

The Different Layers of Islam in Interaction with Politics: a Comparative Analysis of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey

Mohammad Samiei

Associate Professor, Department of Iranian Studies, University of Tehran, Iran (m.samiei@ut.ac.ir)

(Received: 10 Aug. 2017 Accepted: 18 Apr. 2018)

Abstract

This study attempts to assess the different ways through which Islam as a religion can impact politics. In fact, the notion that is collectively labeled as Islam and its re-interpretation as an escalating presence of religion in politics in today's world has deep layers. To distinguish a variety of these layers, each with different characteristics, they should be defined, and the type of contributions they can make to politics should be examined one by one. Mixing up the layers with each other and employing characteristics of one for another can result, and in fact has resulted in many misunderstandings in political discussions. In order to show how to distinguish the layers and how to find the dominant layer of religion in each case, the role played by Islam in three important Islamic countries: Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey will be examined. Comparing and contrasting these cases, this paper will conclude that only through identifying layers of religion in force and distinguishing the dominant ones can the actual role of religion be examined in each case study.

Keywords: politics, religion, Iran, Islam, Saudi Arabia, Turkey.

Introduction

Since their early formation different branches of modern political sciences have been overlooking religion in their analyses. This was in harmony with an underlying trend, prevalent in social sciences as a whole, towards ideas promoted by scholars such as Marx, Stuart Mill, Comte, Weber and Durkheim who linked modernity to the demise of religion as a significant social and political force (Appleby, 2000: 3; Hurd, 2004). The pervasiveness of this phenomenon can be demonstrated— for instance in the field of international relations— by a survey of four major journals. The survey shows that only 6 out of 1600 articles published in the last two decades of the twentieth century included religion as a significant element (Philpott, 2002).¹

This ignorance of religion and its real effects on politics was finally overcome by some important events, motivated by religion, at the end of the twentieth century. Fundamentalist religious movements in Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism, as well as democratic contributions of religious parties and movements, all with significant effects on world politics challenged the foundations of secular modernism. The irony was the fact that the revival of religion came into being by the hands of the children of modernity and not students of religion (Kepel, 1994: 192). The miscalculation of Western policy-makers, who assumed that religion had died and therefore for decades had been focusing on anti-communist policies, brought an unwanted result, and as Gill Kepel (1994: 17) remarks, “[h]istory played a trick to the Western foreign offices by substituting one revolution for another: where they had expected to see a leftist in his *keffieh*, there was a turbaned mullah brandishing his Kalashnikov.”

1. The journals in the survey were *International Organizations*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *International Security*, and *World Politics*.

Next to such dramatic events, another prominent discourse emerged in the late twentieth century that gave religion along with other cultural factors the central role. The literal apex of such a culturalist view on world politics was devised by Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' theory. Accordingly, in the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among people are not ideological, political, or economic; they are cultural. That is to say, people define themselves in terms of cultural factors such as: ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions (Huntington, 2002: 21). Among all cultural factors religion is the most pivotal. "Millennia of human history have shown that religion is not a 'small difference' but possibly the most profound difference that can exist between people" (Huntington, 2002: 254). An important consequence of Huntington's vision is an inevitable and dangerous clash between 'the West' and 'Islam'. This clash will be much worse than that of the Cold War. For differences in secular ideology between Marxist-Leninism and liberal democracy could at least be debated, if not resolved. The deep-seated cultural differences, however, could not even be negotiated (Huntington, 2002: 130).

Much has been said to refute both of these two extremes, one denying any role for religion and the other giving it the central role. In recent decades many papers have been written about the evidence to falsify secularization assumptions. Peter Berger (1999) is a prominent advocate of a reversal in the academic forum to a new concept of de-secularization. John Esposito (1999: 286) terms the secularist rigid understanding of world politics "secular fundamentalism." Much more has been written to falsify the culturalist view. As Barrington Moore (1967: 486) submits in his classical work "To speak of cultural inertia is to overlook the concrete interests and privileges that are served by indoctrination, education and the entire complicated process of transmitting culture from one generation to the next." Hence,

cultural factors, including religion, are not fixed and given, as the oversimplification of cultural determinism asserts, but are subject to changes brought to them by supposedly such material factors as class and power. In fact the fallacy of explanation of politics in terms of ahistorical words such as “Islam” lies in ignoring a constant dialectic between material and cultural factors.

To take a middle ground, Fred Halliday (2007: 199) defines some conditions for taking the religious factor into consideration. He holds that if the study of religion is essential to any political discussions, it needs therefore to be (i) *sociological*, taking into account the relation of ideas to social and political interests, (ii) *historical* in seeing, although religious ideas are asserted to be ahistorical, they are shaped by contemporary factors, and (iii) *contingent*, in the sense that both the particular set of cultures and states we have today is only one accidental outcome of past possibilities, and that it is aware of the countless other possible interpretations of religious resources.

