Islam and Political Power

https://www.e-ir.info/2011/10/25/islam-and-political-power/

EVAN RITLI, OCT 25 2011

Over the last decade the relationship between Islam and political power has become the subject of much attention and interest. Following the events of 9/11, the 'War on Terror', and most recently the 'Arab Spring', questions concerning the precise nature of Islam's relationship with politics have become increasingly frequent in the media and academia. In the non-Islamic world, politicians, bureaucrats, academics and the media have debated questions such as whether Islam dictates the political decisions of Islamic political actors or is merely a tool used by them. Muslims themselves have been engaged in similar debates concerning the role the state should play in contemporary Islamic societies. This essay seeks to contribute to these debates by critically examining the relationship between Islam and political power.

To do this, this essay will begin by analysing the relationship between Islam and political power in a domestic political environment. This will be done through a discussion of the role that Islam plays in the politics of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Leaving domestic politics, it will then turn to the relationship between Islam and political power in international politics. It will begin by analysing the use of Islam in the foreign policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran and will then examine the state-sponsorship of Islamic causes internationally, a common foreign policy for Islamic states to pursue. Through these case studies, this essay will argue that the relationship between Islam and political power is one in which Islam theoretically provides a normative framework which supposedly guides or restrains the use of political power, but in practice is used and manipulated by political actors and states to gain legitimacy for their regimes and to enact pragmatic, *Realpolitik* policies.

Due to the immensely broad nature of the central topics of this essay it is important that before any analysis is undertaken some key clarifications are made. First, this essay is not concerned with theological, philosophical or normative questions concerning politics as it relates to Islamic thought or tradition; it does not seek to answer questions or make judgements on topics such as whether the use of Islamic discourse in politics is justified according to Islamic thought, or what the role of the state should be in an Islamic society. Rather, it simply seeks to analyse what the relationship is, *in practice*, between Islam and political power in relation to contemporary Islamic states. Second, this essay is not concerned with the relationship between Islam and political power in non-Islamic states, nor with the use of Islam by non-state actors. While these are extremely important topics worthy of academic attention, they are simply beyond the scope of this essay. Thus, as outlined above, this essay will only focus on the relationship between Islam and political power in relation to states that have self-identified as being Islamic in nature. Finally, it must be stressed that it is simply impossible to create an all encompassing 'rule' regarding the relationship between Islam and political power and doing so is not the intention of this essay. While this essay does seek to uncover common trends in the relationship between Islam and political power, it acknowledges that there will always be exceptional cases.

In light of the clarifications above, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan provides an excellent case study to begin analysing the relationship between Islam and political power. Since Pakistan's establishment in 1947 as a home for the Indian Sub-Continent's Muslim population, Islam has played a central, and increasingly official role in the politics of the state. Due to the tumultuous and unstable nature of Pakistan's politics, the 'official' place of Islam in Pakistani politics has changed considerably over time. This, in part, has been due to the numerous military coups that have taken place in Pakistan, and the "the classic manoeuvring that follows to give these coups legitimacy and strengthen the powers of the military rulers" (Bajoria 2010). In the case of Pakistan, the repeated changes to the specifics of the

Islam and Political Power
Written by Evan Ritli

official relationship between Islam and political power have more often than not been made to serve the political causes of ruling regimes rather than any higher Islamic cause. Thus the relationship between Islam and political power in Pakistan has in many ways been more overtly characterised by pragmatic power politics and struggles for legitimacy than in many other Islamic states.

This is in large part due to the influence of radical Islamic groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) in Pakistani politics. Founded by Mawlana Mawdudi in 1941, JI initially opposed the partition of Pakistan on the grounds that the creation of a Muslim country would divide the *umma* (Akbarzadeh 2003, p. 170). However, following the partition, JI adapted their policies and began their campaign for the creation of an Islamic state in Pakistan. Groups such as JI have argued that since Pakistan was partitioned from British India with the specific intention of providing a country for the Subcontinent's Muslim population, it must be governed by an Islamic state. This is despite the fact that it is reasonably clear that Pakistan's founders intended a secular state for their Muslim country. After all, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's 'founding father', had declared that Pakistan's citizens "may belong to any religion or caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the state" (Jinnah cited in Akhtar 2009, p. 37). Nevertheless, the influence of parties like JI rapidly led to Islam being used as a source of political legitimacy in Pakistan.

