

1 Introduction

We are living in a period when globalisation is criticised from various quarters for its social and economic imbalances, cultural imperialism, and political distortions.¹ The interconnections among Muslims across the world are often presented as a kind of sub-globalisation that has equally come under attack for its divisiveness and negative impacts. Often in the West the prospect of a united Muslim world, or at least pan-Islamic solidarity, has been exaggerated and viewed as threatening; among Muslims, its political utility in enhancing state or regime interests has been enticing. Yet, for a majority of Muslims worldwide, the sense of communal affiliation is pre-eminently spiritual – a kind of fraternity of the faith.

At issue is one of the central concepts of Islam, the *umma*, which this volume seeks to explore from several perspectives. The concept has Qur’anic roots with variant interpretations. The bedrock tenet of belief, *tawhid* (oneness), endorses the ultimate goal of ‘one community’ of the faith (*umma wahida*). Whether this scripturally endorsed community is a statement of fact or aspiration has troubled Islamic thought for centuries. Some perceive of the *umma* in non-territorial terms; others see it as in competition with the nation-state or other parochial forms of community. Many millions of Muslims who are living as minorities in predominantly non-Muslim societies routinely affirm their connections with a wider and common religious enterprise but are often suspected of disloyalty to it. A cosmopolitan sense of identity has at times taken the form of an explicit ideology – pan-Islamism – which itself has often been viewed in the West as hostile and aggressive. In short, the idea of the *umma* has been idealised and is frequently invoked, but its precise meaning has remained vague. Nor should it be confused with the convenient and now often used shorthand, ‘Muslim world’, which, as Cemil Aydin insightfully shows, is a contrivance of late nineteenth-century ‘imperial globalization and its concomitant ordering of humanity by race’.²

While the term ‘*umma*’ is thus of universal appeal today, it has been invested with both political and sectarian understandings. The Caliphate (*khilafa*) in Sunni circles has become virtually synonymous with the *umma* and, in the non-Muslim world, with pan-Islam. Medieval thinkers such as Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyya argued that leadership was an essential ingredient for the unity of the community. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Caliphate’s abolition in 1924 inspired extensive introspection among Muslims and speculation among Orientalists, as to what the future held for Islam. While T. W. Arnold argued that it was a temporal institution, lacking a ‘pre-vision’, bound by history, and subject to evolution,³ H. A. R. Gibb held out hope for a ‘spiritual Caliphate’ embodying the ‘religious conscience of the people as a whole’.⁴ Muslim thinkers in a succession of international meetings and in various publications debated not only the doctrinal justifications of the Caliphate but also who should occupy the position of Caliph.

While the Shi’a also link leadership to the preservation of the *umma*, they invest authority in the theologically distinctive Imamate. The inerrant Imams are morally exemplary and serve as the religious and symbolic pole around which communal order ought to be organised. The centuries-long absence of the Imams did not deprive *de facto* dynastic rulers in Iran of appropriating a proximate form of legitimacy, especially when affirming broader relevance for Muslims elsewhere. The clerical leadership that took power following the 1978/79 revolution has taken extra-territorial ambitions to a higher level, committing itself to ‘export’ an ideology that is meant to be inherently cosmopolitan but is Shi’i forged and largely self-limiting.

Complex Muslim Geography

Fragmentation

Although the notion of the *umma* has nearly universal appeal, pan-Islamic, trans-sectarian unity is patently elusive. Following Qur’anic disapproval (6:159), Sunnis and Shi’a alike have decried those who ‘divide their religion and break into sects’ (*faraqu dinahum wa-kanu shi’an*). In the latter part of the twentieth century, the Egyptian Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali, went so far as to lament a lacerated and immobile *umma*, ‘half dead or frozen’.⁵ There are today multiple lines

of division among Muslims, seen mainly, but not only, in nation-state terms. There are also mobile communities that escape easy categorisation, now especially seen in Muslim minorities of the West, who render a strict divide between an Islamic ‘here’ and a non-Islamic ‘there’ nonsensical. Muslim transnational networks are well-financed organised additions to the scene, but they could not exist without underlying – and variably defining – strata of affiliation and support, however unformulated and inarticulate they may at times be.⁶ Moreover, there is also a more sharply delineated sense of inclusion and exclusion among Muslims themselves – one that aspires to redraw the internal borders of Islam on sectarian, doctrinal, or national-territorial lines: Sunni–Shi‘a; Salafi–Sufi; Wahhabi–Shi‘a; and Saudi–Iranian–Turkish rivalries are all firmly entrenched, undermining ambitions to Islamic unity and belying a simple dichotomous presumption of a monolithic Islamic–Western antagonism.