Focusing on Islam, this paper attempts to take the argument further, asking about what we exactly mean by religion (in this case Islam) when mentioning its impact on politics. This study, using an inductive approach, suggests that what is collectively labeled as Islam has some deeper layers and manifestations. We start the discussion with defining such layers as well as the type of contributions each can make to politics when Islam is manifested through it. Then in the second half of the paper the three case studies, the role played by Islam in three important Islamic countries: Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, will be examined.

Different Layers of Islam

The different manifestations of Islam when it interacts with

politics can be categorized for analytical purposes into eight interrelated layers: first, an established system of moral and spiritual interpretations usually manifested in Islamic mysticism; second, an established system of legal, and sometimes political, interpretations that often appear in a clerical institutions; third, a set of ideas and understandings of lay people who are committed believers but their interpretations may differ from mystics and clerics; fourth, a key element in a worldview which unconsciously impacts the way one looks at every aspects of life including politics; fifth, a factor in identity even if it does not make people committed to any religious practice; sixth, a set of symbols and rituals that are regarded sacred; seventh, an ideology in a narrow definition of the term, referred to by Islamism; and finally a great civilization with all Islamic, non-Islamic and even anti-Islamic factors.

The first layer is mostly, but not exclusively, manifested in Sufi political movements. This layer of Islam comes to politics with moral and spiritual concerns, but it does not offer legal and political prescriptions to society. Sufism has made some very effective political contributions throughout Islamic history. From Hasan al-Basri (643-728) who typifies the ascetic reaction to corruption of the Umayyad dynasty to many anti-colonialist Sufi movements of the twentieth century, Sufi Islam has been linked to politics in one way or another. Flexibility, tolerance and eclecticism have been the very important factors in Sufism that appealed to the masses during political uprisings and made such political contributions effective and successful. But lacking a theoretical base and relying merely on “direct knowledge”, and rejecting Islamic learning and religious authority, usually led Sufi movements to excesses and eventually to degeneration (Esposito, 2005: 109).

The second layer of Islam which is in parallel with, but very different from, the church in Christianity is represented by

ulama. *Ulama*, literally scholars, have no divine position in Islam and its original sources, i.e. the Quran and *hadith*, yet they are products of Islamic civilization. After the death of the Prophet, and for Shia Islam after the occultation of the twelfth Imam, the Muslim community felt that it needs a body of professionals from whom it can get authentic interpretations of primary Islamic sources. The answer to that need was the establishment of *madradas* and the clerical hierarchy that first and foremost involved itself in Islamic legal instructions, an aspect which were related more than other aspects of religion to Muslims' everyday life. However, since Islamic sources beside legal teachings give political instructions, *ulama* were more or less involved in politics as well. Of course, in the majority of cases *ulama* were working with the political authority and did not take a direct political role. The ruler usually needed their support as a source of legitimacy and in exchange he gave them room for their religious activities.

The third layer has manifested itself in modern non-clerical movements such as the Egyptian Islamic Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*) founded by Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) in 1928. The rise of this layer in the late twentieth century is considered the main reason for the revival of religion (Kepel, 1994: 192). Olivier Roy (2004: 169) explains how modern religiosity is intertwined with the de-legitimation of the religious hierarchy. There is a great deal of anti-intellectualism in all contemporary forms of religiosity in both Islam and Christianity. Religion is everybody's business. Thanks to modern communications, information is easily accessible to everyone. The divide between *ulama* and ordinary Muslims is blurred, because many educated young Muslims think of themselves as experts in religion. The circulation of knowledge is horizontal between equals and not vertical, from learned intellectuals to students. This horizontal circulation is a characteristic of the Internet (Roy, 2004: 168).

The fourth layer is the position of religion in one's worldview, which effectively influences one's every action including political ones. Thus, religion even in its most private manifestations, which has been tolerated even by many secularist schools of thought, can affect political decisions of politicians and ordinary voter alike. From this angle it can be argued that religious worldviews take part in politics in two ways: (i) they can influence the worldview and belief system of policy-makers since they "deal with the constitution of being as such. Hence, one cannot be pragmatic in concerns challenging this being" (Lausesen & Waever, 2000); (ii) they can influence politics by preventing policy-makers from challenging widely held religious belief among their constituents (Fox, 2010).

