

## Making Revolution Islamic Again: Protest and Rebellion from '79 Iran to the Arab Spring

Andrew Hammond - 18th January 2017



**Andrew Hammond explores the continuities and new developments in representations of Islam, politics and violence in the Middle East. This piece is the first chapter in the E-book 'The Future of the Middle East' co-produced by Global Policy and Arab Digest, and edited by Hugh Miles and Alastair Newton. Freely available chapters will be serialised [here](#) and collected into a final downloadable publication in the spring.**

The 1979 Iranian Revolution was revolutionary on a number of fronts, but it had two particularly profound consequences in terms of Western discourse on Islam and political change. On the one hand, it signalled the death knell of modernization theory's rejection of religion as an organizing force in society, which still retained currency at that time in scholarly discussion of the Islamic world. What was termed "[radical alterity](#)" became the rage as anthropology took its "[cultural turn](#)" and Middle East Studies, and other disciplines focussed on the Islamic, refracted into various approaches, from the reduction of Islam to unsalvageable fundamentals to the search for an Islamic liberalism (viz. Leonard Binder's [Islamic Liberalism](#)).

On the other hand, historians and social scientists began to look anew into questions of radical change and responses to oppressive power systems, from James Scott's "peasant resistance" to Asef Bayat's notion of "everyday resistance" in urban Iran. "Most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized political activity," Scott wrote in [Weapons of the Weak](#) (1985), and since rebellion invariably fails, it would be wiser to focus on "everyday forms of peasant resistance – the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them." Similarly declaring that he wants to "deemphasize the totalizing notion of 'the revolution' as the change par excellence", Bayat argued in [Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran](#) (1998) that in their drive for autonomy non-elite groups may succeed in subverting the domination of the modern state.



As Iran came to replace one form of repressive system with another, its popular revolt became paradoxically emblematic of all that was wrong with violent change. Marxist and post-colonial studies scholars influenced by [Michel Foucault's](#) theories on knowledge and power did not like this new trend, which was at one with ascendant neoliberalism and its treatment of man as a consumptive rather than political animal, but the fact is that from that time revolution became distinctly unfashionable in how the Arab world was discussed in Western public discourse.

These two developments – renewed emphasis on the essence of Islam and questioning the efficacy of violent revolt – came sharply into focus again with the popular uprisings that spread across countries of the Middle East region in late 2010 and throughout 2011, collectively referred to in media as the Arab Spring. Against the grain of policy discourse and social and political science theory, masses of ordinary people risked their lives in taking to the streets to effect forms of political and economic change that it had not been possible to realize through the established means within state structures. Moreover, they did so as “Arabs”, a flexible taxonomy propagated by 19th century European politicians and scholars in the imperial metropole whose many, contradictory characteristics included, as Edward Said so lucidly outlined in [Orientalism](#) (1978), both passivity and propensity to violence. As they staked their place as global citizens (speaking the universal language of rights espoused by the West), there was little to be gainsaid about the hundreds of thousands who engaged in protest in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Yemen, Oman, Kuwait, Syria, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Morocco once their popular mobilizations had made their way into international media and tapped into the universal discourse.

But this was no small feat. The array of coercive, economic and discursive forces ranged against the protesting Arab were considerable, and the success of these mechanisms, which were lodged in processes of globalization, seemed to be both long-term and consistent with the notion of the submissiveness of the political culture. Brutal police states were sustained through extensive political and diplomatic, military and security, and economic support from Western powers, whose first concern when protests broke out in Tunisia was to preserve order in the World Bank’s model Arab economic reformer. The reform narrative was so prevalent that it took a news agency such as Reuters several weeks to move beyond dismissing protesters as damn meddling kids and passé leftists from the interior wastelands. The French foreign minister of the time [Michèle Alliot-Marie](#) even offered to help the regime restore order, then spent a Christmas holiday in the outremer province as the uprising unfolded.

