11.

From World War I to the 1960s: The Years
of Muted Islamist Politics

The First World War marks a major watershed in history. Restricting our attention to the Muslim world, and treating that vast area with only the broadest of brush strokes, the second decade of this century produced the following developments:

- The last great Muslim empire, that of the Ottoman state, went out of existence. Juridically speaking, this took place in 1923, but in fact the only question following the Ottoman defeat in the First World War was whether there would be a truncated Ottoman remnant or, as turned out to be the case, a nation-state in Anatolia, the Republic of Turkey, with all remaining Ottoman territories parceled out as separate political entities.
- Europe completed its division of the colonialist spoils in Africa and Asia with the British mandates in Palestine (and Transjordan) and Iraq and the French mandates in Syria and Lebanon plus several mandates in Africa, largely a reshuffling of former German holdings. The League of Nations mandates, however, presupposed ultimate independence for the mandated states. The mandates system itself represented a step away from confident colonialism as had existed in the nineteenth century (and in previous centuries) and toward the European acceptance of decolonization such as took place in the post–World War II period.
- The Western concept of "natural" nations and of nationalism as the normal legitimate policy of any people (the idea of easily distinguishable "peoples" being assumed) was henceforth the dominant

operational framework for political action throughout the Muslim world. Early stirrings in this direction over roughly the previous half-century can be traced, but this second decade of the twentieth century brought a giant step forward. Woodrow Wilson's championing of the self-determination of nations served to establish the dominant rhetoric (but not yet the reality) in both the West and the non-West. Nor was there any confusion concerning the presumed applicability of self-determination to Muslim lands. The twelfth point of Wilson's celebrated fourteen points, given in his address to Congress on January 8, 1918, read in part: "The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development."

Accordingly, the political history of the Muslim world from this time can be interpreted in terms of would-be "nations" seeking to become states and of existing states seeking to legitimate their existence on nationalist principles. Both the reality and the ideal of a multilingual, multiethnic, and, yes, multireligious empire led by a Muslim ruler was eclipsed. The dominant political paradigm that had existed virtually unchallenged in theory and was usually present in practice since the rise of Islam was giving way to the quite different notion of cohesive, coherent nation states.

The question not so readily answered, however, was what should be the basis of these presumably natural nation states. Who were "we" and who "they" in these nation-building exercises? The answers throughout the Muslim world—just as in the West where nationalism developed—were multiple and contradictory.

Ethnolinguistic nationalism characterized Turkey and the Arab world, but for both there were problems and choices to be made, not always consistent with the emerging nationalist ideology. Pan-Turanism (or the concept of a common Turkicness extending into Central Asia) was abandoned in favor of an Anatolian Turkish nationalism. Arabism emerged at first as an ideology binding together the Arabs of Asia (Fertile Crescent and Arabian Peninsula). Only later in the interwar period did Arabism expand to embrace the Arabic-speakers of Egypt, Sudan, and the Maghrib. In any case, several different Arab countries had a long history of statehood. These included Egypt, Morocco, Oman, and Tunisia. With a somewhat looser definition of "state" one might well add Algeria,[1] Kuwait, Lebanon (at least the Mount Lebanon core), Sudan, and Yemen. In all these a potential for nationalism based on existing cultural and territorial borders was present.

Other Arab countries had significant segments of their population with strong antipathy to being absorbed into a larger Arab political unity of any kind. This would include the Maronite Christians of Lebanon, the large non-Muslim and non-Arabic speaking population of Sudan, and the Kurds of Iraq.[2]

Moving eastward, Iran, like Egypt in the Arab world, looked back on centuries of political existence, even long predating Islam. Religion (Shi'a Islam), territory, and history fit together as the matrix for an Iranian nationalism that continues to this day. Even so, the presence within Iran's borders of appreciable non-Shi'a Muslims and also non-Persian speakers added complications.