The idea of a Muslim international organisation, in lieu of real unity, has been around since at least the Turkish abolition of the Caliphate in 1924. The Caliphate’s history over the centuries had been chequered, it represented political theory in its Sunni orthodox form, and even for Sunnis it was very rarely the undisputed heart of Muslim societies. Nevertheless, it acquired for the majority of Muslims a central symbolic significance,⁷ and emotional attachment occurred even in areas distant from the Middle East. The Muslims of South and Southeast Asia, in particular, became vocal defenders of the institution, perhaps finding in it the means to connect their perceived ‘periphery’ with the ‘centre’.

Yet when it was abolished, many assumed that Islam’s demographic and geographical strength could be harnessed in some form of common enterprise. In the event, this very same strength produced failure, with the diverse viewpoints and experiences of Muslims, and competing dynastic claims to the Caliphate, rendering impossible any agreement on what should be done. Muhammad Rashid Rida called for the restoration of a traditional Caliphate, whereas ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq argued that it was a political institution that was not integral to the faith. ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Sanhuri advocated a Caliphate that would be subject to periodic election at the *hajj* pilgrimage, with the Caliph presiding over a loose grouping of Oriental nations akin to, and in association with, the League of Nations – a general argument that has been endorsed as a ‘confederation’ of Muslim countries in a variety of

circles.⁸ The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is the current manifestation of this inter-state project, but, like similar organisations, it is based above all on preservation of the territorial sovereignty of its members and, as we shall see, constrained by the competition of states to be its – and, by extension, the *umma*'s – leading light.

Although we have witnessed the creation of a supposed 'Islamic state' in Iraq and Syria around a reconstituted Caliphate, unity has not followed. Indeed, Muslims, including even al-Qa'ida, have argued against the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), on the grounds that a Caliphate cannot be imposed but must result from general consensus; it must occur gradually over time and not by instant proclamation; and it must be for the good of the entire community and not work to the advantage of a particular group. Simply put, the reality of the current Muslim world is of structural fragmentation, and the very idea of the *umma* appears chimerical.

Interconnections

Yet Muslims themselves see it as a definable, perhaps even palpable, presence. It clearly forms an integral part of rhetorical claims to legitimacy, invoked by states, regimes, sub-state actors, religious officials, individual preachers, and missionaries, but the movements across borders themselves have also had reinforcing effects on the sense of interconnectedness. The *hajj* is the great convocation of Muslims, indistinguishable in principle by national or sectarian identity; early and medieval Islamic history is replete with examples of networks of traders who significantly helped to advance the word of Islam; travelling elites such as students, scholars, judges, and political officials routinely sought knowledge (*rihla*) far from their home societies or went on minor pilgrimages (*ziyarat*); Sufi orders rapidly spread from their spiritual centres and created expansive 'brotherhoods'; and the various Muslim empires constituted multi-ethnic, far-flung political organisations.

Pilgrimage, educational travel, trading networks, and mystical brotherhoods persist today, and are complemented by globalised communications, transnational Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood or Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami (the Islamic Liberation Party), and near-constant and large-scale migration.⁹ Some argue that these patterns are so pronounced that a kind of spatial detachment or

deracination has occurred – or, at least, that concepts of space and distance have been redefined. Through the Internet, and through broadcast and social media, images of political and religious authority, as well as community, are daily projected into domestic space; and ‘cyber-Islam’ takes Muslims into some ethereal neighbourhood that understates the physical, and even perhaps to some extent the cultural, distances. To the extent that these developments are in fact occurring, optimists celebrate them as ‘virtual Islam’, whereas pessimists fear a ‘de-culturation’ that paves the way for reactionary radicalism.

