Religion and the State in Islam: From Medieval Caliphate to the Muslim Brotherhood

Richard W. Bulliet
**Introduction**

The Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Denver’s Josef Korbel School of International Studies was established in 2012. The first institution of its kind in Colorado, the Center is dedicated to promoting and strengthening the study and understanding of the societies, political systems, and international relations of the Middle East and the broader Islamic world. The Center seeks to generate scholarly research and foster public understanding of this critical and changing part of the world. Engaging in both academic and policy research based on an interdisciplinary social science agenda, the Center will produce new scholarship on the Middle East and provide a lively forum for dialogue and debate on the contemporary politics of the region. A specific focus of the Center’s work is the relationship between Muslim societies and democracy.

The Center’s second Occasional Paper, by the world-renowned scholar of Islamic history Richard Bulliet, lies at the nexus of these issues: an examination of the relationship between religion and the state in the “Muslim South”—that half of the Muslim world located south of Medina, whose peoples came to Islam centuries after those of the “Muslim North”—and how understanding the different means of legitimating governance in the Muslim South sheds light on the crisis of legitimacy in Muslim-majority states like Egypt today. The Muslim north revolved through the 1200s around the notion of caliphal legitimacy: that the only legitimate ruler or ruling authority was the Caliph (for Shii Muslims, the Imam) or someone entrusted with his “sulta” or power. From the late 1200s on, however, control of the pilgrimage to Mecca—the hajj—became the determinant of legitimate authority, starting with the Ayyubids and continuing through the Ottoman Empire. The power of the hajj as a legitimating factor is evident in contemporary Saudi Arabia, where the monarchs prefer the title “Protector of the Two Holy Places”—Mecca and Medina—to that of king. And, this paper argues, we see its power in the vacuum it leaves for claims to legitimate political authority today. There is no caliph and no viable caliphal structure, and the Saudi state has control of the pilgrimage. Hence the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and any other government desiring Islamic legitimacy, must develop a new model of Islamic government—or else their legitimacy will remain contested.

This is a powerful reading of Islamic history, and a provocative assessment of its consequences for the present. No one could better make an argument of this scope than Richard Bulliet, whose work in Islamic history over the past 50 years has been extraordinarily far-reaching. Bulliet is Professor of History at Columbia University, where for years he directed the Middle East Institute. He has been a Carnegie Scholar and a Guggenheim Fellow, and currently serves on the Board of Trustees of Columbia University Press. A prolific scholar, Bulliet has published ten scholarly books, and has edited several world history textbooks and the *Columbia History of the 20th Century*. Each of his works has broken new ground in its field, starting with *The Patricians of Nishapur*, which reconstructed a crucial period of medieval Islamic history. *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* introduced a quantitative method for assessing conversion rates, based on an innovation diffusion curve. *Islam: The View from the Edge* pushed scholars of Islamic history to leave the caliphal courts
and turn to peripheral regions to understand key developments in piety, scholarship, and commerce. *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* shifted paradigmatic understandings of Islamic and Latin Christian civilizational histories by proposing that they be viewed as sibling, rather than opposed or discrete, civilizations through the early modern period. His more recent works, including *Cotton, Climate, and Camels in Early Islamic Iran*, employ annaliste, animal studies, and environmental history methods to make broad-sweeping arguments that reframe scholarly understandings of Islamic history.

Professor Bulliet was my graduate adviser at Columbia, and it was a pleasure and an honor to host him at the University of Denver in February 2013. We would like to thank the Marsico Short-Term Visiting Scholars Fund for underwriting the cost of his visit, which included a riveting talk before a rapt audience in Sturm Hall. The question and answer session lasted nearly as long as the talk itself, and the line of people waiting to speak to Professor Bulliet after the event concluded was ten or fifteen deep.

This Center for Middle East Studies Occasional Paper developed from that talk, and is all the more relevant now, as events in Egypt and elsewhere continue to reflect the crisis of legitimacy that Bulliet sets in the context of Islamic history. This paper offers an incisive and compelling lens through which to read current events in Egypt and other Muslim-majority states, and provides historical context crucial for understanding the fractured legitimacy that today’s and tomorrow’s Islamist governments face.

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THE MUSLIM SOUTH

First let me introduce the notion of the history of the Muslim South. We sometimes use the term Global South as a conceptual tool to talk about the world’s poor countries as opposed to its rich countries. The term Muslim South is something like that. It refers to every place in the world where Muslims live south of the 25 degrees North latitude of Medina, where the Prophet Muhammad moved to from Mecca in 622. If you follow that line of latitude around the globe, you will find that at least half of the Muslims in the world live in the Muslim South, which includes Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, West Africa, East Africa, Sudan, and Ethiopia. If you then look at the Muslim North, the territories above 25 degrees North latitude, you find North Africa, Egypt, the Middle East (except for southern Arabia), Northern India, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Turkey.

Looking at the scholarship that has been done on the history of Muslims, you will find that there are about ten books on the Muslim North for every book on the Muslim South. Part of the reason for this is that the Muslim South contains many areas to which Islam was comparatively late in spreading. Consequently, not only do over half of the world’s Muslims call the Muslim South their home; most of them are descendants of people who converted to Islam after the year 1300. There are also areas in the north—Southeast Europe, China, and Inner Asia, for example—that had similarly late conversion phases. These we will notionally include under the rubric Muslim South because late conversion is important to any discussion of Islam and the state.

