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**Is Islam a Special Problem? Exploring
the Link Between Religion, Politics, and
Development**

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1. Introduction

- Religion is not only a persisting phenomenon, but also a reviving one. This is running counter to the modernisation theory.
- One central angle under which economists have addressed the issue of religion is by looking at its effect on long-term economic growth. The underlying assumption is that religious affiliations have rather stable characteristics that influence economic behaviour.
- Max Weber for Protestantism and Bernard Lewis for Islam have proposed theories that support this approach. [Diapositive 18](#)
- Muslim countries, Arab countries in particular, suffer from a severe ‘democracy deficit’ (in both civil and political rights), relatively high political instability, a comparatively low development of human capital, and highly asymmetrical gender relations. [Diapositive 23](#)

To what extent can Islam, the religion of the Muslims, be considered responsible for the predicament of the countries in which it dominates?

On the one hand, we disagree with the substantivist view according to which Islam is a major obstacle to modern development because it has always been associated with a merging of religion and the state, or a fusion between the spiritual and political spheres of life.

But, on the other hand, we reckon that Islam possesses a special feature, a highly decentralised structure, that tends to make politics comparatively unstable with the consequence that economic growth may be especially volatile or long-term growth performances hard to sustain.

2. The storyline

- Only in the times of the Prophet have religion and politics been truly merged in the history of Islam. Islam is therefore separable from politics, and religious clerics must be conceptualised as actors separate from the state and who must decide how to relate to it.
- Submission of clerics to the autocrat quickly became a general rule of conduct, often amounting to slavish obedience. The idea that religion is the handmaiden of politics and clerics must cooperate with absolute monarchs in a subordinate position has been justified in principle despite the professed aim of Islam to establish a righteous world order and to provide guarantees against despotic rule. [Diapositive 24](#)
- Under the dominant pattern, called the stable politico-religious equilibrium, the autocrat has complete control over clerics and the political regime is therefore stable.

- A state of crisis is a possible outcome of an unstable politico-religious equilibrium: it is obtained when popular anger mobilised by the clerics results in a upheaval that shakes the ruling regime. Clerics then suddenly rise to the forefront of politics, and the relationship between politics and religion is inverted.
- A state of crisis can arise either because of adverse external circumstances that create a political vacuum in the country or as the endogenous outcome of the autocrat's bad policies.
- In the second eventuality, control over the men of religion by the autocratic ruler was not complete.
- To better understand how he may choose to have partial rather than complete (or near complete) control over the clerics, it is important to see that he faces a trade-off between political stability and the extent to which he is able to pursue his own selfish interests, and that the clerics play an important role behind this trade-off.

- Religious clerics have two special features that distinguish them from other elites:

(1) they hold values regarding social justice and human rights, or regarding proper behavior, that they draw from their religion;

(2) they have a natural prestige and influence on the population as representatives of the supernatural world and as wise men possessing deep knowledge (theological and philosophical, in particular).

- Because of these two traits, the clerics are susceptible of playing a role as political actors or social leaders.
- But they are vulnerable to corruption: they can be “bought off”, seduced or corrupted, by the autocrat. The price of their submission increases with the distance between their values and the policies or practices of the autocrat. [Diapositive 27](#)

- Since the preferences of the clerics are heterogeneous, the autocrat chooses the proportion of them whom he wants to coopt.
- Cooptation of clerics constitutes only one arm of the autocrat's strategy. The other arm consists of the policies followed: policies that have strong disqualifying effects and involve a great measure of elite corruption, or those that hurt religious values or interests, tend to arouse more opposition from the clerical body, for given levels of perquisites received from the autocrat.
- When choosing both policies, he pays attention to the size of his income and the probability of his political survival. Both variables are influenced by the extent of religious cooptation.
- The cooptation strategy has the effect of potentially creating a divide in the religious body: between official and self-appointed clerics.