This was most notably the case during the military regime of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq. After seizing power in a military coup in 1977, General Zia initially declared that he had no political ambitions and expressed his intentions to hold democratic elections within 90 days (see Ghazali 1999; Yasmeen 2003, pp. 76-80). However, it soon became obvious that Zia planned on staying in power indefinitely. As Yasmeen (2003, p. 76) argues, "to legitimise this shift and ensure the process of regime maintance, he resorted to a revised interpretation of Islam's place in Pakistani society and politics." Zia began to promote himself as a defender of Islam in Pakistan, declaring that before him "many a ruler did what they pleased in the name of Islam" (Zia cited in Ghazali 1999), and it was his duty to ensure this did not happen again. Ironically, this was precisely what Zia was doing himself, as it is clear that Zia's use of Islam was merely a cover for his own power politics. What followed was the consolidation of Zia's power under the guise of a systematic program of 'Islamisation'. Thus, "Pakistan moved in the direction of dictatorship in the garb of Islamisation" (Pattanaik 2008).

Among other policies, the Islamisation of Pakistan undertaken by General Zia involved the broadening of the functions of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), state-patronage for Islamic schools (particularly orthodox Deobandi schools), and the introduction of the infamous *Hudood Ordinance*. While officially Islamic tenets supposedly guided these policies, in reality Islam was simply a tool of *Realpolitik*. General Zia's Islamisation policies strengthened his regime's ties with the orthodox ulema and other Islamic power brokers such as JI, which in turn provided the regime with much needed legitimacy. Furthermore, the Islamisation of Pakistan worked towards disenfranchising Zia's potential political rivals, most notably those who held more liberal interpretations of Islam and non-Muslims. This disenfranchisement occurred, in the case of liberal Muslims, through the normalisation of orthodox discourse, and in the case of non-Muslims, through constitutional amendments which systematically limited the rights of non-Muslim citizens.

Although a relatively extreme case, the example of General Zia's use of Islam to solidify and legitimise the power of his regime typifies a common relationship between Islam and and political power. It demonstrably shows how in theory Islam is often called upon to guide the use of political power and how in practice it is used to legitimise power and justify pragmatic politics. Although General Zia's regime came to an end with his death in 1988, the practice of using Islamic rhetoric to legitimise regimes and their policies has continued, albeit in a less extreme manner. This has occurred on both sides of politics and has not been limited to either dictatorships or to conservative or 'orthodox' interpretations of Islam. As Samina Yasmeen (2003, p. 75) notes, even those who subscribe to more liberal interpretations of Islam have not "shied away from using Islam for their own political ends", but instead have incorporated Islamic ideas in to their rhetoric to "attract support, seek legitimacy, or question the position of their adversaries." Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's use of the notion of 'Islamic socialism' as the basis of the Pakistan People's Party in the late 1960s and early 1970s is a prime example of this; "by claiming to bring alive the real socialist spirit of Islam…he not only questioned the policies of Ayub Khan's regime, but also laid claim to his leadership in a post-Ayub set-up" (Yasmeen 2003, p. 75).

Islam and Political Power
Written by Evan Ritli

So far this essay has only discussed the relationship between Islam and political power in a domestic political environment. Specifically, it has shown how 'Islamic policies' have been used to legitimise and consolidate domestic political power in Pakistan. Equally important though is the relationship between Islam and political power in international relations. As has been shown in the case of Pakistan, Islamic discourse is used by political actors to legitimise actions and policy made for largely political, rather than Islamic purposes. However, although there is a tendency in mainstream International Relations scholarship to think of the state in anthropomorphic terms (Wight 2006), we cannot simply assume that the relationship between Islam and political power within Islamic states is fundamentally the same as the relationship between Islam and political power in international politics. To understand how the relationship between Islam and political power plays out in international affairs, we must then analyse the behaviour and policies of Islamic states in the international context.

Of all the states which have identified as being 'Islamic', few have publicly appealed to Islam in their foreign relations as much as the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since the so-called 'Islamic Revolution', Islamic discourse has been used by Iranian leaders to demonise Western states in the promotion of Iran's foreign policies. Famously, Ayatollah Khomeini labelled the United States of America 'The Great Satan' and declared it to be "the number one enemy of the deprived and oppressed people of the world" (cited in Baxter & Akbarzadeh 2008, p. 81). Similar rhetoric has been targeted toward Israel, which has long been portrayed by Iran as "the devil, the root of all evil, a criminal cancer that must be excised from the Muslim body politic" (Maghen 2009, p. 13), and toward the United Kingdom, which was recently denounced by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for being "the most evil" Western government (Smith 2009). Interestingly, it is not just the non-Islamic 'West' which has been targeted in this fashion. At the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, Khomeini rallied his country by declaring that the war was not "a question of a fight between one government and another" but "a rebellion by blasphemy against Islam". Subsequently, he framed Iran as "fighting to protect Islam" (Khomeini cited in Kelsay 1993, p. 49), rather than their own national interest. Importantly, the place of Islamic rhetoric in Iranian foreign policy extends far beyond the simple condemnation of those Iran perceives as enemies. As Mansoor Limba (2010) has noted, Iran's foreign policy has been characterised by the Islamic concept of *mahdawiyyah*, highlighted by it's constitutionally expressed desire "to prepare the way for the formation of a single world community" (Preamble to the Iranian Constitution cited in Limba 2010, p. 197).