Neighboring Afghanistan, although a cluster of different tribes and ethnic groups, was ruled in 1919 by a dynasty with roots going back to the early eighteenth century, Moreover, the cement of Sunni Islam (some 90 percent of the population), the land as a mountainous bastion, and the shared history of either resisting invasion or bursting out to found dynasties in neighboring lands provided elements on which to built an Afghan nationalism.[3]

In the Indian subcontinent Muslims faced hard choices. Indian nationalism as organized by the Indian National Congress was receptive to Muslim participation and many Muslims joined this movement. Still, even though Congress leader such as Gandhi made a real effort to make Muslims feel that they belonged, there was no getting around the harsh demographic fact that Muslims, for all their millions, would be a minority alongside the Hindu majority. Of course, Hindus and Muslims (plus even smaller numbers of Sikhs, Parsees, Christians, and others) had lived together for centuries, but in a distinctively imperial form of communal autonomy. Nationalism presupposed a breaking down of such caste and community barriers in order to realize a shared Indian patriotism. This move toward a unified "national" culture would be, many Muslims understandably feared, overwhelmingly Hindu in character.

In addition, the protean nature of Hinduism, capable of absorbing other gods into its pantheon, was so different from the scripturalist, monotheistic, and transcendent Islam that all-Indian togetherness must have struck quite a few pious Muslims as likely to erode the very foundation of their religion. Accordingly, many but not all Muslim secularists who feared minority political status found common ground with many but not all pious Muslims who feared loss of religious autonomy to create the idea of a separate Muslim state—a Pakistan—in the Indian subcontinent.[4]

Southeast Asia, then divided into British and Dutch colonial domains and with a Muslim majority of roughly the same proportion as existed in the

Arab world, presented a somewhat similar majority-minority situation. In both regions the non-Muslim minorities were more urban, more economically successful, and better positioned to influence the colonialist overlords. The Southeast Asian equivalent of the Christian and Jewish minorities in the Arab world were the Chinese and, to a much lesser extent, the Indians. In both regions a more Islamist political stance could thus appeal to peasants and petty merchants as well as traditional elites, both religious and secular. On the other hand, Islamist politics risked strengthening the more traditional forces, weakening modernizing efforts, and dividing forces in the ongoing struggle against European colonial rule.

The Islamic culture of the two regions—Arab world and Southeast Asia—was, however, sharply different. It is often maintained that Southeast Asia was much less Islamicized than was the Middle Eastern heartland. That approach is prejudicial, implying a Middle Eastern norm against which all other parts of the Muslim world are necessarily to be measured. By such logic Western Christianity would be described as less authentic than Orthodox Christianity, with its roots remaining in the Holy Land. What can be said, however, is that the Islam of the Malay cultural area had integrated much more of Javanese and Hindu mores, embraced a more pantheistic approach to religion, and gave less authority to the scripturalist and legalist aspects as championed by the ulama.

At the same time, many Muslims from Indonesia and Malaya were becoming converted to Islamic reformism (inspired by either the Wahhabiyya or—even more—the Salafiyya of Shaykh Muhammad Abduh and his school) through their pilgrimages to Mecca and their studies in Arabia or Cairo's al-Azhar. This produced an struggle within the Muslim population between would-be reformers and their traditionalist opponents. It was the *kaum muda* (young group) against the *kaum tua* (old group).[5]

Muslims of what was soon to become the Soviet Union experienced the turbulent post–World War I years of civil war and outside intervention before being yoked to harsh Communist rule.

As for the Muslims of Africa living south of the Arabic-speaking belt, all were under colonial rule. The Somali Muhammad b. Abdullah was to die in 1920, bringing to an end his long jihad against not just European rule but Somali clans, opposing Sufi brotherhoods and neighboring Ethiopia.[6] The Somalis were thereafter brought into some semblance of alien controlled order, divided between British, French, and Italian overlords. Elsewhere, as in Nigeria and the Cameroons, nationalism was in its infancy as the struggle within the Muslim communities between would-be modernizers and the traditional alignments got under way. European colonial rule, generally,

tended to side with the traditional forces, devolving considerable authority, for example, to selected Sufi brotherhoods or manning the colonial armies and security forces with many Muslims. This nod toward "indirect rule"—which was even picked up by the French, usually so prone to centralized control—shored up the traditional forces in the short run but provided nationalists an additional incentive to take on both colonialism and the indigenous old guard.