- Such a division is possible in Islam because no church establishment exists.
- The (stable) politico-religious equilibrium is obtained when the autocrat's strategic choices consist of wide cooptation of religious clerics combined with moderately popular policies. An unstable autocracy prevails when the opposite choices have been made by the ruler. In particular, the autocrat has followed policies that blatantly favour his inner circle and the surrounding elite, surrender national sovereignty to external powers, and/or antagonise traditional values cherished by religious representatives.
- If rebellion occurs that succeeds in overthrowing the autocrat or in severely limiting his ruling capacity, a crisis situation arises. A significant number of self-appointed clerics have entered the political stage in order to protect the common people or rescue the nation.

- Pervasive corruption, cynicism, and aloofness of the elite around the autocrat seem to be far more damaging for political stability than reforming measures taken by an honest, equitable and dedicated ruler.
- The archetypal situation observed in many Muslim countries since the 2nd world war is best depicted as unstable autocracy. It is characterised by the combination of socially inequitable policies and pervasive elite corruption with partial co-optation of the religious elite resulting in a division between the official and the self-appointed clerics.
- Most public debates and controversies are then framed in religious terms. ([Diapositive 30](#)) What the autocratic authority unleashes is a dangerous religious war in which both the regime and the opposition try to outbid each other in their claim to be the most legitimate bearer of Islamic values and principles.

- When chaos ends in a military coup, the general result is the emergence of a secular regime resting on the use of coercion and repression. The corruption and cynicism of often secular despotic rulers are largely to blame for this sobering association between secularism and force.
- Why, since the second world war, Muslim countries have been characterised by an unstable, rather than a stable politico-religious equilibrium? *Role of the international context:*

The supply of Islamist ideologies is facilitated by the abundant oil wealth of Saudi Arabia, the Iranian Islamist Revolution, a critical conjunction of events in Pakistan and Afghanistan (in the early 1980s), and the ready availability of effective mass communication technologies.

[Diapositive 31](#)

On the other hand, the demand for ideologies stressing the victimhood of Muslim people and demonising the Western civilisation has been stimulated by the one-sided meddling of advanced Western countries in the regional conflicts of the Middle East. [Diapositive 33](#)

To these factors, add the threats and challenges arising from the pressure to catch up with the rapidly developing economies of the West and other emerging countries. [Diapositive 34](#)

The effect of both changes in supply of/demand for Islamist ideologies and the felt presence of the challenge of modernity is a modification of the terms of the trade-off faced by Muslim autocrats. Religious clerics become harder to buy off and the autocratic regime becomes more unstable.

The predicted response of the autocrat consists of (1°) moderating his controversial policies, and (2°) increasing his efforts to subdue religious clerics, so that the political risk can be reduced (yet, not down to its level before the change brought by international forces).

- Islamist movements are born of deep-seated frustrations caused by the behaviour of both political and religious elites.

Their struggle tends to be especially fierce and determined when, as a result of the corruption and/or incompetence of the political autocracy, national interests are surrendered to foreign powers.

The proclivity of these movements to adopt puritan scripturalist interpretations of the Prophet's message is the outcome of two circumstances:

- the association of corruption with the values of material individualism and atheism,

- the obsequious attitude of religious dignitaries accused of being “lackeys of the prince” hurting the “dignity of Islam”. Hence the idea that what matters are deeds and not speeches. Official Islam is thus seen as a debased version of the primeval faith, justifying the need for its restoration.

- *Two remarks:*

- Things may be more complicated than suggested so far. Intelligence and police forces (*the “deep state”*) may thus nurture and encourage extremist Islamist organisations on the condition that they directly attack leftist or other secular opposition movements operating on university campuses, inside trade unions, and professional associations.
- When the religion is centralised, clerics dissatisfied with the compromising attitude of their church may choose to leave it and even join revolutionary movements. However, they cease to be members of their church and, therefore, they can no more avail themselves of religious credentials and to claim supernatural legitimacy.

- A major advantage of our theoretical scaffolding is that it allows us to bring out both similarities and differences between religions:
 - Like Islam, Christianity cannot be properly analysed outside a setup featuring the state, and this certainly applies to 17th century Europe when modern nation states were being formed. [Diapositive 40](#)
 - Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity are endowed with a hierarchical structure under the form of a centralised church. A key prediction of our theory is that political instability is greater with a decentralised than with a centralised religion.
- During the critical period corresponding to the formation of their centralised modern states, European countries have been particularly successful in building a cooperative relationship with national church establishments.

