**Islamist Thoughts on Democracy**

**Nick Mullins**

Islam and its political manifestations are commonly misconstrued as altogether monolithic, uniform, and homogenous. This view is wrong. Still, Islamism and democracy remain a central question that can be addressed with a polyvocal/interpretative approach to an essentially non-monolithic phenomenon. Political Islam is different than the non-political variety, and it depends on sociopolitical contexts how it manifests. This paper scrutinizes how Islamism comes to head with democracy and thereby brings light to the scholarly and popular debate. First, a long historical view of political Islam establishes a lens through which to view Islamic political thought. A review of the scholarly debate on Islamism in dealing with democracy reifies political Islam as a political culture as well as a manifestation of Islam that is distinctly political as opposed to the faithful sense. The framing of Islamism as interpretative and adaptable is applied with the aim of elucidating the understanding of how Islamist ideologues and organizations contend with democracy. Islamism and its manifestations are variable phenomenon capable of accommodation like any other worldview.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Introduction** The question of Islamism and democracy becomes central in the face of modernity. But despite a multifaceted, multilayered, and complex reality, there are common misconceptions of Islam and its political manifestations as altogether monolithic, uniform, and homogenous. The opposite is the case, where Islam in the theological, faithful sense can be differentiated from its ideological, politically-driven displays (Nandy 1998). The latter, referred for simplicity as either political Islam or Islamism, rather than uniform is “polyvocal” (Riaz 2018). Put another way, there is a distinction between religion as faith, on the one hand, and religion as a set of rules, subject to interpretation and negotiation, on the other (Volpi 2010). With this distinction between political and faithful Islam in context, it continues to be debated whether Islam can come to terms with democratic norms of the modern world. A close examination of how Islamism deals with democracy is in order before such a debate can ever be settled.  
 Though often much emphasis is placed on the radical displays of political Islam, less encountered in this dialogue is rigorous engagement with the interactions between political Islam and democracy, that is, how Islamism deals with democracy—because it has been accommodated as well as adapted. Moreover, Volpi (2010) contends that, overall, a cultural approach to scholarship on Islamism in international relations is theoretically underdeveloped vis-à-vis the dominant neoliberal and neorealist approaches. This underdevelopment of a cultural perspective to aid an understanding of religiopolitical interactions in contemporary world politics should be addressed to prevent misconstrued conclusions from distorting analyses. By examining the variegated Islamist thoughts on democracy, this paper hopes to aid in the development of a reified understanding of political Islam in the modern world, with democracy as a particular subject of inquiry.   
 The path forward to understanding Islamist interactions with democracy first includes a brief, albeit long view of political Islam. In the opening section, classical Islam and its variations form the context around which the question of democracy fits into the history of development in Islamist thought. This historical context also brings to light three prominent dynastic experiences for Islam, concluding with a summary of takeaways to bear in mind for the larger inquiry. Secondly, a theoretical and literature review on Islamism and democracy is laid bare to highlight conceptual understandings of political Islam, questions of compatibility and challenges regarding democracy, the importance of varying contexts, and observable takes on Islamist engagement with democratic processes. From there, a framework of adaptability of political Islam is advanced, then applied to a qualitative case comparison of Islamist thoughts from various ideologues to religiopolitical organizations on democracy. The conclusion summarizes the arguments, and remarks on possibilities for where to go from here.