The pan-Islamic dimension is an important part of the logic of today’s evolving jurisprudence, since, it is argued, minority Muslims, no matter where they reside, are still members of the larger *umma* and feel obligations as its members. This permanent presence of Muslims outside majority Muslim countries runs counter to the expectation that believers should live in the *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam), but modern guidance on issues such as participation in elections, contracting home mortgages, and military service has been felt to be necessary. This incrementally articulated ‘jurisprudence of the minorities’ (*fiqh al-aqalliyat*) makes clear that minority Muslims, regardless of their transnational religious bonds, are expected to obey the laws of the land in which they reside, unless, naturally, those contravene God’s universal law. Although some view this pragmatic development as dividing the *umma* between a minority and majority Islam, its proponents see it as reconnecting disparate communities under the common moral umbrella of ‘Islamic law’.

Even attempts at doctrinal ecumenism have occurred. Scholars, especially since the twentieth century, have attempted a kind of rapprochement between different doctrinal and legal pathways – a *taqrib* or ‘bringing closer’. Advocates of this approach argue for a dialogue across the traditions based on a fundamental premise: all share the common roots of the faith (*usul*) but constitute different ‘branches’ (*furu*). In eighteenth-century Persia, Nader Shah had tried to induce the Ottoman Sultan to recognise Twelver Shi‘ism, representing the majority of Shi‘a, as a valid school of law. Greater effect was attained when post-colonial state formation and modernisation in the Middle East facilitated cross-border travel and education and encouraged the new loyalty of nationalism over traditional sectarianism. Shi‘i luminaries such as Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita’ (1877–1954) in Iraq and ‘Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din al-Musawi (1872–1957) in Lebanon urged Muslims to rise above their divisions and unite in a common

enterprise.¹⁰ In Egypt, the pre-eminent Egyptian Sunni religious leader, Mahmud Shaltut (1893–1963), issued a *fatwa* (religious opinion) in 1959 authorising Shi‘i instruction at al-Azhar – considered the premier Sunni educational institution in the world – for the first time in nine hundred years. The Society for Reconciliation (Jama‘at al-Taqrīb), unusually initiated by an Iranian but with broad support in Sunni intellectual circles, had paved the way in Egypt from the late 1940s, and today Yusuf al-Qaradawi, associated with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, has proposed ‘Principles for Sunni– Shi‘i Dialogue’.

In Iran in 1990, the newly installed Supreme Leader, ‘Ali Khomeini, created the Society for Reconciliation of the Islamic Schools (Majma‘ al-Taqrīb Bayna al-Madhahib al-Islamiyya), which convenes international conferences to this end and publishes the journal *Risalat al-Taqrīb* (Message of Reconciliation). Perhaps the most ambitious attempt has been the ‘Amman Message’. King ‘Abdullah of Jordan convened an international conference in July 2005 in order to counter the rise of intolerant versions of Islam. It delineated eight doctrinal groups as acceptable: four Sunni and two Shi‘i schools of law, the Ibadi school based mainly in Oman, and the Zahiri school that privileges textual authority over other legal sources. According to this manifesto, signed by 552 religious scholars and intellectuals from eighty-four countries, no one was entitled to delegitimise the others as non-Muslim.

The Moroccan regime has also launched religious reformist initiatives that espouse jurisprudential reconciliation. The religious establishment argues that, while differences have been exploited for personal and political reasons and undermined the unity of the *umma*, difference as to the ‘sub-details and details’ (*al-umūr al-far‘iyya wa-al-tafsiliyya*) is ‘normal’.¹¹ The moderate form of Islam that is encouraged, *al-wasatiyya*, is a conflation of the locally predominant Sunni Maliki school, Sunni Sufi movements, and Sunni Ash‘arite theology, and is proselytised via the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidins, and Morchidates.¹² Building on the credentials of the King (b. 1963, r. 1999–) as ‘Commander of the Faithful’ (*amir al-mu‘minin*), it was established in 2015 ostensibly to combat extremist trends and, implicitly, as a counter to Sunni Wahhabism. It principally trains religious officials from throughout Africa and, in the process, has become a valuable instrument of Morocco’s continental diplomacy.¹³ But, in spite of the reformist and pluralist agenda, its

wider, pan-Islamic attractiveness is limited, given the embedded Sunni orientations of its ideological approach.

