



*The End of the Caliphate and the
Concept of the Islamic State*

While the example of Deoband is only one of the many Islamic movements that have arisen during modern times, it, like the rest, is framed by the twin experiences of European colonialism and the rise of the modern nation-state. The superior firepower of European military technology eliminated local dynasties throughout Asia and Africa. One of the last arenas of conflict was the Ottoman Empire, which held sway over the eastern Mediterranean and parts of southeastern Europe. Rising European commercial and military power was able to extract advantageous concessions and legal immunities from the Ottomans for Europeans and for Christian minorities within the empire, through formal treaties. These forced agreements, summarized under headings (“capitula”), were known as the Ottoman capitulations, thus giving that term the meaning of a complete surrender of sovereignty.

The ruling institution of the Ottomans was technically known as the sultanate, but the sultans also claimed a religious office, the caliphate, or succession to the authority of the

Prophet Muhammad. This was a historical anachronism, since the last actual dynasty that claimed this title, the 'Abbasids, had been wiped out by Mongol invaders in 1258. After that time, political theorists extended the courtesy title of caliph to any Muslim ruler who protected Islamic religious practice and institutions. The Ottomans, however, adopted the title of caliph with a distinctly religious pretension, in a treaty signed with the Russians in 1774; in a novel interpretation, they claimed through this mechanism a kind of political jurisdiction over Muslims living in the Russian Empire. Now in a rearguard effort to reclaim some kind of religious authority over other Muslims, the last Ottoman sultans attempted to play the card of caliph, even as their political power was waning.

The grandiose plans of Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid II (r. 1876–1909) to create a pan-Islamic movement under his own leadership foundered on a many-leveled crisis. The concept of nationalism, based on European models, spread rapidly through the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century, creating a new Turkish nationalist movement (the “Young Turks”) as well as nationalist movements among minorities such as Armenians. The uncompromising loyalty demanded by nationalism became a divisive force that eventually helped tear the empire apart. The Ottoman defeat in World War I was the decisive blow; not only were the Balkan and Near Eastern provinces lost, but there were four European armies on Turkish soil. The secular nationalist leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (“father of the Turks”) expelled the invaders and proclaimed Turkey a secular republic in 1922, abolishing the office of the sultan and most of the religious institutions of the empire. But the former sultan still retained the purely symbolic title of caliph, which became a powerful symbol of vanished power among Muslims around the world. Tiring of special pleading on the caliph's behalf by foreign Muslims, Atatürk in 1924 decided to abolish the office of

the caliphate as well. The chief symbol of international Islamic sovereignty had ceased to exist.

Although the meaning of the caliphate under the Ottomans was questionable, the extinction of this symbolic office raised the issue of politics among Muslims with unprecedented urgency. Although none of the nominally Muslim dynasties ruling in Africa and Asia were particularly religious governments, their nearly total defeat by European, Russian, and Chinese forces was seen as a blow to Islam. While colonial rulers pontificated about the civilizational decline of Muslims as a justification for conquest, reformist Muslim thinkers accepted this argument, but with a twist. In their view, it was not an intrinsic defect in Islamic civilization that had led to the decline of Muslim nations; it was, rather, the failure of Muslims to live by God's commands that had caused their defeat. From this tragic situation, tailor-made for a preacher, arose the new concept of the Islamic state, which has now become a principal concern of many contemporary Muslim thinkers. After this point, reformist Muslims began to redefine Islam as the ideology that is the basis of the Islamic state.

The initial mobilization of Islamist groups in colonial India and Egypt did not start auspiciously. In the 1920s and 1930s, Hasan al-Banna organized the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and in 1941, Abu al-'Ala' Maudoodi founded the Jama'at-i Islami (Islamic Society) in India. As the prototypes for all later so-called fundamentalist groups, these organizations employed the reformist rhetoric of claiming to return to the original and pristine form of the Islamic faith. This strategy was also designed to discredit rival Islamic leaders, on the grounds that they represented corrupt deviations from the true path. Maudoodi and Hasan al-Banna were, nevertheless, thoroughly modern (neither was trained in a traditional Islamic academy), and both were squarely placed in anticolonial resistance.

