Islam as a political force: more than belief

*The politicization of religion cannot be explained by the ideas of religious doctrines but by the interactions between religious and political actors, institutions and ideas argues **Jocelyne Cesari**. In the Muslim world, the nation-building process saw a decisive rearrangement of the society-state-religion nexus with state projects making use of Islamic terminology or vocabulary to legitimize state actors and policies. This resulted in redefining Islam within state institutions and thus politicizing it by turning it into a modern national ideology. Political approaches to religion should pay attention to historical processes and cultural transformations, rather than focus on unhistorical approach to belief and theology.*

Since 9/11, and even more so with the atrocities committed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria, violence in the name of God is predominantly perceived as a "different" kind of violence, that triggers more "absolute" and radical manifestations. As a result, the dominant assessment of religion in world affairs, is that the scope and reach of terrorism in the name of God has grown out of control, that this violence is inspired by the specifics of the Islamic tradition and resilient to usual forms of compromise or negotiation.

My research has questioned such a perception by broadening the scope of the religious influence beyond Islam and channeling the scholarship from religious studies into political analysis. It is obvious to scholars of religious studies that religion is not only belief but also about modes of belonging and behaving. For scholars of politics however, religion is still very much the sum of private beliefs specific to each person. As a consequence, in these scholars' view, to understand a religious tradition, a brief incursion into the fundamental texts and doctrines, is sufficient. However to limit Islam, or all other religious traditions, to beliefs or texts proves to be a dead end as the same text can lead to very opposite political mobilizations. Instead, looking at belonging and behaving and the ways they are interconnected with belief helps us solve the puzzle of apparently very secular projects leading to political battles over islamically correct social behaviors which are currently happening in Turkey, Egypt or Tunisia. In other words, the social and political visibility of Islam is not caused by an increase in personal beliefs or religiosity. People are not

stronger believers than they used to be, but their identification to Islam has certainly shifted, creating a collusion between political and Islamic belongings that facilitate political mobilization. Hence, the question is not on the nature of the religion but more on how historical processes and cultural transformations inform the tensions between religion and politics or between secular and religious, which are at play everywhere. Such a perspective requires a "longue durée", historicized analysis that   drastically challenges the rational choice centered theories that still dominate the International Relations discipline.

The politicization of religion cannot solely be found in the study of religious doctrines. In fact, the politicization of Islam has not affected so much theology or doctrines. However, it has certainly changed the identifications to the Islamic tradition by mingling it with national belonging. More to the point: in most Muslim-majority countries, political Islam is not the monopoly of Islamic parties but also a foundational element of the national and civic identity. Although most of the founders of Muslim-majority countries were secularized, they nevertheless included Islam in the state system, spurring its politicization by turning it into a modern national ideology, which operates as a common denominator for all political forces, secular or otherwise. As such, political Islam should be understood in a broader context that goes beyond Islamist ideology or Islamic parties. I therefore argue that both the state and the Islamists have been instrumental in politicizing Islam. In this broader sense, political Islam includes the nationalization of Islamic institutions and personnel under state ministries and the use of Islamic references in law and national education. In other words, the relevance of religion is not in the content of the Islamic tradition per se but in the interactions between religious and political actors, institutions, and ideas.

The nation-building process in the Muslim world saw a decisive rearrangement of the society-state-religion nexus. During the Caliphate era, religious institutions were not subservient to political power and most scholars of political history argue that separations of hierarchies of power between temporal and spiritual establishments were generally well organized and established by the tenth century. This does not mean that there were not "official" *Ulama* working in conjunction with the political rulers, similarly to the modern era. The major difference, however, was that in pre-modern time, religious authorities and institutions were not financially and organizationally dependent on the political power.

The Caliphs also acknowledged the cultural and religious diversity of the empire, although not so much as to translate into an egalitarian society for all religions and ethnicities. For example, the *Ummah* was established as the totality of the territories and people under the Caliphate rule, which included an extensive collection of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups including Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahais, and Druze. This is in stark contrast of what one would see as the original successor of the community that followed the message of the Prophet Mohammad. In reality, the Caliphate's power was limited by geography and governed in a way comparable to any secular dynasty charged with ruling multiple ethnic and religious groups. In contrast, the modern idea of the *Ummah* refers to a spiritual, community distinguished by those following Islam. In other words, the *Ummah* is now considered as a kind of extra-territorial citizenship for Muslims, regardless of where they live. This new concept of the *Ummah* pervades all modern theological thinking and has been exacerbated in the vision of the ISIS caliphate.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 marks the end of the Islamic rule over different religious, ethnic, and linguistic communities. Nation-building in the wake of the Empire's fall, systematically omitted and in some cases, eradicated, particular ethnic, religious, and linguistics groups in hopes of creating a nation defined by a single religion and language. This homogenization had a direct influence on the politicization of religion. The emergence of new political norms in concert with nationalism generally resulted in state projects that made use of Islamic terminology or vocabulary (Ummah/Jihad) or were articulated within an Islamic framework in order to anchor the nation-state project the vernacular mindset. To put it differently, Islamic references of norms were applied to "localize" the nation-building process and legitimize state actors and policies, the outcome of which was the redefining of Islam within state institutions. The pruning and grafting of these new political norms on the pre-existing ones happened at three levels that define what I call Hegemonic Islam:

1. The Nationalization of Islamic Institutions and clerics
2. The redefinition and reduction of Sharia as well as inclusion of Islamic references into secular legal systems (mostly family Law)
3. The integration of Islamic teaching in public education as part of civic education

In other words, hegemonic Islam seals national and religious belongings and open religious behaving to political competition by creating tensions between groups who are content with the status quo, a.k.a as "secular" and the islamists who want to extend the scope of Islamic Law to other legal domains (like penal law). Such a perspective shifts the research focus from the ideological content of religious movements to the interactions between religious interpretations and political contexts. In other words, politicization of religion cannot be explained by the ideas of religious doctrines but rather by religious interpretations of politics shaped by state institutions and distribution of power between groups. In this respect, historical evolutions of political narratives and of the practices they validate are more relevant than ahistorical variable-centered methods that dominate political approaches to religion.

About the author
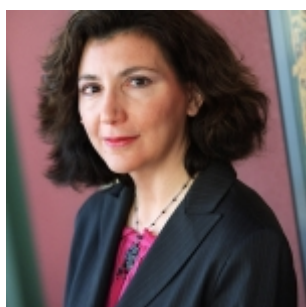
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