The Muslim South by this definition (excluding southern Arabia) does not share with the Muslim North the early medieval history of the Islamic empire. Yet today many of the most important developments in the Islamic world are those taking place in the Muslim South, a situation even knowledgeable people may find confusing because they think “Islam” means Mecca, Muhammad,
and Arab conquests forming a caliphate, that is to say, an empire ruled by a Caliph, from Spain to Pakistan.

None of that happened in the Muslim South. Its history began much later, and that later period of Islam tends to be neglected, partly—I say this from a scholarly perspective—because there is a widespread feeling expressed in summary accounts of Islam, and sometimes also in political statements, that Islam stagnated after 1300 and became ossified and non-creative. All of the really important developments in Islam, by this reading, came before then.

In fact, however, the period after 1300 was incredibly successful for Islam. It may not have produced as many innovative philosophers and legal thinkers as the earlier period, but it won many millions of souls, particularly in those areas where Muslims came into contact with Europeans and into competition with Christians. It is after 1300, during the period of European exploration and then colonial settlement in various parts of the world, that Islam became identified in many local situations with opposition to European imperial penetration and colonialism. Where Christianity and Islam came face to face in competition for souls in the post-1300 world, by and large Christianity lost. That does not mean that Christianity did not grow during this period, but it grew principally in the Western Hemisphere and in the southern half of Africa (south of Nigeria), where there were no Muslims. So in actuality, Islam was vital and growing during the period when many Western historical accounts say Islam was stagnant and past its prime.

Why does the literature get this wrong? Partly because a great change in the nature of Islam at a political level set in around 1200 and was only fully realized after 1300. This had to do with the disappearance of what had been the primary focus of Muslim political life from the time of the Prophet’s death in 632: namely, a quest for divinely sanctioned political dominion.

How did this focus on political dominion develop? From the day of Muhammad’s death onward, the fledgling Muslim community had pondered the question of who could or should replace him as leader. Given the clear, agreed-upon understanding of Muhammad’s status as the last of God’s messengers to humanity, no one could succeed him in his prophetic role.

The notion of a Caliph arose almost immediately, as did the parallel notion of an Imam, a term that eventually came to be particularly associated with Shi’ism. Both of these figures were conceived of as divinely-sanctioned leaders of the religious-political community of Islam, though the nature of that divine sanction was articulated differently. Sometimes people thought the Caliph and the Imam were, or should be, the same thing. Sometimes they thought they were separate offices. In either case, these titles designated the political and spiritual leaders of the community and reflected varying notions of how God thought the community of Muslims should be governed.

Prior to 1200, almost all political movements within the Islamic world focused on who should be Caliph or Imam. After about four centuries, a subordinate title, Sultan, came into use as a third
option. Literally, the word sultan means power in Arabic, and the title initially denoted the temporal power of the Caliph. Hence, the earliest political appearances of this term refer to the sultan of the Caliph. It was one of the attributes of that office. Starting at the end of the 900s, however, the attribute of power increasingly became separated from the caliphate with the understanding that a Caliph who rightfully wielded spiritual authority could delegate his worldly power to a Sultan.

Over time, the term Sultan grew in importance, and some theorists opined that a powerful person could achieve the sultanate not just by delegation from the Caliph but also by seizing power and then writing the Caliph a letter to let him know. Thus a conqueror might write to the Caliph saying, “I have just conquered Northern India, please name me the Sultan.” To which the Caliph would write back and say, “Being greatly impressed by your victory, I hereby name you Sultan of Northern India.” In sum, the theoretical concerns that show up in the books of philosophy, law, and political practice prior to 1200 focus on this question of Imam and Caliph, and, to a lesser degree, Sultan, and take it as axiomatic that at any given point in time there will always be someone who is considered, in some fashion, the rightful and divinely-sanctioned head of the Muslim community.

After 1300, and down to the 1920s, this concern largely disappeared. There was almost no discussion, particularly in Sunni Islam, of who was or should be Caliph. In strictly political terms, the Caliph in Baghdad had lost almost all of his temporal power a century and a half earlier. His capacity to give orders and have them obeyed did not stretch far beyond the city limits of his capital. Then in the year 1258, during the second Mongol invasion of the Middle East, Baghdad was sacked and the last Caliph was executed. There was immediate concern in some quarters about who should take over the caliphate, and that concern was addressed in 1260 when the generals ruling Egypt found a relative of the last Caliph and put him on a throne in Cairo. They called him Caliph, but in fact nobody paid much attention to him. Thus from 1260 down to 1517, there was a nominal Caliph of seemingly little importance. After 1517, when the Ottoman Sultan Selim I conquered Egypt, the title went virtually unused until the last quarter of the 19th century. In those instances when it was used, such as in the Sokoto caliphate founded in West Africa in 1809, it was used locally and was not thought to embrace the entire Muslim world.