**A Brief, Long View of Political Islam** Before addressing any specific question on Islamism, not least in dealing with democracy, it is important to take in a longer view of history. This historical view begins with classical Islam, starting with the prophet Muhammad and the Quran. From the catalyst of a new religious tradition and how Islam entangled with temporal as well as spiritual power, up to more recently, this section adds to the idea that political Islam is non-static, multifaceted, and differs through various temporal and spatial contexts.  
 Black (2011) provides a detailed treatment of the history of Islamism, beginning circa 622-1000. The prophet Muhammad’s recitation by God of the Quran catalyzed a new religion combining faith and force, draped in a sense of Arab nationhood and a new sense of international community, with power transferred from empire to prophet (Black 2011). Muslim people were linked by segments of tribes without sacrificing internal structures; where religion fulfilled identifiable social needs, and features of Islam bound society together, as justice/godliness transcended race, tribe, and gender (Black 2011). The mission of Ali was to create a community of faith that is capable of accommodating others. The Quran mostly concerned religion and ethics, without much to say of law and government, but the priority of the Prophet was to use political power as required by circumstances for religious ends (Black 2011). Neo-tribalism (communalism) and patrimonial bureaucracy were both present forces, and with popularization of the need for reason and religion to enjoy a happy life, the religious authority of Deputy was central to political power (Black 2011).  
 Ulama (scholar-teachers) were an emerging type of religious leadership, and the most stable insofar as social authority due to religious knowledge, whose expertise began to lead or otherwise express public opinion (Black 2011). Yet this authority undermined the project of the monarch and world government for the House of Islam (Black 2011). At the same time, submission to those in power was justified by the Quran (Black 2011). Imami Shi’ites saw a new theory of leadership, that is, to have the true Leader recognized and obeyed as a principal political aim, since political authority was thought to be necessary as a consequence of human imperfections (Black 2011).   
 Three different world orders had come about for Islam. The Ghaznavids were in east, Buyids in the center, and the Fatimids were in the west, including three main religious groups, the Community-Traditionalist (Sunni), Isma’ili Shi’a, and Imami Shi’a. The different predominant religious groups entailed no territorial distinctions amid numerous multiracial tribal societies (Black 2011). The power of these new states derived from tribal armies, which were comprised of slave-soldiers who had drawn distance between government and the public. Whereupon dynastic clan legitimacy often rested on appeals to the tribal, Islamic, and royal-Iranian and the Sultan’s personal qualities (Black 2011). A golden age of Islamic humanism and philosophy had dawned, as cultural and intellectual fruits were borne of religious and political diversity of the House of Islam, like later European society; indeed, Eastern law, sciences, and philosophy outpaced the West until around 1200, in a society that was more open than Christendom prior to the 12th century (Black 2011).   
 From about 900-1220 BCE, revelation grew in importance over and above reason, a Sunni principle applied in determining Islamic Leadership as sultans began appropriating religious functions of the caliph (Black 2011). All the while, a stark contrast between Islam and Christianity grew apparent when the former’s focus on the public sphere resulted in political quietism, whereas the latter’s ostensible reduction in the political, or public, sphere, was accompanied by political activism (Black 2011). The difference as, in other words, that Muslims viewed God’s revelation and ruler’s power each as unchallengeable (Black 2011). As a relatively tolerant “middle way” or balanced approached was used by Al-Ghazali to determine what was right, indeed a concept from the Quran (Black 2011, 101). He also elevated the emphasis of Caliph and centralized rule, rejecting any limits to power like never before in order to secure Platonic justice. Constitutionalism was notably absent, while military success was preeminent as the basis of political legitimacy (Black 2011). Occurring about 1220-1500, the Mongols, led by Chingiz and justified by religious beliefs of his clan-dynasty gaining world sovereignty, tore the Islamic world apart. Yet the confrontation brought about the religious assimilation and attraction by Mongols to a Sufi form of Islam in short time, all over a single generation (Black 2011). A reaction to the prior Mongol invasion, the Malmuk ideology of polity based on military-aristocracy households set out to defend Islam against Christians and Mongols. Soon the religious functions of the caliph (deputy) were transferred to the sultan, as legitimized by the writings of Ibn Jama’a (Black 2011). Incidentally, Islamist thinker Ibn Jama’a was thought of as a contributor to corruption of Islamic thought owing to adverse historical context (Black 2011). The subsequent revival period, led by Nasir al-Din Tusi, was one for development of Imami (“Twelver”) Shiite political thought, including the arguments of Tusi’s political society, Taymiyya’s requisite state power for religion, Barani’s distinction between state policy and morality, and Ibn Khaldun’s study of world civilization (Black 2011).  
 In more recent times of early modern states, under three dynastic powers—the Ottomans in east Black Sea to north African Coast, the Safavids in Iran, and the Mughals in India—political and socio-intellectual divisions within the Islamic world were greater than ever before, with Sunnis and Shiites rooted in rival empires (Black 2011). Despite some cultural divisions, there was still much they had in common (Black 2011). Meanwhile in response to dynastic issues inherent to the regime type, stricter adherence to Sharia was often used to prop the legitimacy of rulers; for the Safavids, however, greater religious power by the clergy advanced dynastic decline by drawing authority from central to local or tribal functions (Black 2011). Local tribal rule or authority likewise undermined Akbar in India (Black 2011). Ottoman decline, on the other hand, drew two reactions, including calls for stricter application of Islamic Code or, much to the contrary, stricter application of non-religious Code (Black 2011). The gradual separation of two spheres of power and authority between the temporal and spiritual became increasingly possible as time elapsed, and space grew, from the flashpoint of political Islam. There was, in other words, a greater need for separation or a kind of secularism with expansion geographically and culturally through time, which is evident as the Mughal empire furthest in differentiation of spheres amidst religion. Here, separation had taken place, being furthest from the heart of Islam and not dependent on the religion. This separation of authority did not happen the same everywhere. The fusion of religion and power in other respects, however, thwarted intellectual life and may have impeded theory development in Islamist thought.  
 Islamic political thought in 19th and 20th centuries was broadly defined in relation to the West as a reaction to European scientific and material development, starkly as either a model of how societies could and should develop (of reformism/modernism), or as the ‘other’ and enemy of Islam (Black 2011). Abd Al-Raziq, however, is worth noting as the first to posit a consistent and unequivocal theoretical assertion of a purely religious character of Islam (Black 2011). After the First World War, the superiority myth of the West for its political and social organization no longer held for Muslim intellectuals, leaving political Islam to spare as a leg up against Western capitalism and atheist communism (Black 2011). As for Islamism concerning reformism and the secular state, it is argued that the Quran as an ethical document rather than one of politics facilitates its ostensible congruence with constitutional theory, thereby aligning Islamic political thought with different conceptualizations (interpretations, hermeneutics) of liberty, tolerance, and human rights (Black 2011). Mainstream Islamism suggests sharia and democracy, perhaps, do not disagree with each other. Black (2011) points to An-Na’im as an example, who, following Mahmud Muhammad Taha, an earlier spiritual leader and republican activist, has argued for a return to the first stage of two in the Prophet’s career. The first stage for the Prophet offered tolerance and egalitarianism, changing later on in a second stage for the adaptation to varying needs of the time, which involved harsher elements of Islamic thought (Black 2011). The tolerant, egalitarian earlier stage was comprised in part of the responsibility among believers to exercise ijtihad (i.e., self-exertion, independent reasoning, civic reason), to allow Muslims to carry political dialogue without invariable deferment to the Quran (Black 2011).   
 From this long historical view, it should be clear that there has never been a single cohesive voice in Islamic interpretations, especially in regards to concepts such as the state and democracy. For instance, even as jihad was formerly understand as an internal struggle, it has only recently come to be understood in terms of a ‘neglected duty’ towards the riddance of infidels (Black 2011). Different interpretations in Islamist thought have not only been tolerated but prolific through different temporal and spatial contexts as it spread from its original catalyst with the Prophet. At present it could be gathered from information hitherto that there is a sort of binary response produced by interactions with the West for Islamist thought, ranging from outright violent rejection of the West, to being used as a tool for mobilization, or even acceptance in modernist reform. Others suggest political Islam is not a response but a relationship between religion and the nation-state (Cesari 2018). In all, it can be concluded that this brief history of Islamist thought has set up for an adaptive, malleable understanding of political Islam in varying contexts and against different demands.

**Theoretical and Literature Review** Defining Islamism, compatibility and challenges with democracy and the democratic state, and political Islam in varying contexts are three broad themes to address against the question of how political Islam deals with democracy. A clear conceptual idea of what amounts to ‘political Islam’ or ‘Islamism’ is necessary first to distinguish it from the theological, faith-oriented counterpart across a varied landscape of definitions revealing political Islam as a mobilizing and legitimizing force. In terms of compatibility and its relations with democracy, liberal democracy, and secularism, among democratic norms, a review of theory and literature on this discussion paint a broad brush of how Islamism uniquely handles and adjusts to democracy, including challenges. The different contexts act on the shape and character of Islamism, which is further discussed in light of different scholarly perspectives commonly supportive of this view.