By contrast, the decentralised character of Islam makes the same task much more arduous in countries with large Muslim populations: in these countries the state tends to follow the path of increasingly unstable autocracies.

A sudden shift toward democracy appears quite illusory in such conditions. But even a less radical transition involving a shift toward liberal autocracy, understood as a regime in which the economic space is open to genuine competition instead of being controlled by the autocrat and his clique, has proven to be problematic in most Muslim countries.

By treating the left as the most dangerous threat to their political survival, illiberal autocrats have ended up suppressing the progressive forces that could have compelled them to become gradually more accountable to their people.

Not only would the scope of corruption have been reduced but also, and more importantly, its form would have evolved from the noxious type of prebendary taxation and racketeering for purely patronage purposes to a system of privileges conditioned upon socially useful achievements, such as has been observed in East Asia.

The prospect of a transition from patrimonial to liberal autocracy is certainly more conducive to economic and social development than running the risk of a religious takeover in order to leave unchanged a system of rent capture that exclusively benefits a narrow ruling clique.

Since religions stress moral absolutes and thereby create aversion to political compromises, a cleric-led opposition is quite unlikely to stop short of a revolution which, if successful, will reproduce autocracy rather than establish an accountable political regime.

- Another line of explanation, propounded by Timur Kuran (2011), exists to highlight the impact of Islam on long-term development.

The effect is indirect and operates through certain institutions derived from the Islamic law or the classic Islamic system. Path dependence mechanisms then create an ‘institutional trap’. An interesting link can nonetheless be made between Kuran’s approach and the political economy approach followed here: it becomes apparent as soon as it is recognised that formal institutions are not necessarily enforced.

3. Illustrations: Five Case Studies

Case Study 1: Iran

= Construction of a complacent religious officialdom (looking like a national church), thereafter followed by the breaking of the prevailing stable politico-religious equilibrium.

Cases Study 2 and 3: Algeria and Saudi Arabia

= Richly endowed countries (oil and natural gas) but with different equilibria: a stable equilibrium for Saudi Arabia and an unstable one for Algeria.

Case Study 4: Egypt

= A country that does not possess natural wealth, and with an unstable politico-religious equilibrium (like Pakistan, Sudan, and Yemen).

Case Study 5: Iraq

= A country struck by a sudden change in the level of radicalisation of the religious clerics (similarity with Syria).

4. Conclusion

1. Like other religions, Islam can be used by the state and is generally subservient to the state's interests rather than the other way round. Instrumentalisation of the religious clerics is typically achieved through their co-optation and seduction.
2. Being decentralised, however, Islam is more likely to generate political instability under an autocratic system than centralised religions.
3. When this instability ends in a popular upheaval led by religious clerics, the men of religion come to the frontline of politics. In principle, their rise should be temporary until a new autocrat, better enlightened than his predecessor, is found.

- Using data for Prussia in the late 19th century, Sascha Becker and Ludger Woessmann (2009) have been able to show that Protestantism had a positive and significant impact on education. This conclusion is supported by Robert Woodberry (2012) who suggests that, in the process of disseminating faith, Protestant missions fostered mass education and printing, while at the same time reinforcing civil society, constraining colonial abuses and elite power.
- Yet, how can we account for the fact that Switzerland, a (partially) Protestant country which was a leading publisher during the sixteenth century, fell back dramatically during the next two centuries (van Zanden, 2009, p. 195)? And why is it that England (except the area of London), despite its comparatively high degree of urbanisation and commercial development, remained a laggard in matters of literacy compared not only to Sweden but also to Germany and the Low Countries (Todd, 1990, p. 138)?

- Davide Cantoni (2015) properly controls for endogeneity in estimating the potential impact of Protestantism on economic growth. Using micro-econometric evidence, the author constructed a novel dataset on German cities (272 cities in the period 1300-1900), exploiting the fact that German cities had substantial religious heterogeneity but also remained quite stable in terms of denominational affiliations until the 19th century. Using population figures, the study has found no effect of Protestantism on economic growth. This finding is robust to the inclusion of several controls, and does not appear to depend on data selection or small sample size. In addition, Protestantism has no effect when interacted with other likely determinants of economic development.