The fifth layer, i.e. Islam as a factor of identity, has presented itself in virtually every Muslim even if they are not committed such as secular Muslims and also some Muslim migrants in the West who have chosen a Western way of life after being integrated in Western societies. People who have Islam merely in their identity know themselves as Muslims, but have no actual link with Islamic spiritual, legal and political teachings. Yet their mere nominal Islam may bring them into the camp of political Islam. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of Indian separatist Muslims, was secular in his political orientation but founded Pakistan based on the Islamic identity of his people. Minority Muslims residing in the West can be another example of this category. Considering their otherness, as explained by Kepel in the case of second generation French Muslim migrants, although they are full citizens, the Republic does not guarantee their social integration and give them access to the labor market. Hence, the spread of systematic social exclusion in post-industrial societies makes a fertile land for re-activating the Islamic part of their identity (Kepel, 1997: 232-233).

The sixth layer of Islam is perhaps its most visible layer and

is ironically very close to politics. Religious symbols and rituals, such as Salat, Hajj, Ramadan, Hijab, halal food, and mosques, are very important in Islam. Symbols and rituals are important in politics as well. Flags, anthems, parades, political rallies are among distinguished elements in politics. The mixture of the two sets of symbols and rituals can be found in many Muslim countries. In fact many Muslim states as well as other Muslim political activists intelligently use religious symbols in political rallies to gain momentum. David Wessels (2010) explains how political leaders and institutions use existing religious symbols and rituals for their purposes in many instances, from crusades and jihad to aggregating political parties and using soft-sell propaganda in the era of communicative abundance. It is also suggested that we need to extend the use of the term, soft power, from its original usage— persuasion and influence in a secular world— to the influence of religious actors as well (Haynes, 2010).

The seventh layer, namely Islam as an ideology is typically the most radical use of Islam in politics. Once theories, in whatever field of inquiry, turn into ideologies they imprison their proponents (Popper, 1996: 61). They act as a prison in the sense that they impose a strict 'regime' or 'norm' on those who are trapped inside. Ideologies have a ready-made black-and-white answer for any question. What they do is that they suggest their advocates to wear colored spectacles and then see everything in its color. Ideologies seem to be irrefutable theories. Yet, as Popper (2002: 48) remarks, irrefutability is not a virtue of a theory, but a vice. Once Islam becomes an ideology, a combination which is usually for political implications, it inherits all such negative aspects. A clear example is al-Qaeda with its black and white worldview. Their Islam is an ideology with a simple logic that can resolve every political problem in a simple-minded way. Their ideological machine is ready to draw a binary opposition based on which it can eliminate their opponents with whatever costs.

The eighth layer, civilization, is the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity. But it is different from religion. Unlike the dichotomy between ‘Christianity’ as a religion, and ‘Christendom’ as a civilization that incorporates non-Christian or even anti-Christian elements, the term ‘Islam’ in English usage of the word represents simultaneously both the religion and the civilization. As a consequence, although one is able to explicitly affirm that Adolf Hitler is a product of Christendom not Christianity, it is hardly possible to make a similarly efficient statement about the position of Saddam Hussein in Islam. In other words, when we talk of Islam we use the same word for both the religion and the civilization, which can lead to misunderstanding (Lewis, 2003). In fact, some cultural aspects of Islam (the civilization) are originally pre-Islamic and non-Islamic (the religion) (Lewis, 1991: 6). By pre-Islamic, it is meant, practices of the Persian and Roman Empires, and by non-Islamic some traditions imported from originally non-Muslim dynasties, states and armies such as those of the Turks and Mongols.

Having observed the different layers of Islam, we need to consider three important points in the interplay of religion and politics in the context of the Muslim world. First, as Halliday points out, every understanding and manifestation of religion in all layers is contingent. History tells us that states promoting Islam – Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Sudan, Malaysia, etc. all promote Islamic spirituality, Islamic law, build mosques and *madrasas* and speak of Islamic unity, not under a universal interpretation of the faith but under their own interpretation to recruit the faithful to their own Islam, sometimes with radical contradictions with each other. We should not ignore the fact that political bodies attempt to use cultural beliefs as a vehicle for legitimacy. States use religious values, as a language to justify what they are doing in the domestic or international scene. In fact, the multiplicity of voices represented radically

differing perspectives and priorities among Muslim governments, between some governments and their people, among religious leaders and Islamic movements (Esposito, 1999: 256). In other words, similar to other world religions, “[d]iversity rather than monolithic unity is more the norm than the exception in Islamic politics” (Esposito, 1999: 287). Hence, it is of significant importance to identify in each case of study the dominant layer of religion, interpretations and characteristics of which defines the way Islam interacts with politics.