*Defining Islamism* Corralling the variations in conceptualizations of political Islam, interchangeably referred to as Islamism to distinguish it from non-political, is a significant step in traversing any inquiry on the subject on how religiopolitical thought such as Islamism comes to head with democracy. A review of the differences across the conceptual discourse on Islamism lends a sharpened view of the phenomenon. Conceptual clarity in discussions of Islam and democracy, in other words, is essential (Kahn 2011). Below is accordingly a discussion of the conceptual breadth through various understandings of political Islam in concept before more specifically the question of democracy.  
 First, Euben and Zaman (2009) describe Islamism as encompassed by a multifaceted, interpretive framework that can be distinguished from Islamic thought (including modernists, ulama, Salafis, and Sufis) by its unambiguously political aims. In short, Islamists seek to alter the political landscape towards a new religiopolitical order. This politically charged commonality is not to diminish the broad complexities of Islamism in its range of features and differences dependent upon specific historical, cultural, and political contexts. Islamism forms a basis in reinterpretation of texts to achieve varying social and political ends, while ostensibly returning to unmediated scriptural foundations as a remedy for moral failures associated with Western cultural dominance. In sum, Islamism cannot be simply categorized due to its complexity and contradictions, contingencies upon time and place, fluidity, and cultural adaptability. It must be understood as such in order to illuminate rather than distort the political landscape (Euben and Zaman 2009).  
 Islamists have subtle differences, complex overlaps, and radical breaks from other areas of Islamic thought (Euben and Zaman 2009). They are similar to modernists insofar as generally having been educated in modern institutions and seeking liberation from the authority of ‘ulama but differ by their opposition to modernists for lacking Islamic values. While seemingly sharing common cause with ‘ulama, going so far as blurring lines between Islamists and ‘ulama authorities through self-measured divine interpretation, Islamists often paradoxically insist on an unmediated, direct approach (ijtihad rather than taqlid). The easiest distinction between ‘ulama and Islamists is the latter’s efforts toward public implementation of Shari’a. Salafis and Islamists are more difficult to distinguish, but the latter is best differentiated when aims are a new religiopolitical order. The Islamist relation to Sufis is more political insofar as Sufis populist appeal (Euben and Zaman 2009).  
 Another voice in the debate describes political Islam as a modern phenomenon with origins in the perceived failure of secular ideologies to deliver (Akbarzadeh 2011). It is, in other words, a modern-day ideology, a voice of dissent, and a response to perceived or real failures that appeal to anti-imperialist nationalist sentiments and economic crises (Akbarzadeh 2011). Two of its targets have been national ruling elites, locally, and the West, transnationally. Close relations between the United States and contested political regimes as well as a military alliance with Israel have often each drawn the ire of Islamists. Islamists have sometimes posed a challenge to the state system, dismissed for its man-made origins and artificial national boundaries (Akbarzadeh 2011), which alludes to some compatibility questions raised in contradiction of Islamism. The idea of Islamism as a modern phenomenon corresponds to the notion of Islamism seeking political aims.  
 Kumar (2015) offers another, similar view, but first rebukes both the “clash of civilizations” thesis and the idea that Islamist organizations is an inevitable product of Islam, as evidenced by the historical de facto separation between religion and politics in Muslim majority societies. In other words, a better way of understanding political Islam is with a historically grounded and case-by-case approach. From this Marxist/revolutionary alternative frame of reference, religion transforms in different ways to adapt to the needs of societies where it is practiced, and religion is distinguishable between its use for political purposes and actual societal role. In other words, Kumar (2015) agrees that political Islam is a contemporary or modern phenomenon.  
 What serves as a reminder of misconceptions, Volpi (2010) speaks to an international image of the Muslim world as distinctly geopolitical characterized by Islamism. This representation grew after the fall of the USSR with its part in narrating the post-Cold War order of Western dominance. Western international relations theorists have largely relegated religion in politics to the sidelines (Volpi 2010). Nevertheless, some have called for the incorporation of religion into the study of international relations to address analytical shortcomings. In these conversations, some of which beginning in the 1960s alongside behaviorists and rational choice methods in comparative politics, the role of culture was introduced (Volpi 2010). With specific regards to Islam, critics have pushed for emphasis on the heterogeneity of the Muslim world and Middle East as opposed to analyzing through a homogenizing lens (Volpi 2010). Cesari (2018) does not view political Islam as a reaction to the West, but rather as a relationship between religion and the nation-state. The nation-state, in other words, has been reinterpreted and redefined through a religious lens, not necessarily in opposition to Islam (Cesari 2018). Political Islam is thereby understood as a political culture, and state formation processes reveal how political Islam becomes dominant (Cesari 2018).