Politics changed at a fundamental level. No longer were people debating who had the divine right or the divine authorization to be recognized as the paramount leader of the Muslim community. In Ithna Ashariyya (“Twelver”) Shia Islam, a variant ideal of a single, divinely sanctioned paramount leader survived in the person—if an invisible and immortal entity can be called a person—of the Twelfth or Hidden Imam. The Twelfth and last Imam, considered by Twelver Shi’is to be living in human society, disappeared around the year 873, and it is he whom Twelver Shi’i thinkers assumed

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would someday return. Hence he was called the Hidden Imam. Any Shi’i ruling in his absence was considered to be doing precisely that, ruling in the Hidden Imam’s absence, but without his authorization. Whenever the return of the Imam should occur, divinely sanctioned rule would automatically replace the regime then wielding power. Thus, although he is in occultation, the Hidden Imam has not entirely disappeared from God’s plan for humanity. As for the rival Isma’ili branch of Shi’ism, their last publicly recognized Caliph-cum-Imam, the ruler of the Fatimid state centered after 969 in Cairo, died in 1171.

**SALADIN vs. THE CALIPH**

So if not caliphate and imamate, what is it that politics revolved around in this post-1300 world? And how does it relate to the idea of the Muslim South? The starting point in trying to explain this is the great Muslim hero from the time of the Crusades: Salah al-Din Yusuf al-Ayyubi, known in Europe as Saladin. Salah al-Din was the Kurdish general who commanded the Sunni expeditionary force sent from Syria that ended Fatimid rule in Egypt in 1171 and drove the crusaders from Jerusalem in 1187. After this latter triumph—the crusaders had held the city for 88 years—Salah al-Din sent a message to the Caliph in Baghdad. His message reported that his pious and noble soldiers had driven the unbelievers from Jerusalem. To this the Caliph replied: “As for your jubilation over the capture of Jerusalem—had she not been conquered by the troops of the Caliph, under the banners of the Caliph?” Salah al-Din took offense and wrote back to say: “As for the claim of the Caliph that I conquered Jerusalem with his army and under his banners—where were his banners and his army at the time? By God! I conquered Jerusalem with my own troops and under my own banners.”

Evidence of Salah al-Din’s feeling of pique at being disrespected by the Caliph can be seen in an inscription dated 1191, only four years later. In it Salah al-Din is named the “Servitor of the Two Holy Places,” *Khadim al-Haramain* in Arabic—the two holy places being Mecca and Medina—and also “of this sanctified house,” *al-bait al-muqaddas*, meaning the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. Thereafter, the title “Khadim al-Haramain,” sometimes with slight variations, became the core political concept of the later centuries of Islam.

If the title Khadim al-Haramain had occasionally been used prior to this time as an attribute of the Caliph, as some late sources claim, it would have simply designated an intrinsic responsibility of the caliphate from the death of the Prophet onward. Thus, when Salah al-Din called himself Servitor of the Two Holy Places, he essentially usurped a crucial caliphal function. Though not claiming to be the Caliph, he clearly made a claim to one of the Caliph’s jobs. Moreover, unlike the office of Sultan, which implied a mandate to exercise temporal power derived from that of the Caliph, the function of Khadim al-Haramain was here being claimed without reference to the caliphate.

How fierce was the rivalry between Salah al-Din and the Caliph? Late in 1187, the year Jerusalem was recaptured, a pilgrimage caravan departed for Mecca from Syria led by a prominent general
appointed by Salah al-Din. A second caravan set out from Baghdad commanded by an appointee of the Caliph. The two caravans reached the vicinity of Mecca and carried out those pilgrimage rituals performed outside the city proper. These being accomplished, the pilgrims prepared to enter Mecca to perform the requisite rituals at the Kaaba. The commander of the Syrian caravan instructed his drummers to assemble the Syrian pilgrims together so they could to leave for Mecca. Hearing this, the leader of the Iraqi caravan (the one appointed by the Caliph) said no, the Iraqi caravan must go first. The Syrian commander persisted, saying his people were ready to leave and there was no reason why the Iraqis had precedence. The disagreement escalated into a battle between the caravans pitting hundreds of pious Muslims against each other. The Syrian commander suffered a mortal wound and the Iraqi commander, according to a chronicle describing the incident in detail, acknowledged that he may have picked a bad time and place for confrontation.

There are several instances in later history of competition and conflict over who had priority entering Mecca, but this particular confrontation occurred immediately after the altercation between Salah al-Din and the Caliph over who deserved credit for recapturing Jerusalem. In addition, it is important to note that Salah al-Din had taken an interest in the affairs of Mecca even before the confrontation with the Caliph. Mecca lay in a barren valley and had to be supported by food imported from the outside the Hejaz. Its governors were traditionally direct descendants of Muhammad, a status signified by the honorary title Sharif. One of the earliest detailed descriptions of Mecca, from around 1050, describes it as a desolate town with only 2000 full-time residents. Since a famine afflicted the region at that time, the population a century later may possibly have been a few thousand more; but it was clearly no major metropolis.

It was in 1171 that Salah al-Din, as commanding general of the Syrian expeditionary force in Egypt, defeated and terminated the Shi'i Fatimid state based in Cairo and thereby acquired some measure of responsibility for the provisioning of Mecca and Medina. The holy cities remained largely under Fatimid rule between 973 and 1081, and Egypt continued to be its main source of food. To defray at least part of the expense of providing food for the barren pilgrimage site, the Fatimids had collected a stiff tax on pilgrims traveling from Egypt. Thus, poor Muslims could not expect to make the pilgrimage, even though it stood as one of the five pillars of Islam.

