The State in Islamist Thought

The vast literature on political Islam pre-dominantly offers the following explanation for centrality of “state” in the discourse of Islamists: the state is pivotal to Islamism because, unlike other religions, Islam (as a faith) does not make a distinction between religion and state. Put differently, the argument asserts that since it fuses religion and politics, the idea of a state naturally flows from the very character of Islam. In Ernest Gellner’s view, Islam has a lack in so far as, in contradistinction to Christianity, it failed to enact a separation between religion and politics. So pervasive is this argument that it invariably informs the writings of scholars such as Louis Dumont, Bernard Lewis, Bassam Tibi, Montgomery Watt, and Myron Weiner. Perhaps as a reaction to this, some scholars have taken the pain to demonstrate the opposite. Egyptian Ali Abd al-Razq and Said al-Ashtamawy, as well as the Indian theologian Wahiddudin Khan, for instance, contend that Islam does distinguish religion from state and that the latter is not important to it as a faith. On the face of it, both these positions look radically antagonistic. However, a closer scrutiny shows their basic similarity: both arguments parade a theological logic. In different ways, the proponents of both positions quote, inter alia, Quran and hadith to prove their respective arguments.

In this article, I call into question the validity of the theological approach to the issue of state and Islamism. I argue instead that the reason why the state became central to Islamism was not because Islam theologically entailed it. Rather it did so because of the configuration of the early twentieth century socio-political formations under which the state as an institution had acquired an unprecedented role in expanding its realm of action and scope of its effect. Since Islamism was a response to the modern state formation with its far-reaching consequences, it was only logical that the state became the centre of its discourse. Thus, it was not due to Islamic theology that the state became central to Islamism; on the contrary, it was the unusual expansion of the early twentieth century state and its imprint on almost every domain of life that drove Islamists to make the state central to theoogy. To substantiate my argument, I will discuss the writings of Abul Ala Maududi (1903-79). Arguably, he is the foremost ideologue of Islamism. Founder of the Jamaa-e-Islami in India, Maududi’s appeal has crossed the frontiers of India to influence Islamist movements across the Arab world. In doing so, the author offers a critique of the pervasive view that the importance of the state stems from a presumed lack of separation between religion and politics in Islam.

The state became central to Islamism not because Islam theologically entailed it, but because of socio-political formations that developed in the early twentieth century. The article analyses how these historical developments are reflected in the writings of Abul Ala Maududi, whose influence has crossed the frontiers of India to influence Islamist movements across the Arab world. In doing so, the author offers a critique of the pervasive view that the importance of the state stems from a presumed lack of separation between religion and politics in Islam.

The state became central to Islamism not because Islam theologically entailed it, but because of socio-political formations that developed in the early twentieth century. The article analyses how these historical developments are reflected in the writings of Abul Ala Maududi, whose influence has crossed the frontiers of India to influence Islamist movements across the Arab world. In doing so, the author offers a critique of the pervasive view that the importance of the state stems from a presumed lack of separation between religion and politics in Islam.
and unduly highlighted Hinduism. Maududi saw evidence of “Hindu Raj” in the marginalization of Urdu as well. Clearly, Maududi’s allegations pertained to the role of state—a role the pre-colonial state barely had.

After the elections of 1937, both Maududi and the League thus opposed the Congress. This did not make them friends, however. Actually, as the possibility of Pakistan’s creation intensified so did Maududi’s critique of the League. He criticized it for the absence of a sharia state from its agenda. In the late 1930s, the whole national politics revolved around the issue of state: the League demanded a separate Muslim state; the Congress attempted to avert it by having a secular state of united India; and the Indian Communist movement’s agenda was to secure a socialist state. In a context where “state” was the reigning vocabulary of politics, Maududi advanced his own, a sharia state. From this standpoint, he found the League un-Islamic. For him, there was no difference between the Congress and the League as both desired a secular state. He described the League as a “party of pagans,” because its leaders did not know even elementary Islam. Nor did they quote, even mistakenly, the Quran in their meetings. Since the League had no agenda for a sharia state, Maududi declared that future Pakistan would be “na-Pakistan,” a profane land. He even called it an “infidel state of Muslims.” It was for this reason that in 1941, he founded Jamaat-e-Islami as an alternative to both the Congress and the League. The Jamaat’s Constitution described its goal as the establishment of hukumat-e-ilahiya, “Islamic State.”