The second point is that we must differentiate between two situations: sometimes politics coerces religion and sometime religion manipulates politics. In other words, at times politicians, deceptively or otherwise, use the language and symbols of religion to achieve their political agenda and at times people of religion, with good or bad intentions, cross the border between their normal religious concerns and the arena of politics. Of course, an ultimate border line between the two is always blurry, particularly in the case of Islam with its very political instructions. Olivier Roy looks at this mixture between religion and politics pessimistically. He holds that crossing the border under a holistic perception of religion leads to an inevitable outcome: politics prevails over religion (Roy, 2004: 40). At any rate, it cannot be denied that in the contemporary world, religion is a potent source of legitimacy in the domestic-international nexus and is a complex and versatile tool of persuasion (Fox, 2010).

The final point is the fact that many theorists of secular modernism examined the interrelations between religion and politics as if they are presented merely by church and state (the second layer). Therefore, they may have no problem, for instance, if religion interacts with politics in one’s worldview (the fourth layer). Apparently Wessels refers to this layer of religion when he boldly states: “One could speak of religion and

politics as internal parts of a brocade fabric [...]. The ascendancy of theories of functionalism (and the differentiation that is said to accompany them) has obscured dimensions of organic unity between politics and religion” (Wessels, 2010).

It is noteworthy that these eight layers usually work in an interrelated manner and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the dominant layer. Now after this theoretical discussion we shall look at some real cases in the Muslim world, assessing the way religion interacts with politics and distinguishing the dominant layers.

Islamic Republic of Iran

As the official title of the country shows and the Iranian Constitution reads, Iranian politics sought to be a mixture of Islam and democracy. The former component is based on the theory of guardianship of the jurist (*wilayat al-faqih*), suggested by Imam Khomeini in the early 1970s. In the Imam’s (1981: 59) final analysis, the remedy to all current problems of the Muslim world was the application of a holistic view on Islamic governance. He added that since the essence of Islamic governance was Islamic law, it would be possible only through the rule of the jurist (*faqih*) who was independently aware of every detail of the law. Imam Khomeini argued that it was “because the just jurists [*fuqaha*,] have not had executive power in the lands inhabited by Muslims and their government has not been established that Islam has declined” (Khomeini, 1981: 80). In addition to the knowledge of law, the ruler had to be just and also to possess excellence in morals and beliefs (Khomeini, 1981: 60). Accordingly, if a worthy individual possessing knowledge and who is just establishes a government, he will possess *the same authority as the Prophet had* in the administration of society (Khomeini, 1981: 62). This is indeed the highest possible authority that cannot be exaggerated in an

Islamic political perspective. However, the Iranian Constitution has some democratic components which leave some parts of authority to the people. Regular elections, indirect election of the supreme leader (who serves as the guardian), electing a president and a parliament are among democratic components of the Iranian political system. Yet after more than three decades the Islamic republic has showed in practice that the upper hand is always with the supreme leader who enjoys a Prophetic political authority as suggested by Imam Khomeini. Many events after the revolution such as the occupation of the US embassy and holding hostage American diplomats for 444 days and the subsequent resignation of Prime Minister Bazargan, the removal of President Bani Sadr from power, the final acceptance of the 598 Security Council Resolution regarding the Iran-Iraq War, the events after the students' uprisings of 1999, and finally the controversy over the presidential election of 2009 can well demonstrate the priority of the guardianship of the jurist in Iranian politics.

Hence, the dominant layer of Islam in the Iranian political context, in both domestic politics and international relations, is obviously the second layer, i.e. clerical authority, although all other layers are also influential in one way or another. The preamble of the Iranian Constitution reads: "Islamic Government is designed on a basis of 'religious guardianship' as put forward by Imam Khomeini at the height of the intense emotion and strangulation (felt) under the despotic regime. This created a specific motivation and new field of advance for the Muslim people; and opened up the true path for the religious fight of Islam, pressing forward the struggle of the committed Muslim combatants, inside and outside the country."