Titles of some of the books written by Rodney Stark, one of the most well-known American sociologists of religion:

“The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success” (2005), or

“For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery” (2003);

or the title of Thomas Woods’ book (2005): “How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization”.

In the words of Ali Shari'ati:

“the Prophet of Islam was the only one who simultaneously carried the sword of Caesar in his hand and the heart of Jesus in his chest” (Shariati, 1986, p. 23 –cited from Hassan and Kivimäki, 2005, p. 125).

In those of Bernard Lewis:

“Since the state was Islamic, and was indeed created as an instrument of Islam by its founder, there was no need for any separate religious institution. The state was the church, the church was the state, and God was head of both, with the Prophet as his representative on earth... From the beginning, Christians were taught, both by precept and practice, to distinguish between God and Caesar and between the different duties owed to each of the two. Muslims received no such instruction” (Lewis, 2002, pp. 113, 115).

“Because the Roman Empire had a unified code of law and a rather effective legal system, Christianity did not have to provide a code of law governing everyday life in creating communities of believers. Christianity developed as a religion of orthodoxy and proper beliefs; in earthly matters, Christians followed Roman law and later other secular laws. ... Islam rose through a very different process, in which Muhammad established both a religion and a political, economic, and social unit. Islam therefore had to provide, and emphasize the obligation of adherents to follow, the Islamic code of law, the Sharia. Like Judaism, therefore, Islam, is a religion that regulates its adherents’ behaviour in their everyday, economic, political, and social life” (Greif, 2006, p. 206; see also Lal, 1998, pp. 62-64; Kuran, 2004b; Kepel, 2005, p. 237; Lilla, 2007, pp. 56-8, 318). [1. Introduction](#)

- Lisa Blaydes and Eric Chaney (2013) compared ruler durations for the Christian West and the Muslim world, looking at rulers assuming power on or after 700 CE and before 1500 CE. They find that, from the tenth century onwards, Christian kings were increasingly long-lived compared to Muslim sultans. Although before the year 1000 CE ruler duration in Western Europe and the Islamic world were not jointly statistically different at the 10% level, after this date one can reject the null hypothesis that leadership tenures were the same.
- Divergence in ruler duration does reflect a change in political stability. Indeed, there is an inverse relationship between ruler duration and the probability of being overthrown, suggesting that ruler duration is a reasonable proxy for political stability. Rulers in Western Europe were significantly less likely to be deposed than their Muslim counterparts, over time. [1. Introduction](#)

Al-Ghazali (1058-1111):

“The tyranny of a sultan for a hundred years causes less damage than one year’s tyranny exercised by the subjects against one another”.

“Revolt was justified only against a ruler who clearly went against a command of God or His prophet”.

Gilles Kepel (2005):

“The excommunication of the prince, be he the worst of despots, was pronounced only exceptionally, for it opened the prospect of considerable disorder and created dangerous jurisprudential precedents”. Excommunication was deemed an especially dangerous weapon because *“it could all too easily fall into the hands of sects beyond the control of the ulama and the clerics”* (pp. 56, 59).

“Public order, which is a prerequisite of all what is socially desirable in society (*maslahat*), has always seemed to the ulama preferable to the demands that politics should be completely open to the promptings of religion" (Roy, 1990, p. 49).

Conclusion reached by an authority in Islamic law: “Might, in fact, was right, and this was eventually recognised by the scholars in their denunciation of civil disobedience even when the political authority was in no sense properly constituted” (Coulson, 1964: 83; see also Hourani, 1991: 144; Lapidus, 2002: 260).

As early as in 1925, when Ali Abd al-Raziq advocated separation of religion and politics, arguing that Islam, as a religion, had “no application to temporal governance”, the ulama from the official establishment quickly got him dismissed as a judge in the sharia court system (Lee, 2014, p. 52).