However, Orientalism’s other Arab – the barbarian given to violent urges – was to return in the strange case of Western revival of the defunct category of violent revolt. After the initial confusion over how to compute popular revolt against regimes understood as Western allies and made respectable through narrative artifice, the 2011 movement shifted towards militarization under the guidance of outside forces. The process began with Libya, where then US Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#) saw an opportunity to install a regime more appealing to US interests through the cover of Arab League sanctions for NATO operations in which Qatar and the UAE played a key role. While for the UAE this was the first try out for a new policy of Little Sparta extensions, for Qatar it was the continuing roll-out of a wider project to bring to power political groups whose ideological lexicon was based in the “Islamic reference”. The innocence of a region-wide popular movement, untainted by foreign manipulations and agendas, that would win or lose and live to fight another day in other forms and contexts, was lost.

The basics of that model were to be reproduced in Syria where a provincial protest movement that braved the worst forms of repression from a regime too paranoid about collapse and accountability in the face of an emboldened populace was fatally transformed into an armed uprising dominated by the [Islamic reference](#). This was not the work of domestic forces alone, but produced by their backers, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United States, guided by the crude and parvenu notion that “majority Sunnis” were determined to reclaim their historical patrimony from the manufactured secularism of rule by minorities. Organized opposition forces abroad where secular voices were prominent formed a convenient front for what was increasingly sold in the Gulf arena where the money was coming from as unofficial jihad against an infidel regime. Of the dozens of fighting

groups, some emerged from the Brotherhood fold, others from the diverse ideological movement referred to widely in Arabic since 1980s Afghanistan and in English since 9/11 as “[Salafism](#)”, and it was Salafism that was to win out in Western media and policy circles as the normative ideological descriptor of choice for this Islamic moment.

So in the face of a regime with no red lines in terms of the type of warfare it would engage in to retain control, protesters were replaced with insurgents, both Syrian and foreign. Violent revolution was suddenly in vogue and Islamic again. Yet no thought was given to the death, [the displacement](#) and the destruction of neighbourhoods that was inevitably going to ensue. The lessons of the Lebanese civil war, the Iraq war, the Russians in Chechnya or Israeli wars in Gaza were not enough to stop the madness in its tracks: where Hamas has never fought beyond one month because it knows Israel will continue flattening urban districts one by one, the insurgency continued inexorably in the constant hope that the regime was just one atrocity away from a new US war. To prosecute such a strategy against a regime of consummate cruelty with a proven track record stretching back over decades (the CIA didn’t send suspects there for nothing) was by one reading an unethical act of striking naivety. For affluent Gulf states the jihad functioned as a diversion from the dangers of the Arab Spring, which touched in different ways Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Cheerleaders among the think tank community lobbied for a cause rather than rationally ponder the consequences of policy and action.

With the tragedy of Syria, Islam as the key vector of identity for Arabs and Muslims has been reinforced in the English and Arabic public arena. The secular nature of Syrian society under the Baath regime is presented by pro-rebel politicians and commentators as an aberration from the norm of Arab countries returning to their Islamic self after the failed experience of secular Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 60s. Countries with a simplistically tabulated “[Sunni majority](#)” must be ruled by “Sunnis”, and if Syrians, with their mosaic of confessional communities, don’t think of themselves in such a manner, that simply reinforces the deviant character of Assad family rule (which in simplistic sectarian terms is described as “Alawi”). The opposition groups appealed to Islamic themes, the argument goes, because these express the true nature of the culture. What has been striking, however, is the articulation of this Orientalist essentialism through the new discourse of Salafism. Classified in burgeoning scholarship on the topic as a transnational movement encompassing “jihadists”, political activists and “quietists”, Salafism is becoming the paradigm du jour for understanding Islam in the 21st century. Posing as the ideological champion of Salafism – a term which serves to supersede Wahhabism with its negative connotations – Saudi Arabia in particular has in broad terms promoted the quietists at home and the jihadists abroad, from Afghanistan to Syria, though it has in reality propagated all three globally at different times and in different contexts since the 1970s.