Nevertheless, the Islamist parties did not do well politically at the ballot box, and they did not appear to have mass followings. But the eventual retreat of colonial powers seemed to offer new opportunities for authority in the postcolonial states (although Maudoodi, ironically, opposed the creation of the state of Pakistan, on the grounds that it would create division in the worldwide Islamic “nation”). The new leaders of independent states were, however, socialists and secularists, and they efficiently seized the levers of the centralized power bequeathed them by their colonial predecessors. So began the tradition of one-party rule and presidency for life that has been all too typical for postcolonial governments around the world (whether Muslim or non-Muslim). In Egypt, Socialist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood after members attempted to assassinate him, and he had its leaders imprisoned and executed. Military rulers in Algeria and Tunisia have also persecuted organized Islamist parties. Reformist Islam was basically arrayed against the modern nation-state.

Generalizations about Islamic politics, even if focused on reformist movements, have to be extensively qualified in terms of the context that matters most: the individual nation-state.¹⁰ Nevertheless, insofar as postcolonial regimes have usually shared the same problems of lack of democratic representation and inequitable distribution of resources, reformist political groups have generally positioned themselves similarly in Muslim majority countries. One of the only public spaces that secular regimes cannot control is the mosque, and Friday prayer sermons are the occasions when it is most possible to criticize repressive governments. In addition, Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas among Palestinians sometimes provide people with major social services, such as education and health, which governments have failed to make available. As is the case with Jewish and Christian fundamental-

ists in other countries, Islamists vehemently criticize the elimination of God from governments and the public space. It is their feeling that all of life should be ordered according to God's command, in this way eliminating the sins and weaknesses to which human decisions are prone. Those who wish to erect the Ten Commandments in American courthouses are operating on premises similar to those of Islamic reformists.

Yet the antiseccular politics of the proponents of the Islamic state by no means exhaust the possibilities of religiously based social activism in Muslim societies. Nongovernmental organizations like the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and the Eidhi Foundation in Pakistan make available social services such as microcredit lending and health services for the indigent. Based on both traditional Muslim notions of charity and more recent concepts of development and education, these modern organizations provide homegrown methods for addressing social problems.

The dream of an Islamic state is often more powerful when it remains vague and unspecified. An anecdote from prerevolutionary Iran illustrates how the appeal of Islam was presented as the universal solution. Tehran is a city that expanded far beyond its planned infrastructure, due to the migration of millions of people from rural areas over the past few decades. One of the results is that there is still a system of open sewers alongside streets, which can be a disgusting experience, particularly if one loses one's footing. During the last years of the Shah's reign, someone was overheard complaining bitterly about the sewers. "Don't worry," replied a listener, "that will be taken care of—by Islam." Although the speaker probably had no specific connection in mind that would stretch from classical Islamic texts to the installation of new sewer systems, the remark illustrates how the solution to all modern problems can be sought from Islam.



*Examples of Islam and the
Modern State in Practice*

Given the decisive impact of colonialism on Islamic political thought, it is interesting to look at the political character of the four Muslim countries that technically did not come under complete colonial rule, that is, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Iran. Each of these countries over the past century has had a markedly distinct political history. Turkey became a secular nationalist state in which Islam happens to be the majority religion but is theoretically denied any major role in government. Saudi Arabia continues to be an Arab tribal monarchy that survives on the basis of oil wealth and through its strong alliance with a puritanical sect, the Wahhabis. Afghanistan in 1921 adopted a constitutional monarchy whose authority sat lightly upon a complicated patchwork of different ethnic groups, within boundaries drawn by the British after three wars in the nineteenth century; a Soviet-backed Marxist government took power in 1978, only to be dethroned by mujahideen resistance in 1992, followed in 1996 by the theocratic tribal movement of the Taliban. The lack of uniformity among these national experiences reveals the debatable nature of the politics of the Islamic state. The case of Afghanistan, which is currently the most notorious due to the American overthrow of the Taliban in 2002, vividly illustrates how intrusion by foreign powers has played a decisive role in that nation's destiny.