Just as in the case of Pakistani domestic politics discussed earlier, the relationship between Islam and political power here works on two distinct levels. The same relationship, in which Islam theoretically guides policy but in practice merely legitimises authority and disguises *Realpolitik*, exists in Iran's relations with foreign states. Given the theocratic nature of the Iranian state, there is little need to elaborate further on the official relationship between Islam and political power in the creation of foreign policy. After all, it is a truism that a theocratic state's policies, both foreign and domestic, are theoretically guided by the state's religion. The rhetoric highlighted above further supports this idea. However, it is important to demonstrate the relationship between Islam and political power as it is in practice in Iran's foreign policies. Separated from all the rhetoric, it becomes evident that in Iranian foreign relations Islam is often merely a cover for, and occasionally even contradicts, Iran's realist foreign policies.

A pertinent example of this can be seen in the infamous 'Iran-Contra Affair' that occurred in the 1980s. The scandal involved the US government selling arms to Iran and using the funds raised to back the Contra rebels of Nicaragua. The sale of weapons to Iran, in violation of an official US arms embargo that was in place at the time, was mediated through Israel. For Iran, the purchase came at the height of the Iran-Iraq War and was simply a pragmatic way of acquiring much needed war supplies in the face of an arms embargo. This would therefore have been a relatively unremarkable purchase if it were not for the blatant disregard of Iran's Islamic policies that it represented. As described above, Iran had emphatically condemned both the USA and Israel as enemies of Islam. Thus, as Barbara Rieffer-Flanagan (2009, p. 15) argues, "that Iran's leaders not only agreed to purchase arms from the Great Satan, but were willing to deal with the Israelis, demonstrates that…. they would trade Islam and religious principles for the realism of international relations." It is clear then that Islam could not have been the guiding force of policy that it was officially portrayed to be in Iran.

While the case of the Iran-Contra Affair does show that in foreign affairs realist considerations trump Islamic considerations, it does not explain why Iran would bother to use Islamic rhetoric in its foreign policy in the first place.

Islam and Political Power
Written by Evan Ritli

Indeed, the use of Islam as a tool of foreign policy seems somewhat futile given that, unlike within an Islamic state where it can be safely assumed that the majority of citizens are Muslims and will thus respond in some way to Islamic rhetoric, the majority of states in the world are not Islamic, nor necessarily sympathetic to Islam in any way. What then is the usefulness of Islamic rhetoric in foreign policy? If we turn back to domestic politics this can be explained quite easily. Rieffer-Flanagan (2009, p. 11) argues that the use of Islamic discourse in foreign policy is simply "a means of solidifying domestic power". Thus, Iran's vitriolic condemnation of the US in its foreign policy can be understood as being a means of tapping in to the wide-spread anti-Americanism that exists domestically, thus gaining legitimacy and support for the regime. This method of gaining domestic power by using Islamic rhetoric in foreign policy has been used time and time again in Iran, and can explain Iran's otherwise bizarre handling of important events such as the 1979 hostage crisis and the Iran-Iraq War (see Rieffer-Flanagan 2009, pp. 9-13).

Of course, to argue that the use of Islam in foreign policy is always intended for a domestic audience would be an oversimplification. It would also be inaccurate as there are numerous examples of Islam being used in foreign policy for reasons which cannot simply be put down to the domestic consumption argument. An excellent example of this can be seen in the case of Islamic states financially promoting Islamic groups and organisations internationally. This is a relatively common form of foreign policy for Islamic states to pursue and cannot be explained solely in terms of domestic politics. The most common method through which this form of Islamic foreign policy is pursued is the funding of schools, universities and cultural institutions in foreign countries. An excellent example of this occurred in 2003 when the Sultanate of Oman donated $2.5 million towards Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne (The University of Melbourne 2003). Another example is the funding given to the Australian International Academy, formerly known as the King Khalid Islamic College, by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (AIA 2011) at its establishment. As is the case with these examples, this is quite often considered an Islamic form of cultural diplomacy, or an exercise in 'soft power'.

