

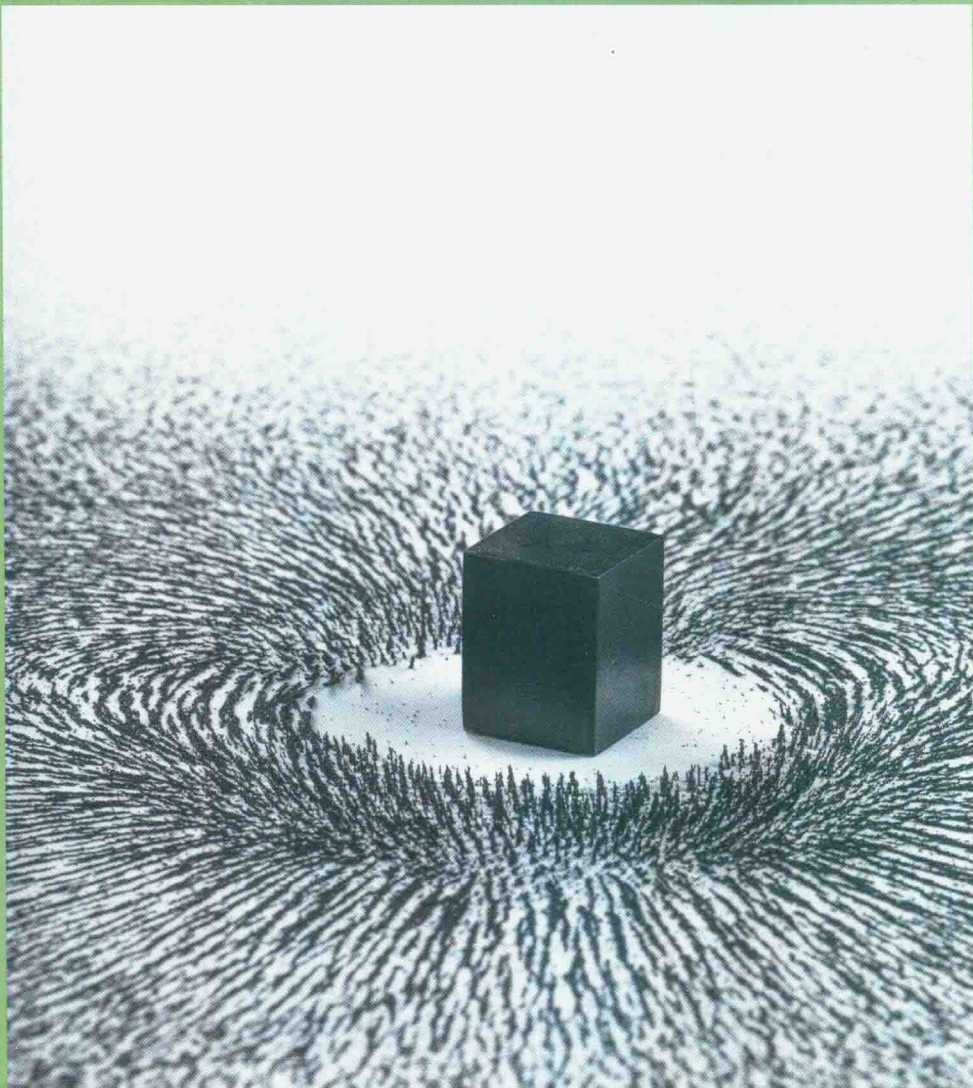


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# The Symbolic Scenarios of Islamism

A Study in Islamic  
Political Thought

ANDREA MURA



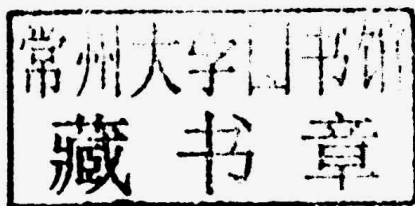
CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

# The Symbolic Scenarios of Islamism

A Study in Islamic Political Thought

ANDREA MURA

*The Open University, UK and University of Exeter, UK*



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## THE SYMBOLIC SCENARIOS OF ISLAMISM

*The Symbolic Scenarios of Islamism* initiates a dialogue between the discourse of three of the most discussed figures in the history of the Sunni Islamic movement – Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb and Osama bin Laden – and contemporary debates across religion and political theory. In the wake of the Arab Spring, the dramatic vicissitudes of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, and the return of the ‘Islamist threat’ in Europe, this book provides a crucial foundation upon which to situate current developments in world politics.