Not all that clear a picture from one end of the vast Muslim world to the other, it is true. Even so, two broad generalizations apply in most cases: 1. The principal locus of political action and thought was within existing state units, whether independent or colonized, and 2. the many different nationalist movements frequently sought a political ideology that included non-Muslims and transcended Islam to include other organizing principles such as common language, culture, and history.

A significant exception to the second generalization was the movement for the creation of Pakistan, which aspired to create an Islamic state. Even this movement, however, conformed to the first, the struggle to create Pakistan being fought out within the confines of British India. Put differently, creation of a state and not Pan-Islam was the goal.

A partial or apparent exception to the first generalization was Arab nationalism, which corresponded to no existing territorial unit. Indeed, the projected borders of that would-be state were nebulous and also expanded over time. Yet, Arab nationalism was very much in line with the second generalization. From its origins Arab nationalism sought to transcend religious communalism. Christian Arabs played a role out of all proportion to their numbers in the rise and development of Arab nationalism. Moreover, although Arabism struck a responsive cord across state borders—especially in the Fertile Crescent—the day-to-day political activities in the colonial period and even beyond are most readily tracked along existing state lines.

What then of transnational Muslim political unity? Pan-Islam as preached by al-Afghani and practiced by Sultan Abdulhamid II came to grief during this period. It will be recalled that after the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War on the side of the Central Powers the Young Turk rulers prevailed upon the sultan, in his capacity as caliph, to declare a jihad against the allies. This call for holy war had, however, slight impact on the outcome. Overwhelmingly, the many millions of Muslims under allied colonial rule remained if not loyal to their overlords at least acquiescent, and a not inconsiderable number of Muslims fought for the allies in the several different colonial armies. Ottoman-sponsored Pan-Islam at this testing appeared to be more sound that substance.

Then, after the war, the question of whether Islamic unity could be a cohesive force in world politics was again put to the test. The Ottoman general, Mustafa Kemal, who later adopted the name Kemal Ataturk (or father of the Turks) dismantled what remained of the dying Ottoman Empire and put in its place a nation-state—the Republic of Turkey. This was done in quick stages. First, he abolished the office of sultan (November 1922) but left the last ruler in the centuries-old Ottoman line with the title of caliph.[7] Less than a year later, in October 1923, the Turkish Republic was proclaimed. The Ottoman Empire was no more. The caliph remained a ruler without a state, without even a tiny autonomous territory such as the pope's Vatican City. This residual anomaly was dispatched the following March when Ataturk abolished the office of caliph and sent all members of the Ottoman family into exile.

Ataturk had acted with such dramatic decisiveness because efforts both to give the caliphate some measure of political power in Turkey as well as authority over all Muslims wherever they lived threatened his plans for a sovereign nation-state. As he later insisted in his celebrated 1927 six-day speech, "I explained to the nation that for the sake of the utopia of establishing a world-wide Islamic state, the Turkish state and its handful of people cannot be subjugated to the service of a Caliph."[8]

That reference to the "utopia of . . . a worldwide Islamic state" pointed at not only religious opposition within Turkey but also developments such as the mass Khilafat movement that had sprung up in British India under the leadership of the two brothers, Muhammad and Shaukat Ali. Muslims in India over the previous two decades or more had become increasingly disaffected with British rule and were turning away from the policy of loyalty to the British raj as championed by Sayyid Ahmad Khan. A more confrontational Muslim leadership was seeking to organize the disparate Muslims of the subcontinent into a unified political force. This latter goal was probably more important to the Indian Muslim leaders than that of defending the Ottoman Empire and the caliphate.[9] Even so, the symbolic appeal of the caliphate to Indian Muslims, with their strongly felt need to see themselves as part of a larger entity and not just a minority in a Hindu world, can not be discounted.[10]

Ataturk's bold stroke of abolishing the caliphate outright forced the issue. It was no longer the simple question of whether to maintain an existing institution. Now answers were needed about whether to revive the caliphate, how to do so, and who should be the caliph.

The Khilafat movement, launched five years earlier in 1919 and, for a brief time, a genuinely mass movement, was the largest organized body to

weigh in on the caliphate, but many others from virtually every Muslim country became involved. Even those Muslim leaders who had other, more pressing concerns felt obliged to address the issue. The question of the caliphate after March 1924 became more complex—and more political.