*Compatibility and challenges with democracy and the democratic state* With now a grounding in some of the conceptual debate surrounding political Islam, Islamist thoughts in dealing with questions of democracy in various ways can be addressed. The question of how Islamists contend with democratic norms such as tolerance and diversity is indeed frequent on the subject of political Islam (Esposito and Piscatori 1991). Some cast doubt in dealing with whether political Islam inherently heads toward the path of increasingly strict, literalist interpretations, and rigid enforcement of Islamic ideals, an absolutism incongruent with democratic norms. Esposito and Piscatori (1991) argues against any such blanket approach to political Islam vis-à-vis democracy. Instead he contends that history shows nations and religious institutions can undergo major reinterpretations or reorientations with respect to ideological concerns (Esposito and Piscatori 1991). This view is in much agreement with the conceptual deliberations over political Islam. Islamist rejection of democracy has been described by Esposito and Piscatori (1991) as often a response to European colonial influence, that is, the West, or as a Judeo-Christian concept. However, it is not necessarily anti-Western in the general sense, but more of a factor of opposition to specific Western policies (Esposito and Piscatori 1991).   
 For another scholar, two trends continue to dominate the Muslim political landscape—first, calls for an Islamic State, and second, secular authoritarianism borne of Arab socialism—according to which Kahn (2011) cites an absence of an emerging democratic theory of Islamic polity, amid a discussion on the prospects for an Islamic democratic theory. Three dimensions of the developing discourse on Islamic democratic theory are highlighted between theologians, jurists, and political philosophers. Theologians can on the surface be advocates for procedural democracy, but only insofar as it does not interfere with divine constitution (i.e. without intervention by popular will). For jurists, moreover, legitimacy of the polity is derived from ability to implement Shari’a instead of Shari’a emerging to serve needs of polity. Kahn (2011) cites El Fadl’s view of Islamic democracy envisioned by jurists as tantamount to dictatorship by Muslim jurists. In the simplest terms, any ideal that an essential interpretation of Shari’a is mandatory inherently subverts democracy. There is, at the same time, also the idea that Judeo-Christian tradition in Europe was in the past supportive of a kind of absolutism not dissimilar from that found in some depictions of Islamism (Esposito and Piscatori 1991). In a transition away from religiopolitical absolutism, European experiences saw reform, reinterpretation, and accommodation of democratic ideals; the thought is that Islam similarly tends toward interpretation such that it has supported at different times and places, both democracy and dictatorship, among other things (Esposito and Piscatori 1991). The political philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush, puts reason at the center of Islamic democratic theory as necessary to arrive at faith and truth, since there is currently an absence of such a thing (Kahn 2011). Khan (2011) views the theological understanding of Islam as important but insufficient for the prospects of an Islamic democratic theory. The philosophical element is key but requires further expansion. On the contrary, jurisprudence is a challenge for a prospective Islamic democratic theory. Before achieving political change, the full development of an Islamic democratic theory is obligatory according to Khan (2011). In brief, social actors, and not only the state, are important in dealing with the democracy question.   
 On a similar note, Akbarzadeh (2011) brings to attention the critical question of sovereignty vis-à-vis the relationship between Islamism and the modern state. For Islamists, sovereignty resides with God, which consequently impoverishes legitimacy from any other political system that neglects holding God at the center (Akbarzadeh 2011). The Islamist vision for a perfect society is opposed to democracy, which rests on sovereignty of the people as a source of legitimacy and not God (Akbarzadeh 2011). It is further inclined to popular disenfranchisement, intolerance, and erasure of a middle ground (Akbarzadeh 2011). Ironically, on the one hand, aspirations toward the ideal Islamic state have involved reinterpretation so Islamism is relevant to the modern state despite exclusive claims to truth. On the other hand, man-made states have been the central confine for Islamist implementation of their political ideals despite rejection of the state system. The question of sovereignty thus creates somewhat of a paradox for Islamism. To bridge the divide between sovereign God and sovereign people, some Islamists accommodate the state by operating within the system to achieve goals such as expanded reach, persistent relevance, and for avoidance of state repression (Akbarzadeh 2011). However, some critics of accommodation suspect there is a covert agenda at work by Islamists who seek political power through democratic means with no intention of maintaining the system (Akbarzadeh 2011). All told, Islamism aspires toward transnational unity, yet commonly resigns to established boundaries of state; it rejects man-made laws as illegitimate and emasculating for Muslims, yet many Islamists partake in the state system and work to influence it from within; it is conflicted over divine sovereignty and popular sovereignty, yet there are cases where Islamists have turned to democratic means and examples, which gives reason to believe accommodation of the state is certainly possible (Akbarzadeh 2011).  
 The way of accommodating and accepting democracy into Islamist thought described above alludes to historical differences in experiences from the West, which have led to different ways of dealing with democracy (Esposito and Piscatori 1991). In either event, democracy has a substantial legitimizing capacity and it is often seen as a universal good, and Islamists have dealt with it differently through underlying meanings in Islam, such as shura (consultation), ijtihad (independent reasoning), and ijma (umma consensus) (Esposito and Piscatori 1991). The different ways of understanding democracy add to the complexity over questions of democracy in the Western sense versus ideas of democracy among varied Islamist thought. Questions of compatibility between Islam, democracy and the state should be understood while cognizant of contexts.

*Varying contexts* There is no single interpretation of Islamism, because it is a non-unified and ongoing debate. Fluidity of political Islam can be gathered from the historical context in addition to the various sociopolitical developments and changes through which Islamist thought adapts. This section touches on the fluidity and malleability of an interpretive Islamism in the face of questions such as democracy.There are various sociological explanations of the religiosity associated with political Islam. Some frameworks for understanding political Islam problematize the role of Muslim individuals and communities in modern as well as postmodern settings. Volpi (2010) first invokes a necessary discussion of Weber’s celebrated approach to religion, but with serious reservations, contending that Weber was too ambitious from the onset by seeking a general explanation for religious phenomenon. Weber often oversimplified, for example, historical development and homogenization of cultural norms (Volpi 2010). Weber’s ideas were part and parcel of secularization theory. First, modern societies were said to be experiencing the process of disenchantment amid scientific advances, which meant previous mysteries once pinned to religious/supernatural explanations became mundane, that is, now explainable by the life world; second, a transformation of consciousness coupled with disenchantment was linked to growing autonomy of state and market institutions at the expense of religious establishment; third, religious decline was from then on dubbed as a natural linear progression for societies, wherein modern ration-scientific beliefs were thought certainly to replace the supernatural; and, like other religious-political orientations, Islamism was dubbed anachronistic or anti-modern (Volpi 2010).   
 Secularization theory, in this way, was for much time the dominant frame of understanding religion and politics roughly from the Enlightenment through the 1980s, until other accounts started to become more prominent. Ernest Gellneer, for example, suggested key aspects of Islamism were, in fact, very much compatible with modernity, citing tenets of ‘High Islam’ such as urbanism and egalitarianism (Volpi 2010). Accounts of secularization were becoming aware and cautious of Western biases (Volpi 2010). It is important “to rephrase more carefully the secularization-modernization argument in global context” given the growing influence of Islamism in Muslim countries and at the same time its growth in Western settings (Volpi 2010, 79). In the face of secularization and modernization, religion and traditional components of society have been narrowly cast as hindrances to the success of the modern state, national integration, and loyalty to the nation-state (Volpi 2010). Disenchantment was viewed as linear, deterministic, and irreversible, yet empirical accounts have since uncovered holes in Weber’s original grand scheme. Volpi (2010) has provided a discussion of history and critiques of secularization theory, culminating in a broad prescription, as he quotes Jenny White, to “think outside the categories we have inherited for understanding political life” to aid the understanding of religion and politics as it relates to Islam and the Muslim world.  
 On the other hand, Kumar (2015a) argues that a set of four historical conditions are responsible for the rise of Islam: (1) the active role of US bolstering Islam as alternative to secular nationalism and the left; (2) persistent imperial intervention; (3) internal weaknesses leading to decline of secular nationalist and various left parties and thereby creating a vacuum for Islamists to occupy; and (4) crises exacerbated by neoliberalism present economic openings for Islamists and their charitable networks. The rise of Islamists groups is, in other words, not linked to 7th century Islam and not dissimilar from the rise of other fundamentalisms (e.g., Christian, Jewish, and Hindu) (Kumar 2011a). The spread of capitalism and colonialism into Muslim empires sparked modernizing capitalist reforms and Westernization to keep pace with military development, which changed economic and political landscapes (Kumar 2011a). The four historical conditions above paved the way for Islamism’s entry into global salience (Kumar 2011).  
 In short, Kumar (2011a) emphasizes how the United States during the Cold War era saw secular nationalism and communism in the Middle East as threats to American influence. This US orientation toward ideological contests in Muslim-majority countries resulted in US support for Islam as an alternative to ameliorate perceived threats. For instance, the US aided the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt against Nasser, a clergy group in Iran against Mossadegh, and also supported Islamists by backing Afghan Islamist holy warriors beginning in 1979, playing a crucial role in projecting Islam coupled with the vast assembly of Islamic fighters from numerous country origins (Kumar 2011a). In Iran, the discontent drawn by US-backed Shah and resulting in the Iranian Revolution further inspired Islamism. The role of Saudi Arabia, moreover, has been pivotal in the promotion of political Islam throughout the Middle East. Western imperial intervention continues, and compounded by US support for Israel, emboldens anti-imperialists (Kumar 2011a). The anti-imperialist orientation goes to show for contextual developments that can shape Islamism.  
 Meanwhile anti-imperialist politics in colonized nations trended toward secular nationalism after WWII in Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia, Algeria, and Pakistan, but not in Saudi Arabia and other monarchs (Kumar 2011b). In the latter, Western-backed monarchs, secular nationalists were successfully muffled as a political force. However, because secular nationalist movements were unable to deliver on promises for radical economic and political change, they met their failure and decline. Consequently, an ideological vacuum created space for Islamists to enter the political space (Kumar 2011b). To qualify, leftists were unable to challenge Islamists for this space given a dearth of legitimacy among the people, after wavering positions aligned with Stalinist politics involving sensitive political matters such as Arab nationalism (Kumar 2011b). Islamists have further gained support through aid in response to devastation by neoliberalism and imperialism, although no alternatives were proposed to endemic capitalist crises, since Islamists at the end of the day are still capitalists. Islamism has drawn urban educated youth to its ranks because of a convergence of economic and political crises around the 1970s. Political Islam seen in this context is therefore modern and urban, arising out of crises erupted by capitalism, beyond just the middle class (Kumar 2011b). In the Marxist frame, a pattern of ascent and decline will likely remain until a viable left alternative poses a successful challenge to Islamism. In this light, Kumar (2011b) argues as it relates to Islamism for the necessity of critically-conditioned support against imperialism and oppression from the left. The Marxist approach to understanding political Islam hammers in the import of context-bearing responses to politics and society, which continues to be supportive of the interpretive view of political Islam as addressed in the previous section.

