



**POLI TURCO**

**REPORT**

**POLITICAL ISLAMISM  
AND THE TEACHINGS  
OF THE QURAN**

**ZEKI SARITOPRAK**  
John Carroll University

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# **POLITURCO**

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## POLITICAL ISLAMISM AND THE TEACHINGS OF THE QURAN

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Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of what came to be called Political Islam has been a feature of many political movements in the Islamic world. In our own century the ideology of Political Islam has become increasingly important in the Islamic world and in the West. As I have said elsewhere, I am not comfortable with the term Political Islam for various reasons. To me to speak of Political Islam bifurcates Islam, the singular religion of the Prophet. I have no problem with people talking about Islamic politics, that is the politics that are compatible with Islamic values as this is more about politics than about Islam. That said, given its salience and for the sake of sharing a common language of discourse, I use Political Islam out of convenience. Occasionally, due perhaps to the inability to easily define such terms, Political Islam, Islamism, and less commonly Islamic fundamentalism are used interchangeably. As a scholar of Islamic theology, I approach this topic from a theological perspective and not from that of a political scientist or a policy expert. In the manuals of Islamic theology, politics, especially in the form of

leadership in the structure of a state, takes place in the final chapter under the title of *imama*, (lit. leadership). This is because in the Shiite tradition, it is a requirement that the head of a state be a religious person from the family of the Prophet or someone who represents the family of the Prophet. While this is a settled matter for Shiites, Sunni theologians argue whether or not it is necessary for the head of the state to be from the tribe of Quraysh, the Prophet's tribe, or not. The main reason for these debates is the famous hadith of the Prophet which says, "The leaders are from Quraysh." A longer version of the hadith says "The leaders are from Quraysh. When they judge they judge justly, when they promise they keep their promise. When they are asked for mercy, they show mercy. Any of them who do not fulfill these let the curse of God and angels, and all people be on them."<sup>1</sup> One can see the importance of qualities of the leader, such as justice and honesty, and the desire to work towards these ideals for society. It seems that among Sunni theologians, it is universally accepted that while a leader from Quraysh is ideal, a

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Tayalisi, *Al-Musnad*, Nos: 968 and 2247. The hadith is also found in Ibn Abi Shayba, *al-Musanaf*, No. 32388.

leader who is not of Quraysh who exhibits the qualities of a leader is acceptable. It can be argued that the qualities mentioned in the hadith: justice, trustworthy, and mercy are the most important qualities of a leader. Therefore, anyone who has these qualities is able to be a leader based on the Prophetic hadith. Today, those who adhere to the idea of Political Islam use Islamic principles as an ideological basis for their own political gains. The problem is not political engagement, but it is in making Islam a political ideology. The values of Islam are not used for the betterment of society, but as rhetoric and support for their agenda. This is not nourished by the main sources of Islam, rather it takes its political basis from other modern political and social movements which have a variety of “isms.”

There is no doubt that power is necessary for the establishment of justice and seeking justice or the power to bring justice in a legitimate way, through peaceful means, without causing any injustice has been an

ideal principle in the Islamic discourse and tradition. Therefore politics is not inherently prohibited in Islam. Politics is

For Islam, a leader should be someone who will sacrifice their own personal interests for the interests of their community. Such political involvement is even praiseworthy. However, politics that is based on self-interest can polarize society and is so dangerous to the well-being of the society as a whole that some scholars of Islam have compared this to a savage animal.

acceptable as long as it serves the community and organizes venues for the betterment of society. To have such an achievement requires strong, knowledgeable, truthful, righteous, merciful, pious, and skillful personalities. Mere religiosity is not enough for leadership in a society. For Islam, a leader should be someone who will sacrifice their

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own personal interests for the interests of their community. Such political involvement is even praiseworthy. However, politics that is based on self-interest can polarize society and is so dangerous to the well-being of the society as a whole that some scholars of Islam have compared this to a savage animal. The early successors to the Prophet including the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs and the Prophet's grandson Hasan, who is known as the "Fifth Caliph" are considered examples of this piety and justice. After these five, there have been a few pious individuals who were also able to combine piety and politics. One such leader was the Umayyad caliph Umar bin Abdul Aziz or Umar II, who is considered by many theologians as the first renewer (*mujaddid*) of Islam.