The first layer is also very important in Iran, though mostly not through Sufi orders. Imam Khomeini himself was a mystic, besides being a jurist. Iranian Shia people give much respect to

their Twelve Imams who are considered the ultimate source of spirituality, particularly, Imam Ali and Imam Husain. Such themes were the main component of Iranian propaganda against Sunni Saddam Husain during the eight year war between Iran and Iraq. The third layer is also influential in Iran. Lay Islamic activists and scholars such as Mehdi Bazargan (1907-95) Jalal Aal-e Ahmad (1923-69), Ali Shariati (1933-77) and Abdolkarim Soroush (1945-) are influential figures with both religious and political contributions. Some of their works have been translated into Arabic and English, among other Muslim languages, and widely distributed in other countries. The fourth layer of religion is also vibrant in Iranian politics. Iranian policy-makers and public are under influence of their religious worldviews as some surveys suggest (Daftar-e tarh va peimyeš-e arzeš-hā. (1382 [2003 A.D])/ Daftar-e tarh va peimyeš-e arzeš-hā. 1380 [2001 A.D]). The fifth layer is also important in Iran. Iranian people consider their religion as a central part of their identity, despite the attempts made by the Pahlavi dynasty to weaken the Islamic essence of the Iranian people's identity and sought to replace it with a sense of belonging to the ancient Iranian civilization. The sixth layer is also very obvious in Iranian politics. In the Islamic Republic virtually all Iranian political symbols and rituals are mixed with those of Islam. From the flag, anthems, parades, political rallies— all with vibrant Islamic themes— to mosques, Friday prayer, Eid Prayer, religious rites— all with vibrant political themes— Islamic and political symbols and rituals are tightened very closely. That came to the international scene as well. Since the 1980s Iranians attempted to employ the hajj religious ceremony to declare “Disassociation from Polytheists”, which is originally a Quranic term (Chapter 9, verse 1). “Polytheists” was interpreted in the contemporary world as the arrogant West and particularly America. The seventh layer has also been used in Iranian politics. Radical terrorist organizations such as al-Furqan and Mujahedeen Khalq are examples for an

implication of Islam as an ideology in Iranian contemporary politics. Finally Islam is present in Iranian politics with its eighth layer, i.e. as a civilization. The preamble of the Constitution reads that the Iranian Revolution tries to develop international relations with other Islamic movements and peoples, “so as to prepare the way towards a united single world community”. Such a civilizational layer is a frequent theme in the lectures by Iranian political leaders, especially that of Imam Khamenei, the current supreme leader.

Although Islam is present in all its eight layers in Iran, the key point of this research is to highlight the critical role played by the dominant layer, i.e. the Iranian clerical authority. Only that layer can officially define what Islam is and interpret the way religion links to spirituality and morality, the way thoughts of lay scholars can be propagated (and some should be removed under a censorship regime), the way Islamic worldview, Islamic identity and Islamic symbols and rituals should be implemented and also the way Islam as a civilization should be taken into consideration. In other words, Islam in Iran mainly manifests itself in its second layer and thus is interpreted and applied by the players of that layer.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Being the current custodian of the land where the Prophet was born and encompassing the two holiest Islamic cities, Mecca and Medina, and also hosting millions of Muslim visitors performing their pilgrimage, Saudi Arabia, more than any other country, symbolises Islam. However, with its strict Wahhabi brand of Islam, the popular understanding of Islam in Saudi Arabia is literal and rigid in comparison with all other Muslim countries. In the enormous, luxurious mosques where daily prayers are held, government regulations enforce the compulsory attendance of shopkeepers at prayer, along with

imposing an excessive degree of gender segregation based on the Hanbali understanding of Islamic law.

Although the country was officially established as a nation-state in 1932, its political structure was inspired by the followers of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab (1703-92). Within this political structure, the country is ruled by a monarch with absolute power in a tribal and extended family politics and a religious authority employed to legitimise the power of the monarch and to unify the country's tribes under the banner of Islam. Having no election, no parliament, and even no constitution which can limit the King's power, the state political system seems to be very far from democracy and can expect no legitimacy from the people. Thus the government desperately requires religious authenticity to remain in power (Kapiszewski, 2006). For this reason, the government attempts to employ, as much as it can, Islamic symbols and rituals in relation to the state. For instance, in 1986, King Fahd replaced the traditional regal title of "Royal Majesty" with "Custodian of the Holy Mosques."

Islam also has an important function with regard to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. A wealthy state, Saudi Arabia employs its petro-dollars to endorse its leadership throughout Muslim countries. In this way, Saudi Arabia has usually experienced close rivalries with a number of other Muslim leaders. Jamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt, Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, and Imam Khomeini of Iran were targeted by Saudi Arabia's international, petro-dollar funded propaganda machine (Esposito, 2005: 193). Ironically, the Saudi government, one of the closest US allies in the region has had the lion's share of the global Islamization process. Its impact on Muslims throughout the world was less visible than that of Iran, but the effect was deeper and more enduring (Kepel, 2006: 61-62). "By becoming the managers of a huge empire of charity

and good works, the Saudi government sought to legitimize a prosperity it claimed was manna from heaven” (Kepel, 2006: 70).