Salafism aligns with the Orientalist imagination of a monolithic Islamic civilization that can be reduced to a paradigm of early (Arab) generations, the period of True Islam, “after which the authenticity of the original article is progressively corrupted”, as Shahab Ahmed writes in [What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic](#) (2016). Western scholarship, on the one hand, and the clerical class who administer Sharia law, on the other, are perhaps oddly at one in sharing this thinking. Both seek to emphasize categories such as the early Islamic period, Islamic jurisprudence and Arab authenticity over a putative wave of corrupting foreign ideas, and both exhibit the scripturalist obsession with producing fixed knowledge from divine texts. Against this narrative, subsequent eras and Islamic cultures will only ever come up wanting; the immense influence, for example, of Sufism on both intellectual life and the lived experience of Muslims over centuries becomes marginalized and belittled. A default position establishes itself in both Islamic and Western

scholarship placing law rather than the practice of theological reasoning (kalām), or philosophy, or logic, or other side-lined disciplines at the heart of what is narrated as “Islam”. In the media dialectic between journalism and the commentariat, “Salafism” is becoming the West’s ideal Islam – legalistic, prescriptive, delineable, suitably Other.

To be clear, Salafism’s semantic victory in defining Late Orientalism’s [constitution of Islam](#) is not yet assured. Ideological and political disputes between Brotherhood Islamism and the Salafi trends, and their various Gulf Arab backers, is complicating the process. But the conflict is indicative of Islam’s continued domination of the social and cultural imaginaire in Middle East politics. A typical example of this is [Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the Middle East](#) (2016) by Brookings Institution researcher Shadi Hamid. The book could well have been titled Islamic Essentialism since it’s as succinct a description of the faddish essentialist position as you’ll find anywhere. Offering a potted history of Islam that goes briskly from the Islamic tradition’s rendering of Muhammad’s life to Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna, who is posited as Islam’s great reviver extraordinaire, Hamid declares that Islam has been in a “struggle to establish a legitimate political order” since the demise of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, which has apparently exercised the minds of all the world’s Muslims ever since because Islam “is different”.

The central conceit is that societies still holding religious belief dear require explanation for a liberal American audience that is imagined to find this odd, despite the Evangelicals, the Mormons, the Creationists, the Christian Zionists, et al. who populate the American project as it forges ahead through its third century. Islam is of course equated with Arabs throughout, and historical and anthropological understandings of Islamic culture are shunted aside for simplistic two-dimensional normativity: executed Sudanese intellectual Mahmud Muhammad Taha’s ideas are dismissed as uninteresting, the Qur’an is declared in a breathless mix of wonderment and defiance as “God’s actual speech”, the author reveals allegedly telling details such as that his Islamist informants prefer to meet in restaurants where alcohol isn’t served, and the reader is assumed to find it exceptional that members of a ruthlessly suppressed political movement would want to die for their cause.

Hamid posits himself as the insider apologist making comprehensible the incomprehensible. We are to be shocked that opinion polls (with which think tank pontificators on Islam are notably fixated) show that zero percent of British Muslims think [homosexuality](#) is morally acceptable, though placing this in global historical perspective I don’t think many African societies, the Chinese, East Europeans and others are too hot on homosexuality (defined here, presumably, as a lifestyle choice and identity) and neither were the liberal Western societies too long ago to boot. Which gets to the second major problem with Hamid’s thesis: if “not all peoples, cultures, and religions follow the same path to the same end point” – in other words, if modernity does not have a uniform cast to it – then what’s so unique about “the Muslims”, across all their cultural and geographical diversity, even if we accepted they were the 7th century-obsessed monolith presented by the author? Most egregious is the constant referencing of Shahab Ahmed in support of his arguments despite that fact that his work was dedicated to challenging the very essentialism Hamid trades in.