Salah al-Din eliminated the tax and declared that support for Mecca and Medina would become a function of his government. This assumption of responsibility made him, de facto, Servitor of the Two Holy Places, and in 1187 he extended that responsibility to Jerusalem as well. This may have been the first time in Islamic history when the three holy cities came to be linked in a unified conceptual framework establishing them as places of central responsibility for a Muslim government.
In the following years, between roughly 1200 and 1400, Mecca became a dynamic center of religious learning. While the city had been such a center during the first century and a half of Islam, surviving evidence from after that time shows few instances of people going to Mecca for more than the few days it took to accomplish the pilgrimage rituals. Remaining in the city for protracted periods was difficult, for there was no place to stay and too little food. It was only under the rule of Salah al-Din and his descendants, known as the Ayyubids, that wealthy patrons began to build schools (*madrasas*) in Mecca. Along with schools they built lodges for Sufi brotherhoods. Evidence survives of some 75 institutions built between the time of Salah al-Din and the Ottoman conquest of Egypt and Syria early in the sixteenth century. Meccan infrastructure and resources finally allowed people to stay—and stay they did, sometimes sojourning and studying there for several years. The city became a major educational center, which it had not been since the generation of Muhammad’s companions and their successors.

This rebirth occurred under the patronage of the Khadim al-Haramain. He was the person credited with making the pilgrimage flourish; indeed, flourish to such an extent that, in my estimation, pilgrimage to Mecca replaced the caliphate as the central unifying entity in Islam. Up to that time, before 1258, Muslims imagined the center of Islam to be embodied in the person of a Caliph or Imam, even though the caliphate had lost temporal power. Over time their thinking evolved to imagine the pilgrimage as the center of Islam, thereby making the person in charge of the pilgrimage *de facto* the central political figure in Islam. This despite the fact that the Khadim al-Haramain made no claim to be Caliph, no claim to be Imam, and no claim to take the place of a descendant of the Prophet as governor of the city of Mecca.

All of Muslim tradition—the small Kharijite sect excluded—says that the Imam and the Caliph should be Arabs. But Salah al-Din was not an Arab; he was a Kurd. Furthermore, the people who ruled in the Middle East from 1100 onward were almost all Turks, Kurds, or Circassians—anything but Arabs. These rulers could not legitimately claim the caliphate or the imamate, but they could be Khadim al-Haramain. The function of Servitor of the Two Holy Places did not depend on ethnic background or on any spiritual claim of descent from the Prophet.

The transformation of the pilgrimage took various forms that have not received much notice. For example, people who completed the pilgrimage started to add the title Hajji or al-Hajj to their name. From Morocco to India, Zanzibar to Indonesia, people began to identify and present themselves to their fellow Muslims as Hajji. In many of these places, particularly in the late converting areas of the Muslim South that had never known the caliphate or imamate, this title conferred important social status. Depending on the local custom, a returning pilgrim might don different clothes, or decorate their houses in a different fashion. The title Hajji marked a person as a particularly pious and
important Muslim, a status that could be enhanced by lengthy sojourn and study in Mecca. Yet before 1200, the title seems not to have been used.

An indication of how important the title became is the fact that Christians started to adopt it after making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. So in Greek and the Balkan Slavic languages to this day, there exist certain surnames, like the Greek Hadjiathanasiou or the Slavic Hadzipetrovic, where the Arabic word *pilgrim*, signifying an ancestor who made the holy trek to Jerusalem, is built into the name.

The expanded significance of the pilgrimage also appears in a new genre of literature, the pilgrimage account. The Andalusian Ibn Jubayr (1145-1217) is the foremost pioneer of this genre, having sojourned in Mecca from 1183 to 1185 when Salah al-Din was beginning his revival of the pilgrimage. After him, hundreds of pilgrimage narratives appeared in the following centuries. The people who made the longest journeys—from India or Morocco, for example—produced the largest number, but some came from the central Middle East. People who gained social and religious status by performing the pilgrimage enhanced their new positions by documenting the story of their sacred journey.

In some cases returning pilgrims received *hajj* certificates, either hand-written or printed from woodblocks. Block printing existed in the Arab world and Iran hundreds of years before being adopted by Europeans, thus paving the way for Gutenberg’s invention of movable type printing. The most common specimens of Muslim printing, however, were amulets: narrow strips of paper designed not to be read, but to be rolled up and put in silver amulet cases worn around the neck. The printed *hajj* certificates from Syria, which disappeared along with other forms of Muslim block printing by 1400, are among the few manifestations of a more public use of this technology.

Despite the importance of the pilgrimage, the only scholarly attempt at a comprehensive history of the institution, F. E. Peters’ *The Hajj* (1994), has almost nothing to say about the pilgrimage before the time of Ibn Jubayr and Salah al-Din. Hence it fails to take note of the great change in the religious role of the pilgrimage that took place at that time. The later history of the Muslim North usually focuses on sultans, shahs, and empires, though Suraiya Faroqui has written a noteworthy study of the pilgrimage in the Ottoman period, *Pilgrims and Sultans: The Haji under the Ottomans* (1996).

For the Muslim South, however, the post-1200 pilgrimage is an important area of scholarly interest, whether it involves the almost legendary wealth and pomp of the 14th-century Malian ruler Mansa Musa, the transformative role of Indonesian pilgrims described in the work of Azymardi Azra, or the genre of *hajj* narratives studied by Barbara Metcalfe and others. Scholars like Michael Lowe have also
examined how in the 19th-century European powers took an interest under the guise of setting up quarantine stations to prevent cholera and other diseases from being spread by Muslim pilgrims.