Saudi Arabia’s opponents accused the government of blindly following US interests while overtly claiming their interests derive from an Islamic agenda. The government was also blamed for inadvertently radicalising its citizens by applying serious oppression against its citizens, which resulted in producing global jihadists, not only against the Saudi government, but also against its closest ally, America. The evidence for this claim is that 15 out of the 19 terrorists involved in the September 11 attacks were Saudi citizens.

It could be argued that the dominant layer of Islam in Saudi Arabian politics is the sixth layer, i.e. symbols and rituals and then the second layer, represented by the Wahhabi clerical establishment. The sixth layer is directly implemented by the government in its domestic and international policies, but the second one is located out of the government and is in the hands of a clerical establishment whom the government needs to gain legitimacy from. Yet the government simultaneously has power over them and can put some limits before them. Therefore, the position of *ulama* here is very different from that in Iran. This difference shows itself nowhere more than in Saudi foreign policy, where Western interests should be fulfilled by the monarchy even at the cost of dissatisfaction of the clerical authority. The presence of infidel troops on Saudi soil during the first Persian Gulf War of 1991 is an example. While the official religion supported the government, sharp voices of religious dissent condemned taking such a religiously forbidden policy (Esposito, 2005: 195). Finally the controversy resolved, at least on a political level, by the International Islamic Conference who supported the Saudi use of foreign troops in the war referring to it as “self-defense” (Rashid & Shaheen, 1992: 242). But the

second layer, i.e. the clerical authority, is quite potent in domestic issues. “The royal family handed over education, the courts and cultural affairs to the imams. Many of the rigid features of modern Saudi life: no women on television, no music in any media, an overdose of religion in schools, stores closed during prayer times, increased powers for the religious police were passed in the early 1980s” (Zakaria, 2004).

The first layer of religion is virtually absent from Saudi Arabia, because the Wahhabi brand does not tolerate any sort of spirituality outside the realm of its own literal understanding. The third layer is also weak in the Saudi context, again because of the rigidity of the official religion which does not hear any other voice. The fourth layer is, however, important in people’s worldview, but since policy makers are not men of religion, one may doubt the presence of religion in their worldview as a defining factor all the time. The fifth layer, however, plays a very important role. The state and people take Islam literally as the most important part of their identity. The seventh layer, i.e. Islam as an ideology, manifested itself in al-Qaeda whose ideology is rooted in the Wahhabi mindset, from the perspective of a political opposition. Finally, civilization is also an important layer of religion in Saudi eyes as they look at themselves as the center of the Muslim World.

The core argument here is that the dominant layer of Islam in the Saudi context, particularly in its international relations, is Islam as symbols and rituals which are very flexible to match any political agenda. In domestic issues the real effect of the clerical establishment, as a dominant layer, is evident. In comparison with Iran, in Saudi Arabia politicians employ religion, while in Iran people of religion have come to politics. This can shed some light on radically different positions of the two countries in world politics.

Republic of Turkey

Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938) is the main symbol of secularism in modern Turkey. Seven decades after his death, the strong secular tradition he promoted, under strict military protection, is still felt within the Turkish political milieu. Ataturk founded his strategy for post-Ottoman Turkey on six principles: republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism, secularism, and revolution/reformism. His understanding of secularism was not limited to the separation of religion and state, yet he believed in an anti-religious secular ideology which was a legacy of the European positivism of the nineteenth century. The anti-religious program was practised to the extent that all indigenous symbols with trivial relations to religion, such as the Turkish alphabet (based on the Arabic script), were banned.

A decade after Ataturk, a multi-party system was approved, granting more freedom to practice religion. Like other parts of the Muslim world, during the 1970s Islamic sentiments tended to be on the rise and became increasingly visible in the 1980s. Although after five decades of suppression, it might have seemed that Islamic propensities were destroyed, during the 1980s, a rise in the number of Quranic schools, religious publications, and the number of citizens performing the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, proved that Islam still had a strong appeal for the Turkish population.

In 1983, Necmettin Erbakan (1926- 2011), a devout Muslim with careers in academia, business and politics, formed the Welfare Party (WP) [in Turkish *Refah Partisi*, or RP]. The economic situation of the early 1990s was a good opportunity for the WP to win an increasing number of votes. Although in 1987, the WP had only 7.2% of the vote, in the national election of 1991, it won 17.2%. The frustrated economy of Turkey, with inflation rates of 60 to 100%, prepared many Turkish citizens to listen to an alternative political theory, i.e., an Islamic solution