Politics and piety can rarely be found together. The Prophet of Islam showing such a concern for justice and leadership says that "The caliphate in my community is thirty years. After that, it will be a kingdom."<sup>2</sup> The narrator of this hadith says that Umayyad leaders claimed that they were caliphs. In fact they lied. They were kings and the worst of kings.<sup>3</sup> Because of

this hadith of the Prophet, many Muslim theologians considered the first thirty years after the death of the Prophet as the era of justice, but after these thirty year justice and injustice have mixed. At times, even great injustices have occurred at the hands of Muslim leaders. The oppression of al-Hajjaj bin Yusuf al-Thaqafi (d. 714) who historians describe as leader, genius, blood-shedder, orator and known in Islamic history as Hajjaj Zalim or the Wrongdoer Hajjaj, against the members of the family of the Prophet is beyond imagination. Perhaps because of this situation and because of the dangers of political leadership especially when injustice is involved, Sunni Muslims have always looked with suspicion at those in power because of the fear that they might not be as just as it is necessary to be. Muslim jurists like Abu Hanifa, when they were offered a high position in the court, would reject it out of fear that they would be manipulated by the leadership of the state and forced to do injustice. Similarly, when one of the relatives of Umar, the second Caliph, came to Umar asking for some money from the state budget, Umar responded "Do you want me to meet my Lord as a traitor?"<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> al-Tirmidhi, *al-Sahih*, No. 2226.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Sa'd, *Al-Tabqat*, v 3, pg. 230.

Therefore, if politics is based on the benefit of a group, a party, or individuals, or the elimination of the other, that political involvement becomes a problem in Islamic teaching. For those in the Islamic world, who with ill-intent use Islam as a vehicle for their own political goals and agenda, the pursuit of power becomes dangerous not just for their own spiritual lives, but for society as a whole. In Islamic countries such as Egypt, Turkey, and Pakistan there are Islamic movements that seek power through politics. Many of these movements in these countries established so-called religious parties, using the name of Islam whether explicitly or implicitly and contested elections. The problem with these Islamist political actors is that first a political agenda is set up and then the various sources of religion including Holy texts are used to legitimize and even mystify those parties and personalities in them. The political leader of an Islamic party is

Leaders generally enjoy these titles as long as they bring them more votes or on occasion have been known to actively accept the title. If the leader is ignorant and not aware of the religious principles, it can be dangerous to lead people with such messianic views.

In fact, one of the most important venues of mystification is the idea of messianic expectation. The ambiguity of sources in this regard, especially secondary sources, is used to mobilize people behind a political leader that can be otherwise seen a charlatan. As the African-American novelist James Baldwin said “It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.” The expected Islamic messianic figure, the Mahdi, can become identified with a political leader. Often in such cases, the country’s intelligentsia comes under the sway of the leader and uses its power to spread the word of the leader. On top of

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propagated as the rescuer of humanity. Messianic roles are also often attributed to these figures. They have been called the Mahdi or Khalifa or Amir of the Believers.

this, there is typically hopelessness and dissatisfaction with corruption and people become easily influenced by ideas that seem to confirm their fundamentally held beliefs.

Such mixing of Islamic messianic hope with politics leads to utopian thought and in turn leads to destruction of individuals and communities.

One of the first instances in recent memory of such expectations is perhaps most starkly seen in the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 by members of a paramilitary organization led by Juhayman al-Otaybi a former Saudi military figure turned ultra-fundamentalist who believed that his brother-in-law was the Mahdi. He interpreted a hadith on the Madhi to influence people that the Mahdi was among them and used this as the basis for his claims. He used the Islamic calendar to his advantage saying that with the new century, a new renewer had arrived. That is why the group seized the grand mosque on the first of Muharram, 1400AH. After his group seized the mosque, a siege ensued and hundreds were killed and injured. Though the ideology of al-Otaybi was outside of mainstream political Islamists, it illustrates just how easily such ideas can become destructive. In more recent times, we have seen groups such as ISIS using similar messianic ideas to further their own political goals. Additionally even today, there are followers of Islamic heads of state who believe that their leader is the Mahdi.

Despite the initial hope that a moderate Islamic government, could lead to the betterment of society, generally the ideas espoused by Political Islam have tended to become totalitarian in nature and those who are involved with Political Islam are generally obsessed with power that the use of force to compel people to follow specific Islamic principles such as the prohibition of alcohol, even for non-Muslims. In many cases these extreme obsessions ignore the foundational principles of Islam that basically consist of public welfare, compassion, justice, and wisdom.

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Any violence will go against the principle of mercy. Similarly, the Islamic principle of wisdom requires things to be done wisely with mercy, harmlessness, and through justice. These four principles actually complete each other. Nevertheless, these seem to be absent in the agenda of Political Islam.

A prominent Islamic scholar of the last century, Said Nursi, when speaking of his own experience presents a good example of many people who get involved in politics. People who are initially attracted to get involved in politics for the right reasons, but find it impossible to live up to the Islamic ideals of the political life. This man was Said Nursi. In the beginning of his career as an Islamic scholar and theologian, he thought that through politics, he could serve the religion of Islam. He met with various leaders and political figures but what he saw of the extreme level of polarization frightened him. He says that such polarization would cost him his spiritual life and go against his understanding of Islam. He specifically said there was a Satan-like person in one party and the leader of that party praised that person as if he is an angel, just because he is a member of his party. The same leader spoke of another person in the opposition party who is angelic in quality as a Satan-

like person. After seeing this nature of politics that makes a Satan an angel and vice versa, he coined his famous statement “I take refuge in God from Satan and politics.” After this he left politics, he voted, but he did not pursue an active political agenda or take a political stance. When he voted, he said he voted for the better of the two parties.

