



**HAL**  
open science

# Introduction: The Politics of Islam in Europe and North America

Marc Lynch, Nadia Marzouki

► **To cite this version:**

Marc Lynch, Nadia Marzouki. Introduction: The Politics of Islam in Europe and North America. POMEPS Studies, 2018, 32, pp.3-5. hal-03024047

**HAL Id: hal-03024047**

**<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03024047>**

Submitted on 15 Feb 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

There has traditionally been a wide divide between the study of the politics of Islam in the Middle East and in the West. Middle East-focused research in American political science has focused in great depth on issues such as political mobilization, social service provision, electoral performance, and Islamist ideologies. American research on Islam in the West, by contrast, has often focused on cultural conflicts, immigration, terrorism, and anti-Islamic campaigns.

The European media debate about Islam has for years been dominated by the disagreement among Gilles Kepel, Olivier Roy, and François Burgat. For Kepel, the challenge of Islam is rooted in religion, transmitted from the Middle East through networks of migration, and reshaping the Muslim lower classes in dangerous ways. For Roy, the rise of fundamentalism is an effect of globalization and the disconnection between religion and culture that makes religiosity more rigid and codified. Importantly, he argues, this transformation concerns all religions, and not just Islam (see the rise of Evangelical fundamentalism globally). For Burgat, the challenge begins from socioeconomic exclusion and political grievance due to the unresolved postcolonial trauma of migrant populations, with Islam providing the idiom for political dissent rather than the explanation.

But despite the focus on the media, the three positions have unequally influenced the academic production of younger generations of European scholars of Islam. While the scholarship of Roy and Burgat has inspired numerous studies of Muslims' renewed modes of practice and Islamic mobilizations, very few scholars today endorse the approach of Kepel without qualifying it and contextualizing it. Today's European scholarship on Islam distinguishes itself by a wide spectrum of methods, topics, and fieldworks, with a trend toward strong ethnographic research. Over the last two decades, a prolific and pluralist field of scholarship on Islam and Muslims in Europe and the U.S. has emerged and brought to the fore innovative perspectives and understudied topics.

One major trend of European scholarship, inspired by anthropologists Talal Asad and Saba Mahmoud and political theorist Charles Taylor, has used the study of practices and claims of second generation Muslims in Europe and the U.S to further interrogate the binary between religion and secularism. Rejecting exceptionalist treatment of Islamic practice, scholars have explored quotidian forms of religiosities, in various fields such as eating, fashion, arts, dating, school pedagogy, and fatwa issuance (Jouili, Peter, Shirin-Moazami, Fadil, Caeiro). A second major trend of scholarship has focused more specifically on the way in which European and American Muslims engage with politics. It has examined forms of mobilization, institutionalization, and authority production in the context of increasingly tensed relations with Western states.

There are good reasons to bring these divergent American and European literatures on the Middle East and the Western context into greater conversation. The divide in the literature is not necessarily reflective of the analytical overlaps across these very different contexts, however. In both contexts, Islam has become a vernacular of politics which has informed political organization, mobilization, and thought. Middle Eastern Islamism takes place within authoritarian, Muslim-majority systems, while in the West it involves Muslim minorities and democratic systems. Common questions emerge about the relationship between Islam and the state, the ability of Islamists to capture the representation of Islam within the political system, and the degree to which Islam offers organizational advantages for political and social mobilization.

On June 28, 2018, POMEPS and Sciences Po CERI convened a workshop with a dozen scholars of Islam and politics in Europe and North America to explore these similarities and differences. The scholars in this workshop engage with these various perspectives. Their work illustrates the richness of the field of the politics of Islam in Europe and the U.S.

Several key themes emerged from these discussions and papers.