Redressing the inefficiency of the terms in which the debate on Islam and Islamism is generally conducted, the book examines the role played by tradition, modernity, and transmodernity as major ‘symbolic scenarios’ of Islamist discourses, highlighting the internal complexity and dynamism of Islamism. By uncovering forms of knowledge that have hitherto gone unnoticed or have been marginalised by traditional and dominant approaches to politics, accounting for central political ideas in non-Western sources and in the Global South, the book provides a unique contribution towards rethinking the nature of citizenship, antagonism, space, and frontiers required today.

While offering valuable reading for scholars of Islamic studies, religious studies and politics, it provides a critical and important perspective for academics with an interest in discourse theory, post-colonial theory, political philosophy, and comparative political thought.

# Contemporary Thought in the Islamic World

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*Contemporary Thought in the Islamic World* promotes new directions in scholarship in the study of Islamic thinking. Muslim scholars of today challenge deeply ingrained dichotomies and binaries. New ideas have stimulated an upcoming generation of progressive Muslim thinkers and scholars of Islam to radically rethink the ways in which immediate and emergent issues affecting the contemporary Islamic world are to be assessed. Central in these new discourses are notions such as cosmopolitanism, exile, authority and resistance. This series aims to take the field beyond the usual historical-philological and social science-driven approaches, and to insert the study of Islam and the Muslim world into far wider multi-disciplinary inquiries on religion and religiosity in an increasingly interconnected world.

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*To Laura and our becomings*

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## About the Author

Andrea Mura is a Lecturer at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, and a visiting academic at the Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance at The Open University, where he previously contributed to the *Oecumene: Citizenship after Orientalism* project. He has published widely in the fields of political philosophy, psychoanalysis, and comparative political thought, inquiring into the influence that political-theological questions have traditionally exerted upon ideas of power, justice, and economy in different traditions.



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The theoretical terrain in which this unpretentious study is set, its methodological proceeding, its action and ethos owe a large intellectual debt to Ernesto Laclau. One of his recommendations to earlier PhD students was included in my doctoral thesis, which was the first inspiration for this book, and pointed me towards what I saw as a fundamental task that I hoped to carry out in the spirit of that time: ‘The discourse of philosophy cannot be constituted without some “accidental” assumptions. To show these assumptions is to de-centre the discourse of Philosophy vis-à-vis itself – i.e., vis-à-vis its ambitions to constitute a ground. The kind of exercise that I am suggesting proposes, consequently, that each thesis – whether it refers to South Africa, Islam, the military regime in Argentina or the black politics in Britain – should be a contribution to the radical deconstruction of the dichotomies through which the metaphysics of presence constitutes itself’ (‘Intellectual Strategies’, University of Essex, 1991). I am also indebted to Moya Lloyd, who patiently and creatively guided me in the years of doctoral study at the Loughborough University’s Department of Politics, History and International Relations, which I gratefully acknowledge for funding my early research. I would like to thank all those colleagues who contributed with suggestions and encouragement to the various reworkings of this book, in particular Yannis Stavrakakis, Andrea Teti and Simona Guerra – all of whom offered invaluable comments and enduring friendship.

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Failings are all mine.