Similarly, when in the 1930s Khalid Muhammad Khalid equated religious government with tyranny and claimed that religion must not deal with questions of governance and public policy, the scholars from al-Azhar immediately objected that the state has “a continuing need for religious legitimacy in order to neutralize its political Islamist rival, the Brotherhood, and promote its essentially secular policies” (Hatina, 2000, p. 36 cited from Lee, 2014, p. 53). [2. The theory](#)

In the Ottoman empire,

“The entire religious establishment held office at the pleasure of the sultan” (Cleveland, 2004: 48). The “cozy relationship” between the religious clerics (meaning not only the ulama but also the Sufi orders) and the sultan “translated into significant economic and political privileges” for the former (Malik, 2012: 8). Offices typically involved lucrative functions which included revenue generation and the administration of religious endowments that controlled vast tracts of land. Religious appointments were all the more coveted as the associated incomes were exempt from taxes. It is therefore not surprising that religious families possessing long-standing honourable ancestries competed for religious offices, titles and tax farms and, when successful, became a core component of the Ottoman nobility and a linchpin of provincial administration (Hourani, 1991: 224-25; 1993; Malik, 2012: 8; Coulson, 1964).

“The biographies of scholars show that, with the elaboration of a bureaucratic hierarchy, interest in careers outweighed genuine piety and learning. The influence of entrenched families enabled them to promote their children into the higher grades of the educational and judicial hierarchies without having reached the proper preliminary levels, while theological students who could not find patronage were excluded. In the course of the eighteenth century the ulama became a powerful conservative pressure group. As servants of the state the ulama no longer represented the interests of the people, nor protected them from the abuses of political power. No longer did they represent a transcendental Islamic ideal opposed to worldly corruption. Their integration into the Ottoman empire made them simply the spokesmen of Ottoman legitimacy” (Lapidus, 2002: 268).

Under the Mamluk state,

Many ulama served not only as religious functionaries but also as administrators and full-fledged members of the state bureaucracy. In particular, the qadis (Islamic judges) were commonly employed by the Sultan in his private secretarial service, in his private treasury, and in the military bureaus. Some even became viziers and, in many cases, “the post of qadi was itself the culmination of an official rather than a religious career” (Lapidus, 1984:137-8).

We can sum up the situation by citing Zubeida (2011) for whom the ulama “as figures of power and influence... acted like other politicians, participating in patronage, control of resources and factional struggles, but with the advantage of being able to invoke religious sanction” (p. 15). [Diapositive 6](#)

“The Arab world is a political desert with no real political parties, no free press, and few pathways to dissent. As a result, the mosque became the place to discuss politics. As the only place that cannot be banned in Muslim societies, it is where all the hate and opposition toward the regimes collected and grew. The language of opposition became, in these lands, the language of religion. This combination of religion and politics has proven to be combustible. Religion, at least the religion of the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), stresses moral absolutes. But politics is all about compromise. The result has been a ruthless, winner-take-all attitude toward political life. For those who treasure civil society, it is disturbing to see that in the Middle East these illiberal groups are civil society...” (Zakaria, 2003, pp. 142-43).

[Diapositive 9](#)

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792): a return to the ideas of Ibn Hanbal.

His significance came from his link to the Seoud tribe which was to conquer the Arabian deserts. Opportunistic adoption by the Seouds of the puritanical doctrine of al-Wahhab was a decisive factor in modern Muslim history.

- Abû al-A'lâ Mawdûdi (1903-1979) in Pakistan:

There is legitimacy in God only and the whole political realm must be reduced to the divine realm: the religious principle must be put back at the heart of social life.

- Sayyid Qutb (1929-1966) in Egypt:

The Qur'an is the source of all guidance for human life, and the rise of a universal Muslim society should mark the end of the Western world.

