli occupation. However, with the outbreak of the first Palestinian intifada (uprising) in 1987, the MB, until then engaged primarily in social service and educational and charitable activities, set up its political wing, called Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement), to participate in the uprising. As the Palestinian resistance became increasingly militant after the 1993 signing of the Oslo Accords, in great part because of Israeli policies of continued Jewish settlement and interminable delays regarding turning over territory to Palestinian control, Hamas gained greater popularity, since it had declared its unequivocal opposition to the Oslo process.³⁸

As chapter 6 will demonstrate, Hamas's popularity also resulted in substantial part from the PLO's conversion into the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its role as the intermediary organ of control acting as the buffer between the Israeli occupation and the occupied Palestinian population. The corruption and inefficiency of the PA added to Hamas's appeal. Furthermore, with Israel's policies becoming more oppressive and strangulating the Palestinian economy and with the PA unable to deliver social services, Hamas's network of charitable organizations moved in to fill the void by providing help and succor to the most disadvantaged segments of Palestinian society, especially in the overcrowded refugee camps and shantytowns of Gaza.³⁹

At the same time, Hamas developed a military wing (especially in Gaza), which has carried out attacks against Jewish settlers, the occupying Israeli military, and civilians within Israel. During the past few years, Hamas members have undertaken several suicide missions both within Israel and in the occupied territories. However reprehensible, such suicide missions and other violent activities conducted by Hamas—as well as other Palestinian groups, including offshoots of Fatah—cannot be divorced from the fact of Israeli occupation that has generated increasing economic and political desperation among Palestinians in the occupied territories. I will return to a detailed discussion of this subject later in this book.

What distinguishes both Hamas and the Lebanese Hizbullah from al-Qaeda and other transnational Islamist organizations that take recourse to indiscriminate violence is that the violence in which Hamas and Hizbullah engage is restricted territorially and is directed against specific targets that they

consider to be obstructing their goals of achieving national independence or freeing occupied territory. Despite America's strong support to Israel, both Hamas and Hizbullah have desisted from attacking American targets during the past two decades. Both Hamas and Hizbullah are organizations that fall well within the logic of the state system and do not have universal visions of a global jihad. In this sense, Hizbullah and Hamas are more similar to the Irish Republican Army or the Basque separatist group ETA than to the al-Qaeda network or Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia.⁴⁰ Their actions are driven more by nationalist considerations than by religious ones, although Islam is a major component of their strategy to mobilize their respective constituencies. This combination of nationalist and religious ideologies has a hoary tradition in the Muslim world, going back to the resistance, often couched in Islamic terms, against European colonial domination from the second half of the nineteenth century onward.⁴¹

The violence carried out by Hamas and Hizbullah, especially by the former, should not be conflated with the acts of terror committed by al-Qaeda or other groups that share its transnational ideology and strategy. Doing so would be counterproductive because, as the International Crisis Group points out in one of its reports, “[t]o brand all armed struggle by Muslims—even that arising out of opposition to foreign occupation—as terrorism is to strengthen the arguments of al-Qaeda that the problem is the ‘further enemy,’ i.e., the US and its allies, with whom it is useless to argue or try to negotiate and who only understand the language of brute force.”⁴² Despite the violence used by Hamas and Hizbullah, most mainstream Islamist political formations have continued to pursue their incremental and peaceful strategies within national confines. In fact, some of them have gone further and have entered what one can call the post-Islamist phase. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, discussed in chapter 5, is the prime example of this phenomenon, having successfully repackaged itself as a conservative democratic party, similar to the Christian Democrats in Western Europe. Hizb al-Wasat (the Center Party) in Egypt is another good example. Several of its founders left the Muslim Brotherhood to establish the organization, in an effort to gain official recognition as a political party in order to openly participate in electoral politics. Official party status has been denied to the brotherhood, although it is well known that it is probably the most popular political formation in Egypt and fields candidates under different labels. Al-Wasat has not been successful so far in getting registered as a political party, although it runs its own nongovernmental organization. The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood leadership has denounced al-

Wasat's founders as having betrayed the brotherhood by leaving the organization and renouncing their Islamist roots demonstrates the organization's post-Islamist character.⁴³ Both the Turkish and Egyptian cases will be analyzed in detail later in this book.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to define and disaggregate political Islam as well as to address the three most popular myths about it in the Western media and sections of academia. It has demonstrated that the relationship between religion and politics in Islam is not very different from that within several other Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religious traditions. It has argued that political Islam is not a monolith and that Islamist movements in different countries pursue nation-specific agendas and strategies, despite a superficial similarity in their rhetoric. It has also shown that the large majority of Islamist movements, those we term "mainstream," abjure violence and attempt to work within constitutional restraints imposed on them in discrete national settings. While fringe groups, including breakaway factions and transnational extremist networks, have engaged in violence, they have been unsuccessful in attaining their ends and, despite their dramatic acts of terror, continue to remain largely irrelevant to the political and social struggles underway in Muslim societies. Several of these themes will be elaborated in the following chapters.

The next chapter will take up the issue of the multiplicity of Muslim voices and the consequent cacophony that has led most Western analysts and policymakers to focus on the most extreme and violent Islamist formations as the leading, if not sole, spokespersons for Islam. This is another myth that needs serious examination.