The rulers of Egypt, who gained sovereign power after 1260, two years following the termination of the Baghdad caliphate, were a succession of Turkish and Circassian generals, all of them originally military slaves of non-Muslim birth. The word for such a slave soldier in Arabic is *mamluk*. After 1260 the chief *mamluk* general took the title of Sultan. But the Mamluk sultans were just as enamored of the title Khadim al-Haramain as their Ayyubid predecessors. They inherited the title from the family of Salah al-Din, which they succeeded, just as they inherited the function of controlling and provisioning the holy places in Mecca and Medina.

To highlight their role as overseers of the pilgrimage, the Mamluk sultanate instituted the custom of having the caravans from Cairo, and later Damascus and elsewhere, led by a ceremonial camel bearing an elaborately adorned enclosed saddle, but carrying no rider. Called the *mahmal*, this camel became the symbol of Mamluk sovereignty, and its entry into Mecca gave visual substance to the sultans’ claim of being Khadim al-Haramain. Before the caravan’s departure from Cairo, the *mahmal* would be ceremoniously led about the city and displayed as a symbol of governmental piety.

After Egypt and Syria were conquered by Sultan Selim I in 1517, the new Ottoman rulers adopted the title Khadim al-Haramain. The last Caliph was taken to Istanbul, where he transferred the symbols of his office to the Sultan, but Selim and his successors rarely used the title Caliph until the late 19th century. Acting as Servitors of the Two Holy Places, the title they more often made use of, the Ottomans took control of Mecca and Medina and symbolically imposed their presence by destroying all of the schools and Sufi lodges and replacing them with new ones. They did not want anyone else to be credited with being patrons of learning and religion in the holy places.

From 1187 onward, Muslims on pilgrimage, regardless of where they came from, received one political impression: the person responsible for the affairs of Mecca and Medina was the central political figure in Islam. He was not a Caliph, not an Imam. More often than not he was Turkish, either a general of slave origin under the Mamluks, or a member of a ruling dynasty under the Ottomans. The pilgrimage became the center of Islam, and the Khadim al-Haramain the most important Muslim political figure, particularly for people in the Muslim South who had never lived under a caliphate. For the millions of people who adopted Islam after 1300, the political perceptions they acquired on the pilgrimage symbolized the reality of Muslim unity.

Unlike today, when human losses in the Syrian civil war, which is not greatly dissimilar, excite widespread outrage in the West, the Algerian tragedy played to a half empty house. The difference is that political Islam was still little understood, and for many people literally unthinkable, in 1992.
Moving forward in time, one finds that the issue of what symbolized the notion of all-embracing political rule in Islam was influenced more by control of the holy places than anything else. That is why the Ottoman Sultan Abd al-Hamid II (r. 1876-1909) reinforced his claim to being the universal Caliph, a claim that reinvigorated a title little used for three and a half centuries, by building a railway from Syria to Mecca. This railway, which had only reached Medina by the beginning of World War I, was paid for, unlike the other major Ottoman projects of the period, by Muslim citizens without resort to foreign borrowing.

In 1986, seven years after a messianic movement led by Juhayman al-Otaibi captured the Grand Mosque in Mecca and held out for two weeks against Saudi and Pakistani security forces, the King of Saudi Arabia in his turn adopted the title Khadim al-Haramain. Irrespective of oil, Saudi Arabia is today thought of by many Muslims as the center of Islam, and the king of Saudi Arabia as the patron of the holy places. Like the Ottoman sultans before them, the kings of Saudi Arabia have torn down virtually every old building and replaced them with grandiose structures built by Saudi contractors, particularly the Bin Laden family, who became enormously important as the contractors in Mecca for the royal family. The latest manifestation of Saudi royal patronage is the Bin Laden-constructed Abraj al-Bait complex overlooking the Grand Mosque. The complex, completed in 2012, includes the world’s second tallest building and largest clock. Pilgrims coming from all over the world can hardly help but see the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as the center of Islam.

WAR OF POSITION: RULERS vs. ISLAM

Now to digress briefly and discuss Islamic political theory. This may not seem specifically related to the Muslim South or the primacy of the pilgrimage, but I will explain the connection. Muslim political theorists of the medieval period thought anarchy to be the worst of all possible situations, and that without government, anarchy would result. In other words, they had a view very much like that of Thomas Hobbes: in the absence of a government, a state of nature—anarchy, the war of all against all—would rule. The theorists also argued that governments tend to become tyrannical when nothing restrains them. Again, this is rather like the vision Hobbes developed in *Leviathan*: to avoid anarchy, there must be a ruler, but rulers unrestrained tend to become tyrants. The question in both the West and in Islam was how to prevent the ruler from maximizing his tyranny.

In the West, what evolved over time was the idea that popular assemblies—parliaments, congresses and so forth—could constrain the ruler by exercising control over his financial resources and writing constitutions, thereby creating polities of laws, not men. This became manifest in the French Revolution and various later assertions of popular sovereignty. An earlier alternative had seen the church acting as a check on tyranny. The medieval Catholic Church had its own legal system, and as head of the Church, the Pope claimed rulership over all Christendom. Temporal Christian powers, however, did not always agree with Rome in this matter.
The Papacy ultimately lost this struggle between the Church and secular monarchy, now called the Investiture Controversy. Then came the Protestant Reformation and a century of war between Protestants and Catholics. At the end of that struggle, in the middle of the 17th century, a compromise enacted by the Treaty of Westphalia emerged recognizing the right of a Christian ruler to dictate with impunity the religious views and laws of his state without fear or threat of external intervention. But his laws would have no effect beyond the country’s borders. With fixed boundaries and limited legal jurisdictions, the idea of a universal religious law, long the bedrock of Catholic political and religious thought, was abandoned in favor of individual laws for each state, whether Protestant or Catholic, with no jurisdiction stretching beyond the newly recognized state borders.