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# Introduction

Since the publication of Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*, the famous formula, 'a spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism', has been subject to all kind of variations, adapting to different contexts and political visions. In one of the most successful alternatives after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is 'Islamism' that plays the controversial role of the new spectre of Europe. Although this substitution has gained special force and visibility over the last two decades, the spectral presence of Islamism is not new. Well before the beginning of the millennium, discourses appealing to 'Islam' as the centre of political and social life had been populating the political scene of the ex-colonial world, having an impact on world politics beyond domestic boundaries. But the international context of the second half of the twentieth century was still dominated by the two blocks of the Cold War and by the powerful counter-hegemonic appeal of 'communism'. The irruption of Islamism as a 'new' spectre at a global level occurred at a moment when the end of the Cold War had allowed neo-liberal discourses to emerge as the triumphant narrative of the *End of History*, and the sole testimony of reality in the face of a defeated communism. The spectrality of Islamism consisted first and foremost in the irruption of an obstacle to the neo-liberal fantasy of 'Western' absolute control, mastery and representation of reality. Its irruption cracked the 'post-ideological' illusion of a cosmopolitan future of harmony, peace and prosperity, where social and international tensions could be accommodated by way of consensus-seeking procedures, which would render conflict unnecessary and ideological divisions obsolete. *Islamist* discourses emerged then as modes of political representation that held a mirror to the dramatic events marking the beginning of the new millennium. From terrorist attacks by Islamist groups in New York, London, Madrid, Paris, and cities in Asia and the Middle East, to the persisting instability and violence in the Israeli–Palestinian arena, and the first major conflicts of the twenty-first century: the military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan where security, economic and political considerations have kept merging together in what George W. Bush called 'the war on [Islamic] terror', and Barack Obama rephrased, with decaffeinated language, 'overseas contingency operations' against the 'terrorist [Islamic] threat'.

We have placed the term 'Islamic' in brackets, not only in acknowledgement of the fact that the 'war on terror' was launched in response to the *Islamic religious fanaticism* responsible for the 11 September attacks but also because despite its media visibility, Islam remained for many an invisible presence, a spectral entity. Since 9/11, 'Islamic' phenomena have been the phantasmatic catalyst of Western innermost fears, a source of anxiety and a threat to the sense of security and stability of the West only recently eclipsed by emergence of a new global threat hovering over Western lives: 'the financial crisis'. The conceptual imprecision that equates terms such as 'Islamic', 'Islamist', 'Muslim', 'obscurantism', 'terrorism', 'intolerance', has given form to a phantom 'Islam' that continues to pervade the language of the media, politicians, and ordinary citizens. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, bin Laden and the Taliban were often taken to epitomise Islam as such, and to constitute undeniable proof of a structural incompatibility between Islam and democracy. Ten years later, it was with some embarrassment that critics welcomed the eruption of the Arab Spring and had to admit that some sort of democracy could ultimately be achieved in the Middle East and North Africa. This however was largely put down to the Arab Spring being a secular and un-Islamic 'revolt', a clear demonstration that a lay, modernised and Westernised youth had finally taken control over its own destiny. After all, as most media coverage portrayed it, the Arab Spring was nothing but a product of the technological revolution set in motion by Facebook. So, after early remarks in the vein of 'The Arab Spring, who would have predicted it?',<sup>1</sup> questions arose about 'the role of Twitter and Facebook in Arab Spring uprising'.<sup>2</sup>

Needless to say, this required once again a bracketing of Islam and Islamism: disregarding the role of Islamist movements such as the Tunisian *al-Nahda* or the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in catering to the needs of a democratic society in pre-revolutionary times; neglecting, in the early days of the Egyptian revolution, the mobilising role of assertive 'young' Muslim Brothers vis-à-vis their dismissive leaders who were mostly unsympathetic to the possibility of a general insurrection; or ignoring the force of religious feeling among demonstrators in

<sup>1</sup> Roger Cohen, 'When Fear Breaks', *New York Times*, 9 June 2011, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/10/opinion/10iht-edcohen10.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/10/opinion/10iht-edcohen10.html?_r=1); Clemens Breisinger, Olivier Ecker and Perrihan Al-Riffai, 'Economics of the Arab Awakening: From Revolution to Transformation and Food Security', IFPRI Policy Brief 18 (May 2011); F. Gregory Gause III, 'Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Mishal Husain, 'How Facebook Changed the World: The Arab Spring', BBC documentary, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b014l2ck>; John Pollock, 'Streetbook', *Technology Review*, September/October 2011, available at <http://www.technologyreview.com/web/38379>.