A clear example of the problems involved in continuing the caliphate in one form or other, in one place or another, predated Ataturk's abolition of the office. The incident even helped Ataturk gain support for his action. In November 1923 two Indian Muslim leaders, Ameer Ali and the Agha Khan, entered the fray by writing to the Turkish government underlining how important the caliphate was to Sunni Muslims and urging "the imminent necessity for maintaining the religious and moral solidarity of Islam by placing the Caliph-Imamate on a basis which would command the confidence and esteem of the Muslim nations."[11] Since both of these Indian Muslim notables were not Sunnis but Shi'is, who, moreover, had supported Britain during the First World War and were thought to have played an important role in countering the Ottoman sultan/caliph's 1914 declaration of a jihad,[12] Ataturk and his followers had a field day attacking this injudicious intervention.

Ataturk was thus able to disentangle his new Republic of Turkey from the caliphate, but many Muslims throughout the world were not yet ready to let this venerable office go out of existence. Nor were candidates lacking. There were Sharif Husayn, for a short time king of the Hijaz (until ousted by Ibn Saud) and thus in control of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Madina. There was King Fuad of Egypt. Moreover, the deposed Ottoman caliph wrapped himself in the mantle of caliphal legitimacy. That is, having received the required *bay'ah* (oath of loyalty), he could not legitimately be deposed by a secular ruler, even less by one bent on destroying the very institution of the caliphate.

A small group of Sharif Husayn's followers actually met in Palestine to proclaim him caliph on March 5, 1924, just two days after the bill in Turkey abolishing the caliphate became law. The response throughout the Muslim world was negative, if not often derisory. Attempting to shore up a rickety cause, Sharif Husayn called a conference in Mecca during the pilgrim season (July 1924). It was not representative of the vast Muslim world. Most were Arabs with a strong Palestinian representation. Even so, Sharif Husayn failed to get conference approval of his appointment as caliph. In fact, the brief charter adopted by the conference did not even mention the caliphate.[13]

Efforts in support of Egypt's King Fuad fared no better. In May 1926 a "Caliphate Congress," largely organized by Egyptian ulama backing Fuad's

aspirations, met in Cairo. Those in attendance represented more of the Muslim world but were heavily weighted toward Egyptian and Palestinian delegates. The Egyptian organizers acted with circumspection, but their efforts at saving appearances fooled no one. The Indian Khilafat movement even refused to send delegates, fearing that the Congress was designed to advance the Egyptian king's caliphal claims.[14]

In any case, those who did attend represented so many conflicting political orientations that the congress, while able to agree on the importance (indeed, the necessity) of the caliphate, proposed no precise steps for his selection. A motion was passed to meet the following year in Cairo, but no further action ensued.

Two later international meetings of Muslims fared no better on the caliphal issue. Neither the Muslim congress in Mecca (in June-July 1926, thus only weeks after that in Cairo) nor the 1931 General Islamic Congress in Jerusalem even put the matter of the caliphate on the agenda. In the former Ibn Saud, recently victorious in ousting Sharif Husayn and the Hashimites from the Hijaz, was seeking international support for Wahhabi control of the holy cities—with only limited success. In the latter the Palestinian leader, Amin al Husayni, looking to gain worldwide Muslim support for the Palestinians resisting Zionism and British mandatory rule, was eager to avoid the divisive issue of the caliphate.[15]

By this latter year the last Ottoman caliph, Abdulmajid, was living removed from *Dar al-Islam* in Nice, and the only announced claimant to the office, Sharif Husayn, had just died in Amman after having spent all but the final dying months of his exile years in Cyprus.[16]

Instead, the political history of the half-century following the First World War is more adequately told in terms of nationalist parties, state building, and secular political leaders. A representative list of those major Muslim political leaders around whose ideas and exploits so much of modern history has been framed would include Egypt's Sa'd Zaghlul and Gamal Abd al-Nasir, Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia, Sultan Muhammad V of Morocco, Sukarno in Indonesia, Riza Shah and his son Muhammad Riza Shah plus Muhammad Musaddiq all in Iran, Afghanistan's King Amanullah, Ibn Saud the founder of Saudi Arabia, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah the principal founder of Pakistan plus Ahmad Ben Bella and Ferhat Abbas in Algeria. Not a one of these political leaders was religiously trained, but this in itself hardly distinguishes them from non-Muslim politicians. Very few nationalist leaders or presidents or kings have been seminarians.