When it came to being a theoretical instrument for eliminating tyranny, Catholic religious law lost its standing and Protestant denominations never tried to replace it with universal laws of their own. Sovereign states thus became the political norm. No parallel legal evolution occurred in the Islamic world. Muslim theorists declared that universal Islamic law limited the tyranny of Muslim rulers, and every ruler had to enforce at least some of those laws. Some theorists were frank in stating that a ruler had to enforce only one law. But all rulers had to enforce some Islamic laws to maintain their theoretical legitimacy.

This vision was based on the concept that before God, all believers are equal. The Sultan or the Khadim al-Haramain is no different from the peddler in the street when it comes to being subject to the religious law or standing before God’s judgment. Did this prevent tyranny? No. For centuries despotic and tyrannical Muslim rulers brushed legality aside and terrorized their own families and the people who staffed their courts. But a Sultan who cut the head off his favorite concubine and threw her body in the Bosphorus did not undermine society’s fundamental acceptance of the idea that Islamic law was the law of the land any more than an American president carrying on an extramarital dalliance in the White House undermined the rule of law in the United States.

Even though many rulers behaved badly, in other words, Islamic law was generally successful in its claims to being the touchstone of proper governance. Post-Reformation Christendom had no parallel. More and more scholarly studies based on the records of Islamic courts show that Islamic law was perceived of and functioned as the law of the land for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and was administered in a comparatively equitable fashion. For example, in cases where Muslims sued Christians and vice versa, the documents we have reveal no pattern of religious bias. At the level of social order, then, the Islamic legal system actually did provide the framework of an orderly, non-anarchic society, and the basis for a general belief that religious law could protect a population against the misbehavior of rulers.
Not surprisingly, some rulers thought poorly of the system because, being rulers, they held despotic aspirations. For rulers such as these, the theoretical path to increasing their absolutism lay in eliminating Islamic legal oversight. In the course of the 19th century, this desire to escape the restraints of Islamic law provided an unspoken rationale for the so-called modernizing or Westernizing changes that were instituted from the top down in Egypt, the Ottoman Empire, and later in Iran. Modernizing rulers sought to push Islam, and particularly the religious scholars who defined Islamic law, to the margins of public life. They replaced Islamic law with law codes borrowed from Europe, they replaced religious school systems with those based on European principles and curricula, and they became as much as possible like the European states of the time. And they did all this with the encouragement of European powers, who, having seen Islam as a threat to Christianity for centuries, were perfectly happy to see the intellectual guardians of the Islamic religious tradition degraded and minimized in influence.

THE EXPULSION OF ISLAM FROM THE POLITICAL ARENA

Back to Islamic political theory. In principle, the expulsion of Islam from the political arena and from the central functions of society should have brought about an increase in tyranny, which is precisely what happened. The authoritarian power of the ruler, sometimes for better but more often for worse, became increasingly unrestrained in the last half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th. By the 1950s, the largest collection of tyrannical regimes in the world was located in the Muslim Middle East. Military coups multiplied as rivals fought for power, but most of the contenders boasted a common ideological claim: they were secular nationalists who wanted nothing to do with Islam. The Muslim military dictators who rose to power claimed to be progressive and dedicated to their nations—as had Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin in their own day. Middle Eastern fascism, usually in the form of governments of, by, and for the officer corps, concealed itself under the guise of secular nationalist identities that were calculated to appeal to the West.

According to Islamic political theory, the necessary and proper response to such increases in tyranny would engender the arousal among Muslim populations of a sort of atavistic, instinctual inclination to see in religion a corrective force against this political imbalance. Thus, as tyranny increased, oppositional movements should have emerged bent on using religion and appeals to Islamic law to try to limit tyranny and introduce more equitable governance. That is precisely what happened. Starting with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1930s, movements and parties supporting the concept of Islamic government became increasingly vociferous and popular.

THE ARAB SPRING IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Skipping ahead to the Arab Spring demonstrations of 2011, it became apparent that these movements and parties stood a strong chance of becoming the beneficiaries of popular discontent with what I call neo-Mamluk rule. By “neo-Mamluk,” I mean to emphasize the dominance of a caste of military
officers, their families, and their cronies that is reminiscent of the Mamluk sultanate that ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517.

Instead of looking at political Islam as a bubbling cauldron of terrorism, misogyny, and intolerance focused maniacally on the real or imagined misdeeds and cultural impositions of the West, the line of argument presented here views political Islam as a natural—indeed, almost programmed—response by Muslim populations to increasingly tyrannical dictatorial regimes. This difference in viewpoint is important in assessing whether the developments that have transpired since the Arab Spring are good or bad, promising or threatening. This being said, regardless of whether one opts for a positive or negative assessment of political Islam, it is apparent that some of the Muslim political movements that sought to undermine dictatorships in the Arab world and elsewhere have used—and continue to use—a broad range of tools, including assassination, indiscriminate bombing, hostage taking, and outright warfare. Most of the larger groups, however, have sought to achieve their goals through elections. If a dictator could be forced from his palace, they have argued, elections might be instituted and members of the group might gain an opportunity to become the government by this means.