In contrast to proponents of Political Islam who believe that they protect Islam, Nursi believed that Islam did not need to be protected by the power of politics. Islam, in his view, was like the Sun; no threat could extinguish its light. Islam was in the hearts and minds of millions and, to Nursi, was alive in the rhythm of the universe. He was confident that Islam could bring bliss to the stressed hearts of human beings in our modern age. In his letter to his students on the occasion of *laylat al-qadr* (the Night of Power or Honor), he mentions that, under the title, “An Important Matter Came to the Heart on the Night of Honor,” since humanity had witnessed the inhumanity of the two World Wars and the ugly face of politics, which costs the lives of tens of millions of people, “humanity will seek for eternal life and the signs of this search, to him, started in the West, in America, and in the North. Since this is a great need of humanity, “the Qur’an gives good news



about eternal life and eternal bliss and cures all spiritual sicknesses by mentioning in thousands of its verses and proving, with certain evidence, the existence of the eternal life. Humanity will find the cure for its sickness in the Qur'an, and the Qur'an provides this cure, that is if humans do not bring destruction upon themselves before the end of time.”<sup>5</sup> Political Islam prevents people from meeting with this Qur'anic message as if the Qur'an is their own property. Instead of promoting the idea of the Qur'an, the shad of politics covers the Qur'an. This is why it becomes very difficult to serve Islam through politics. Therefore, Nursi wanted to establish a civil society and cure the ills of society rather than developing an Islamic

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political agenda. This is in direct contrast to practitioners of Political Islam who often try to devolve the institutions of society to meet their own needs.

As understood from the Qur'an, one third of which is about the afterlife, the goal of every human being should be the attainment of the eternal bliss of the afterlife, whether the person be a Muslim or not. This requires compassion and wisdom. No politics could replace such an essential goal of humanity and no gain be it political or monetary can be equivalent as such as gain which the Qur'an describes as “the mighty triumph” in at least thirteen verses.

One of the problems with Political Islam, and other Islamic political movements, is in using selective Qur'anic verses to support their views and to demonize their

<sup>5</sup> Nursi , *Sözler*, in ibid, p. 60.

opposition. They ask how the opposition can go against the will of God and violate the ideas they point to in the Qur'an. Such absolutism leads

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not space for debate even when the opposition is better-versed in the Qur'an and in Islamic theology and jurisprudence than they are. This brings us to the danger of generalization.

The Qur'anic verse which says: "No soul shall bear another's burden" (6:164), clearly teaches that none should be blamed for the mistakes of others, whether they be relatives, political allies, simply fellow nationals, etc. Unfortunately, modern

Islamic nations whether they are Islamic or secular, ignore this Qur'anic injunction. As a result, human rights are violated, wars are fought and human lives are loosed. This can also lead to the belief that the power of the state is sacred and the elimination of any opposition to that is justified. Therefore, in this view, human beings can be sacrificed for the sake of the state. Their property can be confiscated and given to the state. This goes against the Qur'anic principle which sees human beings as a universe and every individual human being is responsible for his or her own actions. It is unfortunate to see today in Turkey, the torture, purging, and the violation of all human rights of anyone remotely associated with the Hizmet movement by a ruling party that is supposed to be a model for moderate political Islam. This has shown the ugly and disgusting face of politics in the name of Islam.

Political Islam need not lead to such negative outcomes, the example of Tunisia bears this out. In fact, in moderate principles that some groups began with can be a model for a positive engagement with the modern state. What Political Islam needs is the religiosity that is found in the heart and not rhetoric and the ideology of power. A key idea in my book *Islamic Spirituality: Faith and Practice for the Modern World* is that piety is in the heart, as

the Prophet said pounding his heart three times “Piety is here, piety is here, piety is here.” This piety and religiosity is what leads to peace, serenity, and harmony. **A statement from the famous Mauritanian Islamic scholar, Abdullah bin Bayyah, puts it succinctly: “Religiosity is like energy. Through energy one can have prosperity, greenness, water, fertility, and life. On the other side, it can be used to make destructive bombs which lead to destruction and demolition. That is how religiosity is. We attempt to make of religiosity prosperity and life instead of destruction and demolition. We want to cooperate with all those who believe in these thoughts so that we can take humanity to peace. We may not be able to achieve it, but it incumbent upon us to try.”<sup>6</sup>**

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<sup>6</sup> Speech given at “Religious Freedom, Minority Rights, and Apostasy in Islam,” Georgetown University May 14, 2012.

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