



Islam Beyond Borders

Assuming a central place in Muslim life, the Qur'an speaks of one community of the faith, the *umma*. This unity of the faithful is recognised as the default aspiration of the believer, and in the modern era, intellectuals and political leaders have often vied both to define and to lead it.

Based on case studies of actors such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and ISIS, James Piscatori and Amin Saikal consider how some appeals to pan-Islam prove useful, yet other attempts at cross-border institutionalisation including the Sunni Caliphate or the modern Shi'i-inspired Islamic Revolution, founder on political self-interest and sectarian affiliations. Accompanied by a range of scriptural references to examine different interpretations of the *umma*, Piscatori and Saikal explore why, despite its meaning such widely different things, and its failure to be realised as a concrete project, neither the *umma*'s popular symbolic appeal nor its influence on a politics of identity has diminished.

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The *Umma* in World Politics

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Preface

The prospect of a united Muslim world has long inspired both dreams and fears. Many Muslims regard the pan-Islamic community, the *umma*, as the embodiment of the spiritual kinship of the faith, but it has also often been assumed to be inherently antagonistic to adherents of other faiths. Questions over relations with the Other are mirrored by debates over what constitutes the acceptable contours of Islamic doctrine itself. Indeed, the *umma* has had variant and contested meanings over time, and divergent perspectives on its inclusiveness or exclusiveness and whether it must have concrete or institutional form have become acute. The rise of jihadist movements has especially brought these related issues to the fore, with the targeting of external and internal ‘enemies’ presented as part of a purifying and defensive mission to rescue the *umma* from its current degradation. The anthem of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), ‘My *Umma*, Dawn Has Appeared’, extols Muslims to give up this life in order to revive the *umma* and assure victory for Islam. The idea of the *umma*, so central and yet so elusive, has taken on a talismanic quality.

It is not surprising, therefore, that, when Muslims are asked about self-identification, their rapport with fellow Muslims across the world ranks high. The sense of belonging to a wider community is often tied to issues that appear to confirm Muslim vulnerabilities, even victimisation, and evocative terms such as ‘Jerusalem’, ‘Srebrenica’, or ‘Rohingyas’ become signifiers of an embattled *umma*. While such sentiments are widespread and forms of solidarity and transnational linkages have evolved, Islamic unity has seemed impossible, particularly as Muslim elites have accommodated themselves to the realities of the world order. The territorial nation-state has been not only accepted by default, but also validated through the intermixture of nationalist and Islamic symbolism – in effect, an Islamo-nationalism.

The penetration of the Westphalian model is even deeper, with Muslim states competing with each other for leadership of the *umma*,

to which they all theoretically belong as equal members. Manipulation of this paramount, socially resonant concept has been markedly useful for a kind of one-upmanship in Muslim politics today. Such is the persuasive instrumentality of the *umma* that even non-state actors – Islamist and jihadist groups, for instance – seek to appropriate the idea to advance their claims to the moral and political guardianship of Muslims. But these attempts also have built-in limitations. Sectarian differences, political heavy-handedness, and failures to live up to expectations may undermine the pursuit of legitimisation.

The purpose of this book is to explore the dynamics by which the concept of the *umma* affects, and is affected by, Muslim politics. The contestation over what the central symbol means and who controls it lies at the heart of the matter. Our aim is not to provide universal coverage, but through selected cases – Saudi Arabia, Iran, and ISIS – to illuminate the ways in which a contested but core concept is shaped, ‘owned’, and at times repudiated by political actors. While elite pathways are thus privileged in this study, the competitive claims to vanguard status in the *umma* and ideological positioning they represent would not have been possible without underlying sentiments of common belonging and, to a degree, shared normative understandings.

Throughout this volume, ‘Muslim world’ is deployed as a shorthand description for Muslims across the world, in majority and minority situations. We recognise the manifold diversity among them, and there is no intention to suggest by the term anything more than the expansive demographic distribution of Muslims beyond one locality. As will be clear in this volume, we recognise that the ‘Muslim world’ displays neither uniformity of action nor unity of purpose.

A modified transliteration scheme has been adopted for Arabic words: the *‘ayn* is represented, but the *ta marbuta* is not transliterated, except when followed by a vowel when it becomes *t*. For Persian words, the standard Iranian version is used. Proper names in common usage, such as Ruhollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein are rendered as they have appeared in English-language media.

We use ‘Salafi’ to refer to a strict theological interpretation of Sunni Islam and to its proponents, who advocate a return to what is believed to be ‘true’ Islam. ‘Salafist’, where it appears, refers to an ideological-political orientation and to its proponents, such as ISIS.

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