**There is great diversity across Muslim communities.** For all the recent discussions of transnational and global Islam allegedly erasing local particularities, the papers in our collection suggest that national differences and identities persist despite the rhetoric of a global Islam. Both within and across countries, our participants observed significant differences in social organization, religious practice and political orientation along national lines. In some cases, those divisions overlap with sectarian differences, and can be exacerbated by rising global trends in Sunni-Shi'a tensions. In others, the divisions have to do with different rates and moments of migration, as with the persistent differences among Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian Muslim communities in France. In yet others, the divide is ethnic and linguistic, as with the Turkish and Kurdish communities in Germany, or the South Asian-Arab divides in the United Kingdom.

**A generational divide can be seen almost everywhere.** Participants highlighted the importance of generational divides in almost every context. The new forms of religiosity and views of political authority emerging in younger generations challenged very different existing institutional structures in strikingly similar ways. The younger generations engaged differently with political parties and officially sanctioned Islamic organizations, showing less deference to putative leaders and greater initiative in seeking out their own authorities. The effects of such autonomy varied widely, however, empowering new leaders as different as the jihadists of the Islamic State, radical artists, and lifestyle-focused "soft" Islamic preachers.

**The state is deeply involved in regulating and shaping Islamic politics.** The role of the state in defining the terms of Muslim participation in politics emerged as a central theme in almost every essay in the collection. The alienation of Muslim communities from states has been a central theme in recent political discussion, but in fact the relationship between these communities and the state is far more complex. In some cases, national legislation or the politicization of Islam as a polarizing campaign issue directly affected Muslim communities. In others, it took the form of state actors changing the political organization of Muslim communities through their seeking out of – or, in some cases, active construction of – authoritative interlocutors. Seemingly mundane urban zoning regulations have had tremendously significant effects on the construction of mosques and the formation of collective identities around them. Terrorism has had a particularly acute impact, defining Muslim integration as a security issue and dramatically expanding the reach of the state into the policing and surveillance of those communities. This has generated cooperative relations between Muslim institutions and the state, in a common effort to police communities against extremism, but also new forms of youth activism and resistance to what is viewed as state overreach and drift into racist practices and rhetoric.

**Islamic authority is rapidly evolving.** The case studies in the collection demonstrate in evocative ways how the nature of Islamic authority has evolved and changed. New religious authorities have emerged, often from non-traditional sources. New media forms have been especially important for raising the profile and the authority of these new types of preachers and religious figures. The contest between traditional religious authorities and these new figures plays out across generational lines, with significant implications for political organization and ideological orientations. From a security viewpoint, these new Islamic authorities are often viewed as dangerous pathways towards extremism, and as such represent a force to be confronted and regulated. But from other vantage points, the new religious authorities represent positive forces of change from within challenged communities.

**Politics can be a source of both integration and alienation.** The case studies and empirical analysis in the collection reveal the dual edged nature of Muslim political participation in these Western democracies. Muslim communities able to organize effectively to win elections and influence state policy offer a traditional route for the political integration of minority communities. But that very success generates backlash, as can be seen in the anti-Muslim populist campaigns which have risen in prominence across Europe and the United States. The wide variation in political participation across these countries allows for useful datasets to test competing propositions about alienation and participation. Throughout different contexts, we see Muslims struggling with recurrent challenges and dilemmas. We observe similar debates about what exactly counts as *Islamic* mobilizations, institutions, or forms of authority in non-Muslim contexts where Muslims inevitably borrow from the methods and principles of existing groups such as leftist parties or civil rights organizations. Muslims' various forms of political engagement also lead to internal disputes about whether engaging with local politics will lead to a dilution of the Islamic identity and cooptation or can actually subvert the current normative understanding of Islam as a threat.

The essays in this collection bring out some of the outstanding new research on Muslim politics in Europe and North America and offer an intriguing window into an emerging interdisciplinary body of scholarship. We are delighted to present POMEPS Studies 32, *The Politics of Islam in Europe and North America*.

*Marc Lynch, George Washington University and Director of POMEPS*

*Nadia Marzouki, Sciences Po CERI*

*December 2018*