*Framing the Balancing/Meeting of Democracy and Islam*  
 The theoretical and literature review presented above has provided (1) a conceptual understanding of Islamism, (2) a look at conversations surrounding political Islam compatibility and challenges with democracy, including the sovereign state, and (3) a discussion on the interpretative variations of political Islam in different temporal and spatial contexts. From the review of these important themes, a framework for understanding the balance/meeting of democracy and Islam can be laid bare. In short, a broad-brush application to Islamism considering the democracy question adapts a polyvocal, interpretative and non-monolithic Islam and political Islam, which varies by context, and it is both adaptable and malleable.

**Islamist Ideologues and Organizations on Democracy** Islamist political organizations and Islamist ideologues alike do not fit a static mold, and they sometimes orient around a pragmatic understanding of Islam in politics when it comes to dealing with democracy. At other times, it is not necessarily pragmaticism, but more of an Islamic-values interpretation that positions political Islam as inherently democratic or serving democratic ends. This section looks at a few significant Islamist organizations and ideologues in dealing with democracy. Islamist ideologues, including Ali Shariati, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Mawlana Sayyid Abu Al’ Ala Mawdudi, and Rachid Ghannouchi, have each promulgated unique interpretations of Islam vis-à-vis democracy. The latter two, Mawdudi and Ghannouchi, have led Islamist religiopolitical movements through direct engagements with democratic processes. The case analyses below consider the framing of political Islam as polyvocal, varied by context, adaptable, and able to change in the face of different sociopolitical contexts. The pragmaticism of working within the political system of democratic norms to advance an Islamist vision of the sociopolitical is commonly featured. The case examples of Islamist ideologues and religiopolitical organizations chosen are based on their high-level similarities in terms of manifestations of Islamist dealings with democratic processes through either accommodation or the Islamic values interpretation of democratic norms such as tolerance and egalitarianism. The cases of Ali Shariati and Abdolkarim Soroush, juxtaposed to Jamaa’t-i Islami and Mawlana Sayyid Abu Al’ Ala Mawdudi, reveal how different manifestations of political Islam compare—alike in their interpretive compatibility with democracy, while different in terms of context and means. Extant literature coupled with direct Islamist writings serve as support for the following qualitative analyses, all of which are underpinned by the framing of Islamism vis-à-vis democracy as polyvocal, adaptable, and contingent upon sociopolitical circumstances.