The modern geography of Islam is thus complex. A new communal idea that emerged out of seventh-century Arabian social structures – an ‘Arab commonwealth’, in Marshall Hodgson’s phrase¹⁴ – defined membership by common religious affiliation. Dynastic and imperial expansion took the faith into further reaches of the globe, and in the late medieval period – roughly from 1250 until 1500 – political boundaries among Muslims were largely insignificant. The crystallisation of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires from the sixteenth century solidified what might be called the internal frontiers of Islam, and the Western imperial assault and resultant post-colonial struggles only intensified the divisions. But doctrinal and sectarian disputes have complicated the search for unity as well. The permeability of borders, the mobility of individuals, groups, and social movements, and new emphases on ethnicity, sect, and faith have all helped to define and reorient Muslim communalism today.

Two Registers

Muslim communalism operates on two interlinked levels: identity and instrumentality. With regard to *identity*, competing ideas and self-ascribed labels, such as Wahhabi, Salafi, or Shi’a, which have historically existed across and within Muslim societies, are being reified anew today and complicate the pan-Islamic project. But, simultaneously, the sense of belonging to a greater enterprise has helped to foster an alternative, if aspirational, form of affiliation. The rhetorical trope is family-centred: Muslims constitute one ‘brotherhood’; they are all ‘children’ or ‘grandchildren’ of the *umma*; at times, even, to convey the sense of despair at disunity, they are ‘orphans of the *umma*’.

But identity is rarely, if ever, homogeneous and is shaped by several attachments. The perpetrators of the London underground bombing in 2005 and the murderer of a British soldier on a London street in 2013, referred explicitly to British action against Muslim brothers in Iraq and Afghanistan as motivating factors, and the attackers in Paris in November 2015 purportedly shouted, ‘c’est pour la Syrie’ (this is for Syria). Events perceived to be anti-Islamic, whether external aggressiveness or Islamophobic attacks, often stimulate identification with co-religionists.¹⁵ Yet, at the same time as Islamic solidarity can be

galvanising, Muslims everywhere must contend with competing loyalties – national, ethnic, and local. When specifically asked in surveys, most Muslims affirm *umma*-loyalty over national or ethnic ties,¹⁶ but the commingling of *umma* and other bonds is common and accepted as a fact of life.¹⁷

With regard to *instrumentality*, appeals to the *umma* are also often used to validate a regime's or movement's general *bona fides* or bolster support for a particular policy. The Saudi, Pakistani, Iranian, and Malaysian governments and groups like al-Qa'ida and ISIS, among others, invoke their declarative defence of the *umma* as self-validating. In some quarters there is a calculated effort to project – through publications, think-tank work, official speeches, sponsored conferences, and student exchanges – a sense of dedication to a larger mission, and so to enhance legitimacy.

In both the identity and instrumental aspects, while it is understood that Muslims across the globe may be bound together, the manifestations of the *umma* are not merely 'virtual', as has been argued, or restricted to an abstract ether. Olivier Roy's work on global Islam is characteristically insightful, but the 'de-territorialisation' that he identifies as integral to the 'new *ummah*' appears overstated.¹⁸ If more than narrowly territorial, the *umma* is not disconnected from territory. The worldwide concern about ISIS was precisely centred on its capture of territory, and ISIS itself acknowledged the imperative for control over Islamic lands (*dar al-Islam*) to which Muslims must migrate (*hijra*). While the idea of the *umma* has gained some social weight, it is not disconnected from the political realities of states and other communities: it is a modern 'personality', but also a tool; an idealised end, but also a manipulable means.