the streets of Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya and more recently in Turkey. Thus, this phantom Islam continued to haunt the West, not only in the form of a 'denial' but also as a fear, the risk for the Arab Spring being that al-Qaeda and the like will ultimately gain control of the transitional process in these countries, or that post-revolutionary elections might reveal that the Arab Spring was not so lay and secular after all. Hence, tensions in the media concerning the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, or the sweeping success of *al-Nahda* during the 2011 elections in Tunisia. These events were praised as positive examples of a potential harmony between Islamism and secularism,<sup>3</sup> while, at the same time, more critical observers pointed to them as the 'ominous model for where these uprisings will end' ('the road to the Caliphate').<sup>4</sup> This position has been lately fuelled in the West by a resurgent anxiety for the rapid and successful advance of DAIISH (acronym of *Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham*, internationally referred to as ISIS or ISIL), and the recent attacks in Paris, with the result that, right when the ghost of al-Qaeda seemed to be ready to leave, clearing the space for new anxieties in the West, Islam's haunting presence kept reviving all the old fears, manifesting its immortal 'zombie' attributes, rising from its own ashes as a proper 'Arabian' phoenix.

Understandably, in the last decade, the need to confront this spectre has also spawned attempts to enrich academic 'knowledge' of Islam and Islamic issues in general. Islam and Islamism have become increasingly hot topics for a number of Western scholars in fields as disparate as, for instance, international relations or political sociology. The result has been a proliferation of books and articles concerning the social composition and the strategies of Islamist groups, the political significance of Islam in world politics, its impact on state security, its compatibility with democratic institutions, and its effects on social integration and citizenship.

This book initially found inspiration in this fervent intellectual climate. The ambition from the outset was to confront the Islamic 'spectre', thereby contributing to the theoretical debate on Islam and Islamism within this fundamental historical conjuncture. But, rather than produce more fissures, the

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<sup>3</sup> Editorial Board Opinion, 'Tunisia Again Points the Way for Arab Democracy', *Washington Post*, 25 October 2011, and Farrag Ismail, 'Egypt Needs to Learn from the Revolutionaries in Tunisia', *al-Gomhuria*, 31 October 2011, translated in *Al Arabiya* on 1 November 2011, available at <http://english.alarabiya.net/views/2011/11/01/174864.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Ibrahim, 'Tunisian Elections and the Road to the Caliphate', *Jihad Watch*, 27 October 2011, available at <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2011/10/raymond-ibrahim-tunisian-elections-and-the-road-to-the-caliphate.html>.

aspiration here was to overcome some of the tensions that have characterised the contemporary academic debate on Islamism.

As we shall discuss in the following pages, one of the key sources of division in the current debate has been an old and classic 'Orientalist' tendency to treat Islamism as a monolithic phenomenon. The opposing camp hardly fares better, with alternative theoretical approaches over-emphasising internal differentiation within Islamic discourse. Moreover, while scholars have mainly focused either on broad geopolitical strategies or socio-economic differences among Islamist groups, a theoretical differentiation between Islamist modes of representing space and subjectivity is yet to be fully developed in the field of political theory. In the last years, for instance, particular attention has been given to the relation between globalisation and Islamism, highlighting the manner in which a number of Islamist organisations have increasingly adapted to a deterritorialised context, thereby privileging a transnational view.<sup>5</sup> This tendency has certainly been reinforced post-9/11 with the coming into prominence of Islamist organisations such as al-Qaeda and DAIISH on the stage of world politics. The quantity of literature here has mushroomed to tackle in particular the global dimension of jihad and political violence.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, alternative views have pointed to a sort of 'nationalisation' of the Islamist project. In their influential work, for instance, prominent scholars such as Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy first detected the adoption of a national agenda by Islamist movements as the result of the progressive erosion of their original ideological and anti-secularist vision.<sup>7</sup> This transition was the consequence of a long political experience marked by a number of drawbacks, including the difficulties in translating an ideological platform into a practical policy adequate to the needs imposed by the international arena, the economic bankruptcy and repressive attitudes following early seizure of

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<sup>5</sup> Significant examples include Oliver Roy, *Globalized Islam: Fundamentalism, Deterritorialization and the Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004); Peter G. Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2007); and *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma* (London: Routledge, 2001); Simon Murden, *Islam, the Middle East, and the New Global Hegemony* (Boulder, CO: London: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Devin R. Springer et al., *Islamic Radicalism and Global Jihad* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002); and Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (London: Tauris, 1994). Interestingly, Roy differentiates the analytical object of enquiry, linking the destiny of Islamism to this nationalised path alone, while using the term 'neo-fundamentalism' to refer to the global tendencies that a number of new militant groups have expressed in the last decades.