*Ali Shariati and Abdolkarim Soroush* Two Islamist ideologues can be understood in similar, albeit certainly disparate ways, in dealings with democracy or similar manifestations therewith. First is Ali Shariati (1933-1977), who was an activist in Iranian politics, a revolutionary and an intellectual whose public profile would rise around 1967 surrounding popular lectures on Islamic reform and social activism, which he orchestrated around social theory and religious-inspired influences. His father, who was well-read in religious sciences and a reformist, left an early impact on him, while also establishing the Center for Propagation of Islamic Verities, a reform-minded Shia institution that sought a more relevant Islam considerate of contemporary conditions rather than static and narrow ritual in seminary and mosques. A reformist mindset and activism would prove to be an engrained part of Shariati’s life. He and his father were each supportive of the Prime Minister Muhammad Mussadiq who was overthrown after a coup in 1953 arranged by the United Kingdom, United States, and Iranian Royalists. Following the coup, a turn toward oppositional activity against the Shah led to their brief arrests and imprisonment. Later, when Shariati pursued higher education in Paris, he remained active in an anti-Shah student group (1959-1963), though he was dissuaded by lack of attention to action. Shariati took influence from wide array of schools in social theory during an education stay in France (Akhavi 2013). Shariati also extracted from his study of social theory the idea of words as a tool for political mobilization, or “instruments for socio-political change” (Akhavi 2013, 171). The relevant frameworks of social theory to Shariati were “Marxist political economy and sociology, existential philosophy, liberation theology, and sociology of religion” (Akhavi 2013, 173). In this way, social theory served as a central footing for the development of Shariati’s Islamist ideology, while exemplifying the multicolored interpretive nature of Islamist worldviews.   
 From a high level, “Shariati brought together the strands of modernism and Islamic revivalism in an original synthesis” (Black 2011, 311). His principal contributions as an Islamist ideologue are uniquely embodied by these characteristics, with an emphasis on revolutionary Islam, popular sovereignty and the role of the “enlightened intellectual” in pursuit of Islamic knowledge. Like other modernists, Shariati sought to reconfigure existing Islamic knowledge by recasting it into contemporary social relevance. In revivalist fashion and differing from modernists, however, he believed that this Islamic enterprise should come from within Islam as opposed to reforming upon a modern European basis (Black 2011). His views were driven by belief in the ultimate objective of liberation and social justice, for which Islam was key to success according to Shariati (Akhavi 2013). He opposed colonialism and imperialism, and his view of international relations was a system of domination by great powers in self-interested pursuit. His educational background and influences, as earlier mentioned, smoothed the way for the Marxist idea of social change to the fore of an Islamist paradigm, albeit differing by marrying the idea to religion as key to successful revolutionary struggle (the absence of which was his only critique of Marxism). In other words, an authentic religious culture was central to overcome colonizers and imperialists. Even though he favored ijtihad and popular sovereignty for the masses, Shariati argued for the important role of intellectuals in achieving a new, socially-relevant Islamic knowledge. These intellectual mediators (including himself among them), Shariati posited, should undertake the task of reconstituting Islamic knowledge. He wanted to “radically update the social and political program of Islam,” even championing rights for women, as an example (Black 2011, 313). Islam holds a special place in Shariati’s political ideology. According to him, religion is the defining element of a successful revolutionary struggle as well as a call to action. Akhavi (2013) presents a few themes reflective of Shariati’s European schooling and influence, where social theories blend with Shariati’s esteem for Shia Islam. First, the Marxist concept of social change (i.e., history as a dialectical process, presenting historical change based on conflicts and contradictions) was convincing enough for Shariati to believe in a sort of historical determinism, yet pious Shia communities were given an exception based on Shia history. Instead, by coming together around a pious standard, Shi’ites can effect social change without a dialectical process. Shariati thereby sought to rally Shia believers to the example of Imam Husayn ibn Ali, the younger son of Shi’ism’s founder Imam Ali Abi Talib. The Imam Husayn was a central figure in Shia doctrine of martyrdom, which emphasizes his suffering on behalf of both the faith and believers. In brief, Shariati leveraged the Imam’s story, only taking it a stretch further by viewing the revered example in revolutionary terms, as an act against impious tyranny, and in this way especially relevant to contemporary politics for the masses. Second, individual responsibility and choice are essential, a view Shariati adopts not from earlier Muslim thinkers but instead from French influence. He believed in an obligation for individuals to seek truth and act to uphold it. Individual responsibility for worldly actions was also beneficial for reaching a larger sphere of influence and mobilizing for the cause of freedom and justice. Shariati further framed this obligation as a duty to iconic leaders in Shi’ism. A third and final element to Shariati’s political Islam is his asserted belief in the true mission of Shi’ism’s as liberation. In this way, he saw faith as a dynamic process and a cause for the masses to prioritize moral and revolutionary struggle, or else face alternatives like stagnation and sterility (Akhavi 2013).  
Shariati’s positions in Islamist thought demonstrate a lasting influence of his reformist father given that they were each critical of ulama as being parochial and less than relevant, especially among younger people. Moreover, Shariati’s view of egalitarian foundations of the tradition contrasts with an ulama monopoly over Islamic knowledge and understanding of the faith. An extension of these egalitarian principles, he believed in the right for all believers to engage in ijtihad. These views were all despite Shariati’s somewhat paradoxical significance of “enlightened intellectuals” as leaders of the masses (Akhavi 2013). Intellectuals (like him) would serve as leaders (imam) elected and responsible to the masses, and whose leadership is based on “study, designation, election and consensus of the people” (Black 2011, 313). In other words, in absence of the Hidden Imam, Shariati’s view is that of popular sovereignty in Shi’ism context as an exercise by the community (umma) to fulfill the faithful mission. The intellectual leaders according to Shariati then head society through commitment to Islam and knowledge of modern social science (Black 2011). Without mentioning much about the state, Shariati extends his revolutionary orientation to international relations with attention to interventionist domination of great powers, influenced by third world anti-colonialist thinkers. His was aligned on international relations themes with leftist perspectives, although with his added idea of the liberating role of religion (Akhavi 2013). For Shariati, social justice imperatives required anticolonial revolution on the world stage, as the ideals of tawhid (oneness with God) could only be achieved in an egalitarian society without class cleavages.  
Shariati’s ideas caught steam in the late 1960s, becoming increasingly popular after his death in 1977 before the Iranian Revolution, which was perhaps his most felt impact in contemporary politics. Prominent leaders spoke shortly after which characterizing Shariati’s work as vital to its achievement (Akhavi 2013). The 1979 revolution relied on popular demonstrations rather than armed force, and it was driven by resentment towards foreign exploitation. In a double-edged way, the United States fulfilled the dual role of Islamic and Marxist villain (Black 2011). The revolutionary framing of the international order was continued by Khomeini. In broad brush, Shariati transformed himself into a champion of the masses, and the lasting impact of his work is in the unique combination and coming to the fore of Islamic and Marxist ideas. In other words, his work was a unique combination of Shi’ite traditions in religious protest and Marxist social justice and popular revolution (Black 2011). Examples revolutionary ideologies, popular movements and aims to triumph in the face of oppressors, including against the “West” or capitalism, are not uncommon themes on the contemporary world stage when it comes political Islam.   
 Similarities between the two ideologues may lead to the conclusion that Abdolkarim Soroush continues the legacy of the Ali Shariati, since the former Islamist thinker comes in more recent times after Shariati but continues a social justice orientation. In fact, Soroush was a student at the University of Tehran around the time of Shariati’s rise in popularity (ca. 1967), and he describes his efforts at the time to attend as many Shariati lectures as possible (Sadri and Sadri 2000). Grounded in both a traditional and modernist education, including some time spent studying hard sciences in England, Soroush is also product of his time and the sociopolitical context of developments in Iran, especially of the pre-Revolution intellectual tradition. He grew up roughly a generation behind Shariati. Soroush is fluent in the language of religious seminaries, but he is also characterized as charismatic and a serious traditional scholar (Sadri and Sadri 2000).   
 Soroush differentiates between the ethics of gods and ethics of the mundane in a delineation with what could be thought of as literal scriptural interpretations and worldly- or -reality-driven interpretations; that is, humanity is subject to the latter conceptualization of morality, which is relative, subject to context as well as exceptions. Soroush identifies “extrareligious” virtues, including justice, courage, moderation, and wisdom, as “supermorals” that should be upheld through democratic practice as a “right and responsibility” (2000, 113; 120). In other words, ijtihad should be exercised to ensure exceptions do not become rules in a moral society. At the same time, Soroush signifies his rejection of absolutism by virtue of prudent admission of exceptions in moral practice. Moreover, in “The Idea of Democratic Religious Government,” Soroush builds the case for compatibility between religious belief and democracy. Democratic practice, in short, is required for upholding essential moral values through itjihad and alluding to popular sovereignty as “collective reason arising from public participation and human experience” via democratic means (2000, 127). The religious component plays out democratically because it manifests as influence felt through the domain of reason through interpretation of religious texts and edicts, doing so without minimizing vital extrareligious principles such as human rights (Soroush 2000). He argues that upholding human rights is indispensable for ensuring democratic and religious character of society.  
 Soroush (2000) also deals with democratic governance by focusing on tolerance. Here, again, Soroush positions human rights and justice as central, but adds that restriction of power is also important. He argues that religious society in practice should be “sober and willing—not fearful and compulsory” (Soroush 2000, 133). Faith according to Soroush is an “exclusively personal and private experience.” In other words, democracy is “violated” when a particular belief (or interpretation, punishment for disbelief, etc.) is imposed on citizens (Soroush 2000, 135). Furthermore, genuine faithful experience is “contingent upon individuality and liberty” (Soroush 2000, 141). Human choice and actions are therefore crucial for true faith according to Soroush, which brings Islamism into line with democratic norms. Ultimately, he posits history as a series of human choices requiring sober reflection. In stark support of ijtihad, Soroush (2000) rejects blind following as well as blind rejection (taqlid). Ijtihad, in other words, seems to reverberate well with the idea of individual liberty and freedom of thought.  
 Soroush champions liberty, freedom, and democracy as essential values. His relationship with the clergy/seminary (ulama) is contentious considering views on critical reasoning and reflection (ijtihad and popular sovereignty), which clashes with dogmatic religious practice and dictates. Hence, he is in this respect a proponent of secularization insofar as differentiation between of religion from economic and political institutions, but he rejects the wholesale abandonment of religion from culture and conscious (i.e. profanation). His revivalism is a religious attempt at facing secularization head-on through anticipation, adjustment, and reasoned response. Soroush, in this accommodative manner, recognizes the possibility and desirability of secularization in Islamic society without imposition of either belief or disbelief. In this way, he is also a modernist. He describes modernizing as a practical route over “grandiose claims…without a realistic method of achieving them” (Soroush 2000, 20-1). He believes in protecting pluralism in the pursuit of truth with continuous scrutiny and comparison of truths (i.e. need ijtihad). Knowledge, in other words, is a requisite to prevent religious stagnation. He suggests that if such extrareligious ideas as revolution have already been reconciled with Islam, then religion can and should be reconciled with human rights, democracy, and liberty (Soroush 2000). Differing from Shariati, he believes to achieve the above goals, religion should be made “leaner” as opposed to a “plump” religion burdened by too many claims and too much weight on its shoulders (Soroush 2001, 21). In sum, he sees an Islam of truth and not of ideology; he believes that Islamic truth should come ahead of identity in order to coexist with other truths. For Shariati and Soroush, imperatives in social, political, and religious justice serve to accommodate, or reconcile, Islamist dealings with democracy through various interpretations.