Focus of the Volume

The central focus of this book is to elucidate the degree to which the affective symbol of the *umma* shapes Muslim identities today and inspires social and political action. It explores the 'pull' of the *umma* on Muslims, noting, for instance, the publicly expressed concern for fellow Muslims who are thought to be victimised or endangered. The latent sense of attachment to a great enterprise of the faith is omnipresent, but, like other affiliations, seems more pronounced when facing opposition. A kind of societal pan-Islam – grassroots empathy with

Muslims worldwide – has undergirded identification with the Palestinians or Rohingyas, for example. Even when this popular sentiment is expressed, however, Muslim states may find economic and political interests more important than support for Muslim victims, as the inaction of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Malaysia, and Indonesia, among others, suggests when it comes to China's suppression of its Muslim Uighur population.¹⁹ In practice, the *umma* is understood differently, with its nature and meaning subject to theological (particularly sectarian) and political contestation. The identity that the *umma* provides must thus be contextualised and seen as open to widely divergent interpretations and self-interested political concerns.

This book also investigates the effects of the 'push' of the *umma* on Muslims. It demonstrates that states, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, seek to foster a sense of the *umma* and its importance through various means. Through institutions, conferences, publications, and rhetoric, they affect to work for Islamic solidarity while hoping to enhance their presumption to worldwide Islamic leadership. So, too, collective non-state actors, such as ISIS, attempt to harness the symbolic power of the *umma* in order to pressure individuals and groups into taking action. Manipulating the idea of the *umma* forms part of the pursuit of authentication and influence in today's Muslim world – and is a particularly potent instrument to address any legitimacy deficit.

While we do not presume to offer a comprehensive treatment of dogma, issue areas, or regional coverage, our focus on the larger debates of Sunni and Shi'i scholars as well as the activities of two states and a jihadist movement provides a pathway into making sense of a critical but understudied phenomenon. This volume, therefore, takes appeals to Islamic solidarity and brotherhood seriously – more so than has generally been done in academic and policy analyses – but it also recognises the countervailing forces of Islamic fragmentation, such as sectarianism, and alternative identities.

The Volume's Structure

Following this Introduction, Chapter 2 discusses the contested meanings of the *umma*, specifically in Sunni thought. It reviews the ways the concept is understood as having a classical reference point in the era of the Prophet and his immediate successors, and follows its development through medieval and modern scholars. A consistent theme has been

that the community of the faith must be tied to proper leadership, but the declining and then dismissed Caliphate in the second decade of the twentieth century stirred intellectual and political agitation. Today calls for unity, or at least solidarity, contend with debates over how extensive the *umma* is and how much difference is allowable within it. The aspiration to both comprehensiveness and internal tolerance is commonly reaffirmed; yet challenged by normative ambivalence within the concept itself.

Chapter 3 provides a complementary discussion of the *umma* in Shi'i thought and practice. While religious authority is central, as with the Sunni conception, the Shi'i conceptualisation of the Imams elevates genealogical descent and theological erudition to essential ingredients of leadership. It follows that their absence from this world created a dilemma with religious and political significance: who would guide the community until the return of the redeeming Imam Mahdi (Guided One)? From the medieval centuries to the modern period, a rough consensus emerged that the clerical class would fill the void of religious guidance. The minority view that they should also have a political role found its full articulation, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, in Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini's theory of clerical rule and its institutionalisation in the Islamic Republic. The Khomeinist-revolutionary Iranian appeal to lead the universal *umma* has, however, been undermined by an assertive sectarian interpretation and geopolitical rivalries.

Much the same can be said of Saudi Arabia, as Chapter 4 details. The Saudi state's evolution is tied to a Sunni-Wahhabist ideology underpinning the interconnected political and religious establishments. Control of the Holy Places of Mecca and Medina and of the annual pilgrimage – one of the core pillars of the faith – have inflated the regime's claim to speak for universal Islam, but the hostility of the religious authorities to the Shi'a and 'unbelievers' has diminished its credibility to do so. The institutions that have been developed and supported ostensibly to encourage *umma*-wide solidarity have seemed more adept at advancing Saudi interests than pan-Islamic ones. Islamic sentiment from below, stimulated, for example, by the Palestinian, Afghan, Iraqi, and Syrian conflicts, has influenced Saudi policy positions. Yet, both the promotion of Wahhabi ideas – although not univocal or unchanging – and the competition with Iran, and even Sunni Egypt and Turkey, have constrained the realisation of the Kingdom's sense of *umma* entitlement.