As for the notion of the caliphate as the fulcrum of Muslim existence without which life has no true meaning, it comes straight from the pages of German and British Orientalists whose mystical belief in the dangerous power of Muslim unity produced the infamous damp squib of Ottoman “jihad” announced in 1914 at the prodding of the Kaiser, who thought he could thus activate the Muslim mind for Axis Power ends. Hamid is hardly the first to push these ideas. In [L’exception islamique](#) (2004) French politics professor Hamadi Redissi argues Islam is exceptional because it is the only major civilizational bloc he sees to have failed to enter modernity, even in a moderated form that would preserve traditional elements. This is because, he argues, there is no separation between

religion and state, which fatally hobbled the efforts of the modernist reformers and allowed the clerics inordinate influence over society and individuals.

In [Voyous: deux essais sur la raison](#) (2003) deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida saw in Islam the only religious or theocratic culture that “can still, in fact or in principle, inspire and declare any resistance to democracy”, while suggesting the failure of Muslim philosophers to translate Aristotle’s *Politics* as a possible reason. [Samuel Huntington](#), who Hamid also discusses, also felt that Muslims across the board were too locked in their ways for (undefined American or Western) democratic norms. This impulse to produce a unified discourse of Islam has been one of the fundamental characteristics of Western engagement with various peoples through colonialism including Arabs, Turks, Persians and Indians, all the way up to Marshall Hodgson’s celebrated notion of the “Islamicate”, which, as his 1974 work [The Venture of Islam](#) stated in its subtitle, set itself the grandiose aim of describing “conscience and history in a world civilization”.

The Islamic turn was never solely, or perhaps at all, an internal development in Muslim political-intellectual culture. It was poked and prodded into existence by Western powers and their regional allies (Saudi Arabia under King Faisal, Egypt under Sadat) to create a bulwark against communism and Arab nationalism. As Ian Johnson has written ([A Mosque in Munich: Nazis, the CIA, and the Muslim Brotherhood in the West](#)), three decades before the Afghan jihad, the US government State Department was hosting Muslim Brotherhood and other figures at a 1953 colloquium at Princeton University on “Islamic culture”, and the CIA was subsequently primed for casting Islam and categories such as jihad as inspiration for the Arabs to fight Soviet influence. The turning point in the Arab sphere came in fact some 12 years before revolution in Iran: the moral collapse of the Nasserist project with the defeat to Israel in 1967. Secularism henceforth became a dirty word in Arab politics, and it’s curious to imagine that Richard Mitchell’s celebrated 1969 study of the Muslim Brotherhood ([The Society of the Muslim Brothers](#)) was seen at the time as a foray into recondite religious politics. It is similarly clear that a movement such as the Islamic State (or “ISIS”) cannot be understood fully as either the result of internal political evolution or outside machination: there is a complex historical interplay between the two that must be uncovered in the telling.

That the discourse on a religion, a people or a culture could be manipulated by external agency at all rarely features in the essentializing literature on Islam today, in which Brotherhood-mired analysts like Hamid or the host of commentators on ISIS and Salafism riff around themes of violence/non-violence, peaceful/non-peaceful rebellion, [jihad yay/jihad nay](#). Whether Muslims are legitimated to rise or stay silent, revolt or protest politely is only ever a political opportunity away for these writers, contingent upon the analyst’s interest in aligning with the shifting winds of policy and funding. Hamid is right about one thing, however: Islam, in one way or another, is indeed going to play an “outsized role in Middle East politics for the foreseeable future” and that’s because, intellectual trends and political machinations being what they are, the Islamic paradigm [isn’t going away](#) anytime soon. Indeed, the role of state players in propagating and/or repressing Islamic groups has become starker today than ever, as states such as Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia extend their hand far and wide with moral and material support for their favourites. The Trump administration has indicated it will take a hostile view of the Brotherhood and its calques, but whether it regards the Salafis, despite Gulf protestations about the “quietists” among them, as little better remains to be seen.

*Andrew Hammond is a doctoral candidate at St Antony's College, Oxford University, and author of Popular Culture in the Arab World (forthcoming in 2017). The views expressed in this post do not represent those of Global Policy or the Arab Digest.*

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