*Jama’at-I Islami and Mawdudi*  
 A prominent example of Islamist organizations contending with democracy is Jama’at-i Islami, which was founded by the influential Islamist ideologue Mawlana Sayyid Abu Al’ Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979), sparking a unique trajectory for political Islam. The legacy of Mawdudi and his vanguard party continue to shape politics in Pakistan and South Asia. Though Mawdudi’s vision for an Islamic state obtained through capture of political power had been mostly laid bare, the Islamist principles of Jama’at-i Islami were not permanent. Some contradictory Islamist principles had hinted at necessary transformation and adaptation of the political Islamic principles faced with certain sociopolitical contexts. The organization has experienced shifts in orientations to either remain relevant or gain political influence. To capture the significance of Jama’at-i Islami in dealing with political Islam and democracy, this section considers the organization’s contributions, defining elements, and key positions, including its relevance in contemporary world politics.  
 From its roots through interactions in time and space, the development of this Islamist organization “tells much about how Islamic revivalism will interact with democratic forces across the Muslim world in the comings years” (Nasr 1994, XV). Still, in recent years, amid radical Islamists and right-wing political parties in mainstream politics of Pakistan, Jama’at-i Islami portrays an “ambiguous stance” on extremism and terrorism in an appeal to supporters of both ends (Bokhari 2013). In any case, Bhakari (2013) sees Jama’at-i Islami as informative for future Islamist prospects in democracies. This organization carries the legacy of Mawdudi as a political party seeking an Islamic order by the means of gaining political power. The movement also embraced political pragmatism by working within the democratic state confines. In other words, pragmatism would work to transform otherwise contradictory Islamist positions (Bokhari 2013). The political developments of Jama’at-i Islami reveal a reconcilable Islamism with secularism and democracy, rather than a simple dichotomy of opposition (Bokhari 2013). The organization made Islamic ideals part of Pakistan’s national discourse, though without great success in terms of either securing party power or operationalizing their interpretation of Islamic provisions (Nasr 1994). In brief, patterns of pragmaticism and accommodation are reflected when revivalism enters pluralistic democratic processes, as Jama’at-i Islami increasingly displays devotion to democracy and constitutional processes since its foundation (Nasr 1994). Mawdudi’s party notably lost membership and some legitimacy when he and his loyalists decided to focus more on politics and less on “piety” (Nasr 40), but this has not hampered other successes of the Islamist organization.   
 Mawdudi led a revivalist movement that sought a restoration to Islamic principles based in a modern framework. His organization continued as an institution even after Mawdudi passed. But as a result of Mawdudi’s founding, Jama’at-i Islami naturally pursued many of the Islamist principles based in his writing and direction. However, Mawdudi’s interpretations would become subject to substantive rethinking and changes as the organization adapted to changes in the “sociopolitical universe that Islamists and Muslims inhabit” (Ahmad 2009, 10). A chief element of the organization that originated with its founder is the pursuit of Islamist goals via political processes (Bokhari 2013). With this goal in mind, the organization was originally thought to serve as the vanguard of the Islamist movement, providing intellectual leadership in order to reject the secular and religious trends of the time. The organization would in fact come to reconcile with secularism as well as other religious trends for pragmatic purposes.  
 Mawdudi had stressed in February 1957 for the need to operate within existing constitutional boundaries to achieve political change; in other words, an Islamic state could only be established throughout electoral politics (Bokhari 2013). In Pakistan, as an example of pragmatic practices at work, Jama’at-i Islami aligned in its early history with secular elements in opposition to military rule. Bokhari (2013) describes this alignment as the first time the organization had shifted towards a mixture of Islam and democracy. What was also different from Mawdudi’s original Islamist thinking was the contradiction between sovereignty of God and that of people, which was challenged by Jama’at-i Islami’s participation in the nationalist struggle between East and West Pakistan signaled acceptance of Pakistani nationalism (Bokhari 2013). In India, Jama’at-i Islami positioning on secularism, the state, and democracy came into more favorable light given circumstances like opposition to BJP that favored secularism and pluralism. Despite common generalizations of incongruity between Islam and democracy, the Jama’at-i Islami experience with democracy came to be malleable in the absence of mass Muslim appeal for the organization’s more conservative and traditionalist Islamist ideology. They needed to moderate and accommodate in order to remain relevant amid political competition.  
 The organization may be loosely described as a revivalist-modernist religiopolitical party with Islamist goals. Key Islamist positions for Jama’at-i Islami center on participation in modern democratic processes in the pursuit of an Islamic state. From the start, Mawdudi had clashed the ulama by rejecting prevailing scholarship and viewing religious scholars as unable to provide either religious guidance or political leadership. He further saw ulama as engulfed in taqlid (blind following) (Ahmad 2009). Mawdudi and Jama’at-i Islami together sought an Islamic state through the capture of political power by democratic means (Bokhari 2013). The movement has also subscribed to beliefs in tawhid (oneness of God) and the sovereignty of God, though each concept faces contradictions in practice when working through external processes to achieve religiopolitical ends. The sovereignty question remains unanswered in this same sense. Mawdudi had once forbidden members from voting in elections in the secular democratic state considering Islamic concerns according to his interpretation. However, this question was later revisited and allowed through organizational vote under Mawdudi’s leadership. This result was possible because the organization itself was democratized by way of a consultative body (shura) where members would decide and the president would accept their decisions by majority vote (Ahmad 2009). Ijtihad has also been advised by more recent leadership in place referring to Mawdudi’s interpretations of the Quran. In short, Jama’at-i Islami became more moderate as Islam was reinterpreted with a sense of differentiation between the state and Islam (Ahmad 2009). This moderation in reinterpretation occurred in the face of changing contexts and in order for the organization to remain viable.In a larger study, the Islamist ideologue Rachid Ghannouchi, and the religiopolitical party he leads, Ennahada, in Tunisia would further serve to benefit a case analysis through the polyvocal, context-dependent frame applied here to the question of Islamist thoughts on democracy. Ghannouchi and Ennahada have successfully participated in Tunisian elections as an Islamic democratic party, and their religious activism is notably separate from their politics (Wolf 2017). The current takeaways, here, should be principally that Islamist political organizations and Islamist ideologues alike do not fit a static mold. At times when in dealing with democracy, Islamist thoughts formulate around a pragmatic understanding of Islam in politics. Other ways of addressing democracy have been an Islamic values interpretation that positions political Islam as inherently democratic or serving democratic ends. The cases explored above reveal either an accommodative, otherwise interpretive Islamism, despite still considerable differences. As Islamism is sometimes compatible with democracy, as polyvocal, adaptable, and contingent upon sociopolitical circumstances, it should be understood as such in the broader landscape of contemporary politics.