power in Afghanistan and Sudan (two Islamic states that have been, respectively, under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the ideological influence of Hasan al-Turabi's *National Islamic Front* in Sudan), and, in the long term, the 'failure' of an Iranian Islamic revolution more and more sensitive to the needs of a nationalist *raison d'État*. All these factors indicate that 'the Islamist movement may have generated the conditions of its own obsolescence'.<sup>8</sup>

According to Kepel, political failure has compelled Islamist movements to undertake a process of political 'normalisation', adapting to a political language increasingly characterised by assimilation to a democratic, human rights-centred vocabulary.<sup>9</sup> It is true that the process described above has long been accompanied by a 'mainstream' tendency among Islamist organisations, movements and parties to focus on domestic politics, and to achieve a national outlook. According to Malise Ruthven: 'far from being counter-nationalist in the sense of opposing the "secular" national states imposed on the Islamic world since decolonization, Islamism in practice mostly reveals itself as an alternative variety of nationalism whose political focus is cultural and religious rather than primarily economic'.<sup>10</sup>

In the Shi'a context, the death of Khomeini heralded the rising influence of national interest vis-à-vis Islamic ideology. This development could be seen in the Iranian support for Christian Armenia instead of a Shi'a country like Azerbaijan or in the accommodating attitude undertaken in the late 1990s towards the conservative Arab regimes in the Gulf in order to minimise the pressure put on the region by American forces. The 'discreet support' of the US operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 aimed at overthrowing the regime of the Taliban and the contention with international institutions and Western powers over Tehran's strategic nuclear programme have also reflected the weight of nationalist considerations by the regime.

This was the context that gave rise to the first source of inspiration for this book, revealing a need to highlight the discursive complexity of Islamism and the way both global and national perspectives have cohabited within the Islamist galaxy. Against Roy and Kepel, however, we contend that Islamism has reflected modern and national characteristics since its very inception. Nationalisation was not the outcome of years of failure, but the result of the inner discursive tendencies that had already been developed, as we will see in the second part of

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Kepel, 'Islamism Reconsidered: A Running Dialogue with Modernity', *Harvard International Review*, 22/ 2 (2000): 26.

<sup>9</sup> Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, p. 368.

<sup>10</sup> Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 150.



the book, by Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the first Islamist organisation of modern times, the Muslim Brotherhood.

While the focus of the afore-mentioned literature has been on historical events, geopolitical strategies, sociological aspects, and organisational factors, the speculative implications of this tension between global and national outlooks have remained largely unexplored. What does it mean to acknowledge that several Islamist actors have been pursuing a national agenda or adopting a globalised perspective from a political theory standpoint? What does this shift involve in terms of imagining community, identity, and territoriality? What are the political implications of such twists in the construction of the other/outside? To put it another way, which kinds of spatial representations and subjective formations are implicated in the national or global strategies that many scholars have detected? It is this range of questions that this book will try to answer.

In the continental tradition, only a few political theorists have attempted to investigate notions of subjectivity in relation to Islamism. Sometimes these approaches have suffered from a degree of abstraction and reductionism producing ‘neo-orientalist’ patterns.<sup>11</sup> A case in point is Alain Badiou’s criticism of ‘political Islamism’ as ‘nothing but one of the subjectivated names of today’s obscurantism’: a form of ‘generic fascism’ negating the ‘universalist subject of emancipation’, or the *subject faithful to the event* in his thought.<sup>12</sup> When considering the New York attacks, the ‘formal traits’ of this political formation are to be found in its inescapably ‘nihilist character: the sacralization of death; the absolute indifference to the victims; the transformation of oneself and others into instruments.’<sup>13</sup> Even when the thesis of ‘generic fascism’ is contrasted with this characterisation, the many nuances diversifying the Islamist matrix are blatantly neglected to be reduced to a core of political tenets which simply reproduce familiar ‘Occidentalised’ conventions of political thought:

When its genesis was coeval with that of progressive subject, the obscure subject of Islamism did indeed crush anything that could have given body to a generic emancipatory subject, but it did not, contrary to what Badiou seems to intimate, erase all traces of the founding tenets of emancipatory politics. On the contrary, its tactic, largely effective against a left deluded by its own populism and strategic

<sup>11</sup> On this topic, see the remarkable critique of Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 120.