Of course, as would be expected, the vast majority of academic and media attention is given to the cases where states have funded or promoted 'radical' interpretations of Islam or, in the most extreme examples, Islamic terrorism. This radical form of the state-sponsored promotion of Islamic groups is most often associated with Iran, according to the United States the world's "most active state-sponsor of terrorism" (USDoS 2010), and Saudi Arabia. As one of the world's wealthiest Islamic states, Saudi Arabia is extremely active in its financial support of the Islam. Although it is impossible to provide an exact figure, it has been suggested that Saudi Arabia has spent some $90 billion on promoting Islamic groups and organisations internationally (Bendle 2008). Controversially, much of this funding has gone towards mosques and schools for the promotion of Wahhabism, the puritanical branch of Sunni Islam which is dominant in Saudi Arabia.

Although states financially supporting Islamic causes in foreign countries may theoretically be an example of Islam guiding the use of power, more often it is simply another example of Islam being used as a tool of legitimacy and realist policy making. The funding of Islamic causes is, after all, an extremely effective tool of foreign policy. For example, Sean Pager (1988, p. 29) argues that Saudi funding has "influenced such events as former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos' reconciliation with Muslim separatists, Egyptian and Somalian rejection of ties with 'godless communism,' and Pakistan's restoration of Islamic law." In this way Islamic states promoting Islam internationally is little different to secular states promoting secular ideologies internationally. Just as liberal democratic states see the international promotion of liberal democracy as being in their best interests, so Islamic states see the promotion of particular branches of Islam. As Shireen Hunter (2011, p. 9) argues, Islamic states "believe that the spread of their particular brand of Islam will advance their interests and increase their regional and global influence." Thus again the relationship between Islam and political power can be seen as being one in which Islam "plays a purely instrumental role, namely that of justifying and legitimizing state policies rather determining them" (Hunter 2011, p. 9).

A closer look at the international promotion of Islamic groups and organisations by Iran and Saudi Arabia further supports this idea; most of the financial sponsorship undertaken by these two states can easily be explained in terms of *Realpolitik* considerations. For example, much has been made of Iran's financial support for both Hezbollah and Hamas. While the financial and material support of these groups in no way contradicts Iran's revolutionary Islamic rhetoric, the practical purposes it serves should not be overlooked. Not only has it strengthened Iran's political

Islam and Political Power
Written by Evan Ritli

standing in the region but it has also served to strengthen Iran's national security since, as Rieffer-Flanagan (2009, p. 20) argues, "the more Israel is forced to deal with hostilities on its borders, the less likely it will be to strike Iran." That the promotion of Islam only occurs when it is in accordance with the promotion of national interest was made strikingly clear during the Nagorno-Karabakh War in the early 1990s. In this case, Iran chose not to support Azerbaijan, fellow Shi'a Muslims, but instead supported the Christian Armenians. This case demonstrates how "ultimately support for Islamic groups and Islamic states were a part of Iranian foreign policy to the degree that it furthered Iranian interests" (Rieffer-Flanagan 2009, p. 20).

Similarly, Saudi Arabia's widespread sponsorship of Wahhibist Islam began as a pragmatic policy undertaken in the interest of the Saudi state rather than Islam itself. Following the Iranian Revolution, Saudi Arabia viewed Iran as a significant threat to Saudi national interest, and indeed, to the very survival of the regime itself. Sean Pager (1988, p. 30) explains that "not only [was] the Iranian system of direct, non-hierarchical rule by the *ulema* clergy a significant theoretical Islamic advantage *vis-a-vis* the Saudi monarchy," its revolutionary zeal could be exported "to the historically alienated 2-300,000 Saudi Shi'a minority in the crucial oil province of Qatif", thus destabilising the state of Saudi Arabia. In light of this the Saudi regime viewed the spread and promotion of their particular brand of Islam as necessary to the survival of the regime itself. This began an international "competition for Islamic legitimacy" between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Pager 1988, p. 30). As Baxter and Akbarzadeh (2008, p. 83) argue, "the Saudi desire to counter the doctrinal appeal of the Islamic Revolution is, in part, responsible for the determination with which the Saudis propagated their Wahhabi creed to all corners of the Muslim world." This further demonstrates how, even in policies which may appear genuinely guided by Islamic tenets, such as the international promotion of Islam itself, the relationship between Islam and political power is often simply one of political convenience.