**Conclusion** The most general takeaway should be that common (mis)conceptions of Islam and its political manifestations as altogether monolithic, uniform, and homogenous are wrong. Islamism and democracy remain a central question in the face of modernity that, I argue, can be addressed with a polyvocal/interpretative approach to an essentially non-monolithic phenomenon. Political Islam, foremost, can be differentiated from Islam in the faithful sense (Nandy 1998; Volpi 2010). It should be understood as such, while contingent upon the variegated sociopolitical contexts through which it is advanced. The debate over whether Islam can come to terms with democratic norms of the modern world is unsettled; based on points from this discussion I would argue that Islamism is not much different from a Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, atheist, or otherwise religious-or ideological-political orientations, which all, in much the same ways, vary from the radical down to the textual or doctrinal interpretationsworldviews, especially in absolutist terms. This paper sought to scrutinize how Islamism comes to head with democracy in order to bring light to the scholarly and popular debate. There are radical as well as pragmatic, accommodative, or otherwise democratic manifestations of political Islam. First, a long historical view of political Islam established a frame of Islamic political thought through time and in relation to democracy. A review of the scholarly debate on Islamism in dealing with democracy reified political Islam as a political culture as well as a manifestation of Islam that is distinctly political as opposed to the faithful, religious sense. The framing of Islamism as interpretative and adaptable as applied elucidates the understanding of how Islamist ideologues and organizations contend with democracy. In future studies, quantitative analyses may serve to undergird the arguments presented here, or otherwise illuminate a non-monolithic reality of political Islam. Where to go from here is continued excursions into the adaptive and interpretive Islamism, as it remains a preeminent subject of debate how political Islam interacts with world politics in the face of globalization, migration, the so-called global War on Terror, and the common stereotypes surrounding Islam in the West on a more general basis. The political debate should nevertheless expressly view Islamism and its manifestations as a distinctly variable phenomenon capable of accommodation like any other worldview, understood case by case.

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1. Nick Mullins

   Graduate Student | [namulli@ilstu.edu](mailto:namulli@ilstu.edu)

   Department of Politics and Government, Illinois State University

   Completed for Fall 2018 seminar in Political Islam  
   Professor Ali Riaz [↑](#footnote-ref-1)