Iran is, however, the most fascinating example of the application of Islamic political theory in recent years, although it should be stressed again that no Muslim country particularly

acts as a paradigm for others—national history is always distinctive. Saddled with a weak monarchy, in the nineteenth century Iran balanced uneasily between the aggressive power of the Russians to the north and the British coming from the Persian Gulf and from India. In 1906 a constitutional revolution took place that introduced a democratic assembly, but within a few years the Shah (assisted by a Russian-trained Cossack brigade) closed down the parliament. After Iran was occupied by European forces in World War I, an Iranian Cossack officer took power in 1921 and soon named himself Shah, though the Russians and the British overthrew him in 1942 for siding with the Nazis. But when a democratically elected government threatened to nationalize the oil industry in 1953, U.S. intelligence operatives (the Central Intelligence Agency) overthrew the government and installed Muhammad Reza Shah as king. Iran's close military and economic dependence on the United States led to treaties in the 1960s that granted Americans and their dependents full exemption from Iranian law. These agreements, which closely resembled the Ottoman capitulations of the nineteenth century, drew outraged protests from Muslim religious authorities, who saw them as a complete abdication of national sovereignty. Opposition grew under the leadership of the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, and a combination of government oppression and corruption eventually provoked the revolution of 1978–79 and the overthrow of the Shah.

Although the Iranian revolution was carried out by a combination of Islamic and secular forces, it was Ayatollah Khomeini who set up the blueprint for the national government now known as the Islamic Republic of Iran. His theory of government, though couched in classical religious texts, was very much a product of the twentieth century. Khomeini at times emphasized a socialist perspective on economics, and he consistently maintained an anticolonial view of national sovereignty. The

model of government to emerge from the revolution, as outlined in the 1979 constitution on the basis of Khomeini's ideas, is also in many ways a very modern concept.¹¹ The Iranian revolution is described as based on an ideological and Islamic movement against colonialism (see fig. 5.2 for a graphic revolutionary image using an Islamic slogan). Government is divided into legislative, executive, and judicial branches, and it is worth noting that recent elections have successfully drawn the participation of a large part of the electorate. The government's goals include favoring morality, developing the mass media, supporting education and research, opposing imperialism and despotism, advancing freedom within the law, securing public participation in policy, abolishing discrimination, attaining efficiency in government, eliminating discrimination, providing economic justice, advancing scientific and technological sufficiency, supporting citizens' rights, and strengthening Islamic brotherhood internally and internationally. Women's rights and the rights of religious minorities are also carefully spelled out in this document. Much of this would be expected to appear in the constitution of any modern nation.

What is at first surprising, though, is the large role that religion plays in the Iranian constitution. There is an official state religion, which is Shi'i Islam, and religious authority is vested in a Guardian Council of judges having veto power over legislation. Khomeini's boldest innovation was his theory of "the Guardian Jurist," who has ultimate authority over the nation; the authority of this supreme leader in political terms is theoretically equivalent to that of the Prophet or his twelve successors, the Imams. Yet on closer examination, a predominant national religion is not all that unusual in the world today. There are a number of nations that have an official religion or that require the head of state to practice a particular faith. In practice, the Islamic Republic of Iran can be compared to the Jewish state

of Israel in terms of religion as a decisive factor. While Israel lacks a formal constitution stipulating the legal status of religion, candidates for the Israeli parliament are required to accept the notion that Israel is a Jewish state, and Jewish religious parties exert an influence far greater than their numerical strength, particularly when the major parties are evenly balanced. But in either case, the language that proclaims religion as the source of the principles of the state is in a very important sense deceptive, because it is the state that makes that declaration, and so it is the state that authorizes religion, rather than the other way around. In practice, Islam in Iran is defined by the supreme leader and the small group of men who comprise the Guardian Council.