Many in the above list of leaders wore their Muslim religion lightly, did not strictly observe all the tenets of Islam, and even violated a few. Again,

they were very much like most non-Muslim political figures. They were also prepared to observe the public pieties and resisted the ulama or religious leaders only when they stood in the way of their political programs. This, too, is in line with what political leaders tend to do everywhere. All were working in a nation-state political context, and even those few interested in modifying the existing state thought in terms other than of unifying all Muslims. Arab unity, for example, and not Islamic unity was the only significant ideology transcending a single existing state advanced by Arabs.

Perhaps the various ideas of Fertile Crescent unity should not be so summarily dismissed, but they, too, strengthen the argument that Islam did not provide the political matrix during these years. All the many variations on the theme of Fertile Crescent unity posited a regional, cultural, and multireligious political ideal.[17] Pakistan, again, is the partial exception that tests the rule, but even there the goal sought and obtained was the creation of a nation-state. Further, the relative success of independent India under Nehru in gaining Arab diplomatic support and countering Pakistani diplomacy in that region reveals the limitations of employing a shared religion as an instrument of international politics. Moreover, a shared Islam did not provide the social cement needed to prevent the breakup of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

In short, politics in Muslim countries in the half-century from 1918 to the late 1960s is best understood in terms applicable to other parts of the world. The efforts of political leaders in these years and the institutions and ideologies they adopted were directed toward achieving independent nation-states led by strong centralized governments.

These leaders can be seen as twentieth-century heirs of the nineteenth-century modernizing Muslim monarchs (themselves Islamic equivalents of the European enlightened despots) such as Ottoman sultans Selim III or Mahmud II, Egypt's Muhammad Ali and Ismail, Tunisia's Ahmad Bey. The twentieth-century group, like their predecessors, were men of government. To the extent that the Muslim religious apparatus (ulama, Sufi brotherhoods, the traditional Qur'anic schools, *Shari'ah* courts, the institution of *waqf*, etc.) fostered, or at least did not hamper, these modernizing programs, they were tolerated. Otherwise, they were resisted.

The extreme case was Ataturk's Turkey, which became an avowedly secular state, and Islam was, to use a Western term not inappropriately, disestablished. Riza Shah, a contemporary in neighboring Iran, was hardly less adamant in taking on the religious establishment. Clerics were soon relegated to subordinate roles, even in their traditional power bases, the judiciary and education. Moreover, the move to modernization in education,

although imposed with an iron hand, was welcomed by its student con-
stituents. The response of the young has been neatly captured by a scholar
who grew up in Iran during Riza Shah's reign:

> A new, relatively secure, and respectable professional class, admirably
> placed for furthering the national goals of the regime, was created, and
> a corresponding change in social attitudes came about. . . . Nowhere
> was this attitude more striking than in the classroom, where the young
> bow-tied teacher of physics commanded the close attention and respect
> of the students and often fulfilled their hero-image, while the calligra-
> phy and Arabic classes of famous old craftsmen and scholars were
> scenes of mayhem and cruel practical jokes played on the teachers.[18]

Many symbolic changes were pushed through, intended to create "new
Iranians," e.g., outlawing the wearing of the veil, replacing the Islamic lunar
year with the pre-Islamic Iranian solar year, while also replacing the Arabic
and Turkish names for months with "old Persian equivalents."[19]

Riza Shah's son and successor, while circumspect during the early years
of his reign, was no less forceful when he deemed himself to be secure
against domestic opposition. The shah's effort to reconstruct a twentieth-
century adaptation of ancient Persian empires was most strikingly demon-
strated in the huge celebration of the twenty-five hundredth anniversary of
the Persian monarchy at Persepolis in 1971.[20] It was the most grandiose offi-
cial celebration that the Middle East had seen since Khedive Ismail presided
over the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. These two sumptuous celebra-
tions also augured the beginning of the end for both monarchs.