This essay has examined the relationship between Islam and political power in both domestic and international contexts and across a variety of different Islamic states. In the case of Pakistan, it demonstrated how Islam has been used by political actors to solidify power and gain legitimacy. This was most notably done by General Zia-ul-Haq, but is a common practice in Pakistani politics. In the case of Iran, this essay showed how Islamic rhetoric is targeted at foreign states as a means of securing domestic power. It also showed that although Islam is theoretically the basis of Iran's foreign policy, realist considerations are a priority. Finally, this essay demonstrated how the international promotion of Islam through the state-sponsorship of Islamic organisations and groups is more often done out of concerns for a state's national interest and security than any other reason. Through these cases, it has demonstrated that in contemporary Islamic states, the relationship between Islam and political power is one in which Islam theoretically guides the use of political power, but in practice is used and manipulated as a tool of legitimacy and *Realpolitik*.

Bibliography

AIA 2011, *AIAMSC: A Muslim IB World School*, Australian International Academy, viewed 21 August 2011, <http://www.aiahome.net/msc/>.

Akbarzadeh, S 2003, 'State legitimacy', in S Akbarzadeh & A Saeed (eds), *Islam and Political Legitimacy*, Routledge, New York, pp. 169-74.

Akhtar, N 2009, 'Polarized Politics: The Challenge of Democracy in Pakistan', *International Journal on World Peace*, vol. XXVI, no. 2, pp. 31-63.

Bajoria, J 2010, *Pakistan's Constitution*, Council on Foreign Relations, viewed 16 August 2011, <http://www.cfr.org/pakistan/pakistans-constitution/p15657#p2>.

Baxter, K & Akbarzadeh, S 2008, *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The roots of anti-Americanism*, Routledge, New York.

Bendle, M 2008, 'Saudi cash seduction is Faustian pact', *The Australian*, 29 April, 2008.

Islam and Political Power

Written by Evan Ritli

Ghazali, AS 1999, 'Chapter VIII: The Third Martial Law', in *Islamic Pakistan: Illusions & Reality*, National Book Club, Islamabad.

Hunter, ST 2011, 'Religion and International Affairs: From Neglect to Over-Emphasis', in Ö Taşkaya (ed.),*The Sacred and the Sovereign: A compendium of pieces from e-IR on religion and international relations* , e-International Relations.

Kelsay, J 1993, *Islam and War: a study in comparative ethics*, John Knox Press, Louisville.

Limba, ML 2010, 'Mahdawiyyah as Final Vocabulary: A Postmodernist Reading of Iran's Foreign Policy Principles', *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 185-99.

Maghen, Ze 2009, 'Eradicating the "Little Satan": Why Iran Should Be Taken at Its Word', vol. 127, pp. 11-7.

Pager, S 1988, 'Islam and Saudi Foreign Policy', *Harvard International Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 28-30.

Pattanaik, SS 2008, *Islam and the ideology of Pakistan*, Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, viewed 21 August 2011, <http://www.idsa-india.org/an-dec8-2.html>.

Rieffer-Flanagan, BA 2009, 'Islamic Realpolitik: Two-Level Iranian Foreign Policy', vol. 26, pp. 7-35.

Smith, A 2009, *Has Britain Replaced the U.S. as Iran's 'Little Satan'?* , TIME, viewed 19 August 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1907066,00.html>.

The University of Melbourne 2003, *Oman's $2.5m gift to Islamic Studies* , The University of Melbourne, viewed 21 August 2011, <http://uninews.unimelb.edu.au/news/445/>.

USDoS 2010, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2009, Chapter 3: State Sponsors of Terrorism* , U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Washington, D.C., <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2009/140889.htm>.

Wight, C 2006, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* , Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Yasmeen, S 2003, 'Pakistan and the struggle for 'real' Islam', in S Akbarzadeh & A Saeed (eds)*Islam and Political Legitimacy*, Routledge, New York, pp. 70-87.

Written by: *Evan Ritli*
Written at: *The University of Melbourne*
Written for: *Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh*
Date written: *August 2011*

About the author:

Evan Ritli is a Juris Doctor student at Monash Law School. He holds a Master of International Relations from the University of Melbourne, and a BA (Hons) in International Studies from RMIT University. His research interests include IR theory, International Law, Human Rights, Colonialism/Postcolonialism, and Religion.

Islam and Political Power
Written by Evan Ritli