The significance of Mawdûdi and Qutb arose from a critical conjunction of events in early 1980s in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Taliban (and, before them, some factions of the Mujahiddin) took over Hanbal's idea that only a uniform, rigid interpretation of the Qur'an can bring unity and restore order among the feuding tribes and warlords in Afghanistan. [Diapositive 10](#)

“The events of 1967 , and the processes of change which followed them, made more intense that disturbance of spirits, that sense of a world gone wrong, which had already been expressed in the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s. The defeat was widely regarded as being not only a military setback but a kind of moral judgement. If the Arabs had been defeated so quickly, completely and publicly, might it not be a sign that there was something rotten in their societies and in the moral system which they expressed?... the problem of identity was expressed in terms of the relationship between the heritage of the past and the needs of the present. Should the Arab peoples tread a path marked out for them from outside, or could they find in their own inherited beliefs and culture those values which could give them a direction in the modern world?”
(Hourani, 1991, pp. 442-43). [Diapositive 10](#)

Radicalization of Islamic ideology is also a consequence of a deep economic, social and cultural crisis faced by Muslim societies.

Arabs are torn away between two models of civilization, the European civilization which challenges them, and the Arab-Muslim civilization which provides them with a response to that challenge.

Choice between the two models especially difficult because of a “psychic tension” amplified by the acute awareness of the reality of decadence of the Arab world (Mohamed Ferjani).

« *Obsession with past grandeur* » prevents most Arab thinkers from envisaging progress, modernization and development in terms of a rupture with the past. They prefer to think “*in magical and mythical terms*”.

This also applies to the deceptively secular ideology of Baathism in which:

“*Arabism’s most basic model always resided in its own past*”, and the consciousness of pan-Arabism has been ideologized in such a way as to borrow virtually nothing of the constellation of values associated with the European Enlightenment (Makiya, 1989, pp. 189-212).

These circumstances, coupled with the demise of progressive forces centered on individual emancipation, led to a romantic-restorationist view of the root causes of the crisis.

This phenomenon is not specific to Islam:

“Radical ideology looked attractive, especially to the young and semi-educated. It contained everything dreams are made of: the romance of conspiracy and mystery, feelings of personal involvement in ‘making history’, opportunities for direct action, hopes for prompt results, and simplicity of the doctrine, distinguishing ‘good’ from ‘evil’. The way to do good was made clear, and there was the illusion of a back-to-one’s-roots movement intended to purify, to restore healthy principles of life freed from distortions supposedly imposed from the outside. In fact, this possibility presumed to reconstruct the original form of the Golden Age in a system-centered way of life...” (Obolonsky, 2003: 92). [Diapositive](#)

Under Catholic Christianity, priests were discouraged from expressing dissent against even tyrannical governments. It is St. Augustine who established the key principle in this matter. According to him, despite all its imperfections and the ‘sinful’ behaviour of those who govern it, the ‘earthly city’ exists for the sake of protecting the ‘city of God’, and its role is therefore vital for people's salvation.

To oppose worldly rulers amounts to opposing God’s plan and Roman Catholic believers should avoid attempting to overthrow governments even if they turn out to be tyrannical (O'Daly, 2004).

This belief in the God-given authority of monarchs was central to the Roman Catholic vision of governance in the Middle Ages, Renaissance and the Ancien Regime.

Thus, for example, the kings and emperors of medieval Christendom had always invoked divine blessing on their rule, and by the 14th and 15th centuries the parish clergy were called to disseminate news of military victories and lead prayers requiring God's help for further success (Gunn, 2001: 124).

Even tighter intermeshing of politics and religion occurred after the Reformation and Counter-Reformation led to the emergence of truly 'national' religions. Secular and ecclesiastical bureaucracies then expanded in parallel and became intertwined in such a way that changes enacted from the top of the state could reach every subject down to the parish level.

For Luther, to rebel against one's sovereign is equivalent to rebelling against God himself. Has not God awarded to some persons the privilege to govern? Even when the ruler appears to be unjust, God cannot have made a mistake: if people are ruled by a cruel sovereign, this must be the outcome of a divine punishment.

It is in the name of this principle that in 1525 Luther staunchly supported the implacable repression of German peasants who were driven to rebellion by their sheer misery and inspired by the egalitarian ideology of Anabaptist leaders.

Luther's attitude was of great portent since the so-called war of the German peasants resulted in more than 100,000 deaths (Nichols, 2002).

Eastern Christendom, with its tradition of caesaro-papism, was even closer than Western Christianity to temporal (absolute) political power. [Diapositive 14](#)