Sukarno, the nationalist who emerged as leader of independent
Indonesia, is remembered for his five principles (Pantja Sila), which were 1.
nationalism, 2. humanitarianism, 3. democracy, 4. social justice, and 5. belief
in Almighty God. For a country that is almost 90 percent Muslim, religion
figured last, and no religion was mentioned by name. Sukarno did not wor-
ship "the God of Islam. . . . God was for him the all-powerful being who ani-
mated the world, the essence of all being and of every religion."[21] His aim,
embraced by those who rallied to his cause, was to create a modern nation-
state (a polity of "all for all" or "one for all, all for one" as he once put it)
that went out of its way to include the tiny Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist
minorities.

Habib Bourguiba, less than five months after Tunisian independence,
pushed through a radical legal reform (August 1956) that outlawed
polygamy and made judgment for divorce a prerogative of the court, with-
drawing the husband's exclusive right to divorce his wife. Although four-

teen Tunisian ulama issued a fatwa denouncing the new law, it was received with considerable enthusiasm by the modernists and met with no appreciable resistance. Bourguiba had taken on the Muslim official class and bested them. Modernization and secularization of education followed, including the downgrading of the venerable Zaytuna Mosque-University. It became simply a *faculté* of religious studies in the University of Tunis.

Algeria's Ferhat Abbas was the very personification of the modernizing and thoroughly Westernized leader. He was so fully infused with things French—not just language but culture and political ideology—that he appeared (as many commentators noted) more like a Third Republic Radical Socialist than a Muslim nationalist. If French colonialism in Algeria had not been so deep-rooted, broken only by a brutal six-year war for independence, the educated Francophone likes of Ferhat Abbas would have led their country to independence in negotiated steps with only limited violence employed on either side (such as took place in Tunisia and, for that matter, in most former European colonies).

In Algeria, however, independence was won by the National Liberation Front (FLN) with a more proletarian leadership. Ahmad Ben Bella, for example, had been a sergeant in the French army. The FLN had split from the movement organized back in the mid-1920s (largely in France among Algerian workers living there) by Messali Hadj, who created a leadership style blending the mores of an activist Sufi shaykh with those of a leftist ideologue and organizer. The break with Messali, however, came not along the religion-secular divide but against what those who created the FLN saw as his autocracy and ineffectualness.

The long, bitter Algerian struggle for independence was infused with Islamic symbolism—the very pronounced French tendency during most of the long period of *Algerie française* to depict Islam and the Muslim as the unassimilable "other" dictated as much—but this was clearly a movement seeking to create an Algerian nation-state. The nationalist rhetoric called for restoration of Algeria's lost independence.

As for Egypt, Sa'd Zaghlul's Wafd Party had a strong record in favor of religious toleration. Zaghlul's first cabinet contained two Copts and one Jew. The president of the legislative chamber was also Christian.[22] Nasser and the Free Officers had had ties with the Muslim Brethren (about which more later), but the Egyptian regime began a pitiless crackdown on this early, and continuing, example of radical religious fundamentalism beginning in 1954, after a Muslim Brother had attempted to assassinated Nasser.

Such were the leaders throughout the Muslim world who during roughly the first seven decades of the twentieth century appeared to have taken at

flood that tide in the affairs of men leading to fortune. They were the modernizers, the nationalists, the state builders. They and the movements they developed were the future. The Islamists (even that usage was not known, not used until later) were anachronisms. Yes, they could still cause trouble here and there, but they were an ebbing force.

Then the situation began to change. No one event can be singled out as the turning point for the entire Muslim population, but it would not be far off the mark to situate the turning of the tide in the mid to late 1960s.

Those heretofore deemed at the cutting edge of modernizing nationalism came to be seen as discredited spent forces. One began to hear of Muslim fundamentalists, Islamists, political Islam. Such terms as ayatullah and *jahiliyya* and such medieval Muslim theologians as Ibn Taimiyya became no longer cloistered in the vocabulary of specialists. They appeared in the popular media.

Why this change? That will be considered in the next chapter.