Theology of state, state of theology

To Maududi’s amazement, there were only a few enthusiasts for hukumat-e-ilahiya. As a party of reputed ulama, the Jamaat-ul Ulma-e-Hind believed in a secular, composite India and did not regard “state” as essential to Islam. Given the wholesale rejection of his ideology, Maududi realized that Muslims, in general, and ulama, in particular, would rally around him only if he proved, through the Quran and hadith, that the state was basic to Islam. A radically new theology of the state was on the anvil.

It is not as if Maududi was oblivious to the all-encompassing nature of the modern state. In March 1938, he wrote in Tarjuman, “Now [the state] also decides what to wear or what not to wear … what to teach your kids … what language and script you adopt. … So, the state hasn’t left untouched from its ultimate intervention even most peripheral issues of life.” Not only did Maududi fully comprehend the nature of the modern state, his views also reflect a critique of the policies of provincial Ministries on issues of dress, language, curriculum, and religion. Considering nineteenth century approaches to understanding the state outdated, he remarked in the same issue: “The state is beginning to acquire the same status that God has in religion”. Given the extremely interventionist role of the modern state and the manner in which it impinged on the daily lives of Muslims, he equated Islam with state and accordingly interpreted the Quran.

The bible of Maududi’s political theology is the tract Four Fundamental Concepts of the Koran (1979), where he argued that to know the “authentic objective” of the Quran it is crucial to grasp the “real and total” meaning of the four Quranic words: ilah (Allah), Robbins (Lord), ibadat (worship) and deen (religion). He claimed that soon after the revelation, their real meaning was lost.

Maududi considered “Allah” the most important word. His exposition on its meaning is premised on a distinction between the “metaphysical” and “worldly political” life which together constitute an organic whole. To a Muslim is to worship Allah alone not just on the metaphysical plane but also in political life because He is the master of both. Accordingly, Maududi contended that Allah must also be the “Ruler, Dictator (asamir), and Legislator” of the political domain. Consequently, if someone claimed to be the ruler of a country his claim would be equivalent to a claim to be God on the metaphysical plane. Thus, to share political power with someone who disregards the laws of Allah, he declared, would be polytheism in the same sense as someone who worships an idol rather than God. Elaborating on the meaning of Robbins, a cognate term for Allah, he wrote that it was “synonymous with sovereignty, sultan”.3 Since he regarded sovereignty as basically political, he argued that Allah is also a “political Robbins.”4 To believe in Allah is unquestionably obey His laws, sharia, in the political realm. Thus taghoot, another Quranic word, does not just mean Satan or idol. It means a political order not based on Allah’s sovereignty. He chided the ulama for reducing the meaning of taghoot to a literal idol. For Maududi, the Quranic injunction to worship Allah and shun taghoot meant fighting for a sharia state and rejecting all forms of non-Islamic polity.

In Maududi’s formulation, like Allah, worship, also meant obeying the ultimate political authority. He lamented that Muslims had limited its meaning to worshipping Allah in metaphysical life alone and banished Him from their political life.5 He furthermore equated rituals like prayer to military training and considered them as tools to achieve the goal of Islamic state, “prayer, fasting … provide preparation and training for the assumption of just power.”6 Likewise, Maududi interpreted deen, religion, politically, “The word of the contemporary age, the state, has … approximated [the meaning of deen].”7 Elsewhere, he wrote, “in reality, the word deen approximately has the same meaning which the word state has in the contemporary age.”8 Many other theorizations of Maududi also echo the spirit of modern politics; for instance, the conceptualization of Islam as a movement and Muslims as a party. Interestingly, he introduced such innovative theorizations in the name of reclaiming “pure” Islam.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to rethink the dynamics of state and Islamism. To this end, I have demonstrated that the reason why the state became foundational to Islamism was not due to Islamic theology that presumably fused religion and politics. Drawing on the writings and politics of Maududi, I have instead argued that it became basic to the Jamaat-e-Islami because of the expansion and unusual reach of the colonial Indian state and the ways in which it crucially impacted everyday life. Not surprisingly, Maududi interpreted the Quranic words—Allah, worship, and religion—to mean state. The study of theology is important, far more important however are the political dynamics in which theology unfolds, wins, or loses salience.

Notes

5. Maududi, Koran ki Chaar Bunyadi Itihaaen (Delhi, 1979)[1941].
7. Maududi, Let Us be Muslims (Delhi, 1983)[1940], 291.

Irfan Ahmad is Postdoctoral fellow at ISIM. His project, funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, deals with practices of immanent criticism among Islamic organizations in postcolonial India.

Email: mailto:fanahmad@yahoo.com