The first awareness of this current of thought in the American policy arena came with the Iranian revolution in 1979. This was not only an earthshaking political event—it also threw the scholarly field of Middle East studies into disarray. Though a few Iran specialists say today that if they had been consulted, they would have cogently explained what was happening or what was going to happen, I have a vivid memory of the events of that period and do not believe that anyone in American academia predicted the revolution accurately. There were a handful, however, who identified political Islam as a potent and growing force before the Shah’s overthrow, and who saw that political current as both normal and, despite great uncertainty as to how an Islamic political group might govern, the only viable avenue for transitioning from dictatorship to electoral government.

The potential of political Islam was better understood by the dictatorial regimes that witnessed the fall of the Shah with dismay. After the revolution, the tyrannies cracked down on Islamic political groups, throwing their leaders into prison, prohibiting the formation of religious political parties, and sometimes, as in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, assassinating leading Muslim scholars. By and large governments in America and Europe supported this dictatorial repression of the Islamic political alternative, even though they had very imperfect understandings of what political Islam represented. People who advocated an open-minded, if not sympathetic, approach to Islamic politics were largely ostracized from policy circles.

Change came slowly. In 1992, Muslim groups were favored to win a parliamentary majority in free elections in Algeria. To prevent this, the Algerian army staged a coup, canceled the elections, and.
with strong support from France and tacit support from the United States, embarked on a bloody campaign to suppress political Islam. The result was a civil war that killed over 100,000 people. But Algeria’s terrible losses were little publicized by the European and American media. Unlike today, when human losses in the Syrian civil war, which is not greatly dissimilar, excite widespread outrage in the West, the Algerian tragedy played to a half empty house. The difference is that political Islam was still little understood, and for many people literally unthinkable, in 1992. The interesting comparison is between 1992 and 2011. The aspirations and potential for victory of Islamic political groups are roughly the same, but in 2011 Europe and the United States decided to stay out of the fighting, let the dictatorial governments fall, and then let the electoral chips fall where they might.

The chips have been falling for the last two years, and many people are becoming extremely upset over the support being given by people in various countries for groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. My view is if and when these groups succeed in forming a government, they will probably prove to be inept; and if elections continue, the electorate will probably retire them from office. Moving rapidly from oppositional speech making and carrying out street demonstrations to full governing responsibility is extremely difficult. The Arab Spring will have given political Islam its chance, but the likelihood of striking governing success after decades of suppression and fruitless opposition is slight. Nevertheless, the important thing is not who rules, but whether elections become normal. Credible elections carried out year after year transform a society and a polity. Coups and other types of disruption will doubtless derail the course of electoral reform in some countries, but the interruptions will probably prove temporary—following the pattern of military interventions in Turkey in 1960, 1971, and 1980. The lesson of the Arab Spring is that populations have lost patience with incompetent dictatorships and discovered that popular action can bring them to an end. This augurs well for the long-term political trajectories of the countries affected.

Now let me bring this back to where I started, the question of Caliph versus Khadim al-Haramain. Islam does not contain a formula for how religion should enter and interact with government today. True, there are some groups that advocate bringing back the caliphate and letting one person rule the entire Muslim world, even to the extent of going to war with the West. These are fringe groups, however. One, for example, is led by a Scottish Muslim convert named Abdalqadir as-Sufi, who advocates not only a caliphate but also a return to the gold standard using gold dinars he has already started minting. Realistically, however, the caliphate is not going to return.

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The Islamic Republic of Iran represents another model. That is, a religious government based on the 19th-century emergence of a clerical consensus designating certain imams as authorities—first on morals and matters of faith, but today on governance as well—and requiring all other believers to follow one of those imams. However, it is a religious government that Sunnis are not interested in. They feel that the concept of an Islamic republic governed by a Supreme Leader has shown itself to be unworkable, and to be inimical to Sunni Islam. In addition, Sunni Islam does not have so clear a division between authoritative clerics and obedient believers.

Then there are groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood exists in many countries. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Ikhwan al-Muslimin, was the founding organization. There is a Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, a Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, a Muslim Brotherhood in Pakistan. Hamas is the Muslim Brotherhood of Palestine. But these several related groups do not add up to a governing system. Typically, each group seeks to form a political party and stand for election, but religious parties were banned in many Sunni countries before the Arab Spring. Because they have never governed, they do not have a tested concept of governance. Nor is it clear that a Brotherhood government in one country would necessarily adopt the governing philosophy of a Brotherhood government in another country, or even get along well with it.

**WHICH WAY FORWARD?**

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Sunni political figures working within the broad spectrum of groups associated with political Islam have the potential to win elections, as they have done so far in Egypt and Tunisia, but they have no agreed upon, much less proven, model of what an Islamic government would be. Moreover, they can’t lay claim to the title Khadim al-Haramain. The king of Saudi Arabia has that locked up. Nor, for that matter, can any of them make a credible claim to be an Imam or a Caliph, which in any case might mean little or nothing to the Muslim South. What is the alternative? This is an unsolved question at the present time.