for the country. This was additionally reinforced by a good record of the WP during its years of service. After winning 24.1% of the vote in 1994, in coalition with secular politician Tansu Ciller of the True Path Party, an Islamic government came to power for the first time in 1995. Erbakan's government, however, was withdrawn by military intervention as soon as 1997. The WP was banned and Erbakan was barred from being involved in the political system for five years. In 1998, former WP members and supporters formed the Fazilet (Virtue) Party. Although the Fazilet was banned in a few years, political Islam continued to rise in Turkey. The Islamic AK party with their insistence on their Islamic ethos won in 2002 with 34%, in 2004 with 42%, in 2007 with 47%, and in 2011 with more than 49%. One of the first moves of the AK party after its electoral victory in 2002 was to push for the freedom of women to wear the *hijab* at university. Moreover, in the annual meeting at Davos in 2009 Erdogan harshly criticized the Israeli President for the brutal massacre in Gaza in the same year. Once he came back home, he was warmly welcomed by thousands of demonstrators who shared anti-Israeli feelings with their Prime Minister. This bold anti-Israeli action by a Turkish politician, whose party has been winning elections for a decade, appropriately shows the fact that Islamic sentiments are at the center of the Turkish society.

The Islamic parties of Turkey, however, seem very different from their counterparts in other Muslim countries. Although, basically they have accepted anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism policies in the 70s and 80s, when in power, they have acted within a pragmatist methodology. They maintained Turkey's membership in NATO, continued their path to the EU, and sustained relations with Israel. In general, they adopted some principles of Turkish secularism. At the same time, they maintained good relations with Iran, Iraq and other Muslim countries. This pattern made them successful in gaining prominence in the region (Esposito, 1999: 203). However, they

still receive accusations of being anti-secular from the secular factions of the country. Islamic parties are also blamed for being diverted from the true Islam by other Turkish Islamic groups as well.

It can be argued that the dominant layer of Islam in Turkish domestic and international politics is the fifth one, i.e. Islam as a part of identity. Fuat Keyman (2007) explains this clearly and informatively. Quoting Berger (1967: 127), he maintains that secularism has two components: subjective, which implies the secularization of worldview and conscience, and objective that involves an institutional differentiation of the political from religious. Then he holds that today's Turkey has distanced itself from subjective secularism, but has kept firmly the objective one. In this way he submits that Islam, contrary to Ataturk's ambition, remained and is well protected in Turkish society, yet it is only Islam as a part of people's identity and not a legal or political alternative to secularism. Turkish people have chosen Islam because it gives them "a more concrete feeling of belonging than (and beyond) the abstract idea of general will and laicist national identity."

Islam is manifest in its other layers in Turkey as well. The first and second layers are visible but after Ataturk's revolution they became very weak and are currently unable to play a major political role. However, the third layer is very active in Turkey indeed. Non-clerical committed Muslims are very influential in economic networks and also in Turkish civil society. Gulen movement and the Independent Business and Industrialist Organization (the MUSIAD) are two examples. The fourth layer is also evident in Turkish politics both among politicians and voters as the records of victory of Islamic parties illustrate. The sixth layer is also very visible in Turkey, particularly in its magnificent mosques, in Ramadan festivals and in halal food. Symbols play a role in political discourse as well. Prime

Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, achieved notoriety and was even imprisoned, in 1998 for quoting in a political speech a poem which likened the minarets of his country's mosques to bayonets and their domes to helmets (Kepel, 2004). The seventh layer is said to be present in Turkish politics as well. The militant organization known in Turkey as 'Hizbullah', which is a Sunni Kurdish group unrelated to the Lebanese group of the same name, has been condemned by the government as a terrorist organization. Finally Islam is vibrant as a civilization. After all Turkey was the state of the Ottomans, one of the glorious Islamic empires, for few centuries and Turkish people still have the feeling of having a central role in the Islamic civilization.

The dominant layer of Islam in Turkey makes it quite different from Islam in Iran and in Saudi Arabia. In fact, Turkish Islam, as it manifested itself in a successful record of Islamic parties in power, can be considered as a reaction to Ataturk's anti-religious policies. Islamic parties of Turkey do not seek to establish an Islamic state in the country as it is implemented in Iran and they do not want to promote Islam via Islamic symbols and rituals and do not need legitimacy from *ulama* in the way Saudi Arabia does. They, however, want to preserve an important factor of their identity which was oppressively taken from them in a secular revolution.