One direction in which things could go would be to have unique Islamic governments in each country—an Islamic government here and an Islamic government there, without them being linked in any way. A religiously oriented government in Malaysia, for example, might feel sympathy for and seek fraternal ties with an Islamic government in Egypt, but it just as easily might not if the national interests of the two countries were not aligned in other ways. Nor is there any indication that sympathy and fraternal ties would constitute a Sunni governing system or develop a

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unified approach to the role of Islamic law in the affairs of state. In other words, Sunni religious
governments might arise here and there without coalescing into an Islamic government in a broad
sense. It is difficult to see how this sort of piecemeal establishment of Islamic government could
represent or correspond to the idea of a single worldwide Muslim community.

Another approach to generating a political concept or institution representing the Muslim faith
community as a whole might be to work through an overarching body capable of coordinating
Islamic governments in different countries. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), until
recently called the Organization of the Islamic Conference, is the second-largest national membership
organization in the world after the United Nations, and it has aspirations along these lines. Member
nations give money to support the OIC, the richest nations giving the most money. Consequently, the
OIC is based in Saudi Arabia, and the Saudis give the most generous support. This does not
necessarily imply that future OIC involvement with individual Islamic governments would amount to
a prescription for indirect Saudi control, but Saudi aspirations along these lines would be consonant
with the monarch’s role as Khadim al-Haramain and the image of the kingdom with which many
pilgrims to Mecca return home.

Money cannot be ignored in thinking about future Islamic governance. Is there some way to control
the flow of money into political systems in other countries? We Americans do not like or openly
permit foreign money to come into this country to finance our election campaigns, though the
Citizens United decision by the Supreme Court in 2010 may have pried open the door on this. Will
Muslim governments similarly feel so concerned about their independence that they will not want
foreign money coming in? Right now there is a huge flow of money from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf
that is slanting the direction of Islamic politics in a variety of countries in a number of different
directions. Will this prove a help or a hindrance to the future development of Islamic governance?

CONCLUSION

In sum, the argument I have been making is that after five or six centuries of political thought and
contestation focusing on one or another theory of divine authorization of a Caliph or Imam to be
head of the faith community and head of state, Islamic politics turned a corner between roughly 1170
and 1250. From the 13th century onward, political life and thought were dominated by the
contemporary reality of rulers who exercised a pragmatic sort of leadership that was little involved
with either divine authorization or questions of Arab ethnicity and descent from Muhammad. The
title Khadim al-Haramain emerged as a key indicator of the ruler’s pragmatic role in protecting and
servicing the religious needs of his Muslim population.

This type of political system lasted for six centuries—centuries that saw the massive expansion of
Islam in the Muslim South and repeated instances of Muslim groups resisting European imperialism.
Other encounters with European imperialism proved more ambiguous as pragmatic rulers tried with
considerable success to exclude Islam from the political arena. This effort lasted for about a century. In the 1979 Iranian Revolution for Shi’is and the Arab Spring for Sunnis, the collapse of governments defined by nationalism and anti-clericalism led to what is likely to be a long-lasting period during which Muslim groups, parties, and philosophies will play the strongest role in reshaping the political landscape. How they will do this is uncertain, as activists in the Islamic parties themselves more or less confess when asked about their plans for the future. Time, they say, is on their side, but this slogan works better for a movement seeking power than it does for one that is learning to exercise it.

In conclusion, I believe we are at a particularly important and interesting moment in the history of Islam. Totally apart from the issues of terrorism, oil, Palestinian grievances, or American neo-imperialism, Muslims everywhere in the world are becoming deeply engaged in visualizing the return of Islam to the political arena. A Pew Research Center survey carried out in 39 countries revealed that in 2013 over 70 percent of the Muslims surveyed favored making Islamic law the official law of their country. (10 of the 14 countries in which the supporters of Islamic law numbered fewer than 50 percent were clustered in the former Soviet Union, Turkey, and the Balkans.) However, further questioning suggested that this strong endorsement of Islamic law represented a desire to reconnect Islam with governance rather than any concrete knowledge of what Islamic law is. When asked whether Islamic law was the revealed word of God, as opposed to a human legal system based on the word of God, strong majorities of respondents in 17 out of 23 countries said yes. In no country did the alternative, the correct answer, find more than 39 percent support.

Since I am not a Muslim, I do not have a vested personal interest in how this drama plays out. Nor will I have any role in it. My prognostication, however, is that the Sunni faith community, and the world at large, will experience a long period of confusion, uncertainty, and conflict before the outlines of a new relationship between Islam and the state become clear. Meanwhile, the Shia governing experiment in the Islamic Republic of Iran will continue down its uncertain path.
About Richard W. Bulliet


Prior to teaching at Columbia, Bulliet was Lecturer in Near Eastern Languages and Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and Assistant Professor of History at Harvard University. A true polymath, Bulliet teaches courses on subjects ranging from the “History of North Africa and the Sahara Desert to 1500” and “Islamo-Christian Civilization” to “Domestic Animals in Human History” and “Music Humanities,” and has authored four novels: *Kicked to Death by a Camel* (1973), *The Tomb of the Twelfth Imam* (1979), *The Gulf Scenario* (1984), and *The Sufi Fiddle* (1991).

Throughout the course of his career, Bulliet has received multiple fellowships and awards, including the National Defense Foreign Language (NDFL) Fellowship for Arabic and Turkish, the Fulbright-Hays Fellowship, the Harvard Center for Middle East Studies Research Fellowship, the Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Dexter Prize of the Society for the History of Technology, in recognition of *The Camel and the Wheel*.