Conclusion

Nowadays religion is regarded as an influential factor in politics, but not in the way culturalists attempted to put it, i.e. at the center of world politics. The actual impact of religion should be assessed using a sociological historical analysis taking into account the contingency of religious interpretations at any given time and place. Religion, however, is a broad notion with different layers and a complex structure. Hence, to examine its

effect on politics we need to know exactly which layers of religion are dominant in any case of study, so that we can understand the sort of interpretations and definitions those layers suggest. The dominant layer of religion in Iran seems to be Islam of clerical authority which has occupied the highest political position in the country. The dominant layer of Islam in Saudi Arabia is in general Islamic symbols and rituals and in domestic politics, Islam of Wahhabi clerical establishment. In Turkey, however, Islam is regarded as a revived part of identity, something which had been taken from Turkish people aggressively and in last two decades they voted for enthusiastically.

To examine the real effect of religion in any case of study the identification of the dominant layers seriously matters. The way clerical establishment in Iran acts in international relations seems to be more inflexible and also more complex than the way the symbolic Islam of Saudi Arabia and the identity Islam of Turkey act. In other words, Iran acts more religiously and the two others act more politically. In negotiations and political compromise, it matters to have an insightful account of the actual layers of religion in force in each case. Nevertheless, in the course of time and when circumstances change the dominant layer may be replaced by another, as different layers of religion enjoy constant interactions between themselves and with other factors. Hence, in each case further investigations may be required at any given time.

References

- Appleby, S. (2000). *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Berger, P. (1999). *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Washington D. C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center/ Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Berger, P. (1967). *The Sacred Canopy*. New York: Anchor Books.

The Different Layers of Islam in Interaction with Politics: a Comparative Analysis of Iran,
Saudi Arabia and Turkey

- Daftar-e tarh va peimyeš-e arzeš-hā. (1382 [2003 A.D]). Arzeš-hā va negareš-hā-ye Irāniān [Iranians] (moje dovom). Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance
- Daftar-e tarh va peimyeš-e arzeš-hā. (1380 [2001 A.D]). Arzeš-hā va negareš-hā-ye Irāniān [Iranians] (moje aval). Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance
- Esposito, J. (2005). *Islam: the Straight Path* (revised 3rd Ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Esposito, J. (1999). *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* (3rd Ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fox, J. (2010). Integrating Religion into International Relations Theory. In Haynes, J. (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics* (pp 237-292). London and New York: Routledge.
- Halliday, F. (2007). *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Haynes, J. (2010). Religion and Foreign Policy. In Haynes, J. (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics* (pp 293-307). London and New York: Routledge.
- Huntington, S. (2002). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hurd, E. (2004). The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations. *European Journal of International Relations*, 10(2): 235-262. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066104042936>
- Kapiszewski, A. (2006). Saudi Arabia: Steps toward Democratization or Reconfiguration of Authoritarianism?. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 41(5/6): 459-482. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909606067407>.
- Kepel, G. (2006). *Jihad: the Trail of Political Islam* (F. Roberts, Trans.). London: I. B. Tauris.
- Kepel, G. (2004). Turkey's European Problem. Retrieved from: http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-europe_constitution/article_2264.jsp.
- Kepel, G. (1997). *Allah in the West: Islamic Movements in America and Europe* (S. Milner, Trans.). Oxford: Polity Press.
- Kepel, G. (1994). *The Revenge of God: the Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press.

- Keyman, E. F. (2007). Modernity, Secularism and Islam: The Case of Turkey. *Theory Culture Society*, 24(2): 215-234.
- Khomeini, R. (1981). *Islam and Revolution* (H. Algar, Trans.). Berkeley: Mizan Press.
- Lausesen, C.B. and Wæver, O. (2000). In Defence of Religion: Sacred Referent Objects for Secularization. *Millennium*, 29(3): 705-739. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298000290031601>.
- Lewis, B. (2003, May). I'm Right You're Wrong, Go to Hell. *The Atlantic Monthly*, Retrieved from: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/05/-im-right-youre-wrong-go-to-hell/302723/>.
- Lewis, B. (1991). *The Political Language of Islam*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Moore, B. (1967). *The Origin of Dictatorship and Democracy*. London: Allen Lane.
- Philpott, D. (2002). The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations. *World Politics*, 55(1): 66-95. Retrieved form: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25054210>.
- Popper, K. (2002). *Conjectures and Refutations: the Growth of scientific Knowledge*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Popper, K. (1996). *The Myth of the Framework: in Defence of Science and Rationality*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rashid, N.I. and Shaheen, E.I. (1992). *Saudi Arabia and the Gulf War*. Joplin: International Institute of Technology Inc.
- Roy, O. (2004). *Globalized Islam: the Search for a New Ummah*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wessels, D. (2010). Religion and Globalization. In Haynes, J., *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics* (pp323-339). London and New York: Routledge.
- Zakaria, F. (2004, June 27). The Saudi Trap. *Newsweek*. Retrieved form: <https://www.newsweek.com/saudi-trap-128707>.