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## About:

*The MJTILP (formerly the Journal of Islamic State Practices in International Law) was founded in 2005. The Journal is independent of any State or institutional affiliation with a truly diverse and global editorial board. It is published once a year by Electronicpublications.org Ltd; and available both in electronic and printed forms.*



## Aims of the Journal:

The principal objectives of the Manchester Journal of Transnational Islamic Law & Practice (MJTILP) are to provide a vehicle for the consideration of transnational forms of Islamic law and practice. Transnationalism in Islamic law is taken broadly as communications and interactions linking Islamic thoughts, ideas, people, practices and institutions across nation-States and around the globe. In recent times, research in Islamic law has shaped narratives based on nation-States, demographics, diasporic communities, and ethnic origins instead of developing around a central core. Contemporary issues of Islamic law are increasingly linked to geographical locations and ethnic or parochial forms of religious beliefs and practices. Expressions like American, European, British, Asian and Arab Islam have widely gained acceptance.

Despite the growing importance of dialogue to develop shared understandings of issues facing Islamic law and proposing coordinated solutions, the contemporary research and scholarship has not developed harmoniously and remains piecemeal and sporadic. Researchers and practitioners of Islamic law are drawn from a wide variety of subjects and come from various regions of the world but have insufficient institutional support for sharing information and comparing experiences. Innovation in various strands and paradigms of Islamic law and practice is stifled because there are limited spaces where evolutionary, collaborative and interdisciplinary discourses can take place. This in turn hampers the ability to build on past research and record best practices, negatively impacting a consistent and orderly development of the field. There is a need to constitute a world community of Islamic law scholars based on interactions and aspirations moving across linguistic, ethnic, geographical and political borders.

The MJTILP is inspired by the need to fill these gaps. It provides a platform to legal and interdisciplinary scholars and researchers for critical and constructive commentaries, engagements and interactions on Islamic law and practice that are built upon configurations in contemporary contexts. It welcomes contributions that look comparatively at Islamic law and practice that apprise and inspire knowledge across national boundaries whether enforced by a State or voluntarily practiced by worldwide Muslim communities. We are equally interested in scholarships on encapsulated cultural worlds, diaspora, identity and citizenship that are embedded and circumscribed by religious ties. As it has been the practice of the journal since its establishment in 2005, it also has a specific interest in issues relating to the practice of Muslim States in international law, international law issues that may concern Muslim countries, and all aspects of law and practice affecting Muslims globally.

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Volume 17

2021

Issue 1

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## Contents

### Editorial:

#### Transnational Forms of Islamic Law

*Ahmad Ghouri* 1

### Articles:

#### Post-Islamism: From Making Islam Democratic to the Politics of Myth

*Fatemeh Sadeghi* 3

#### Is Taliban Story Going to be the Iranian Story? The Islamic Emirate v. the Guardianship of the Jurist (Wilayat Faqih)

*Haroun Rahimi & Ali Shirvani* 19

#### The Concept of Just-War in Islamic and Modern International Law

*Nehaluddin Ahmad, Siti Sara binti Haji Ahmad & Norulaziemah binti Haji Zulkiffle* 29

#### Islamic Law of Armed Intervention for Peace and Humanitarian Purposes

*Shahzeb Shahid* 59

#### Neo-Ijtihād: A Hierarchical Process Adopted by Pakistani Judiciary in the Context of Muslim Family Laws

*Muhammad Farooq* 95

#### Overturning the Reform of Polygyny: Shaykh Abu Zahra's Renewal Thought Caught in the Tradition

*Salah al-Ansari* 114

<b>One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: The Unending Twist and Turn Regarding the Law of Khul‘ and its Exposition by the Superior Courts in Pakistan</b>	
<i>Muhammad Munir</i>	133
<b>Legal Effects of Muslim States’ Reservations to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)</b>	
<i>Zaheer Iqbal Cheema &amp; Shahrul Mizan Ismail</i>	150
<b>Implementation of International Human Rights in Pakistan: Finding a Balance between Western Conceptions and Islamic Law</b>	
<i>Sana Khan</i>	168
<b>Liability in Partnerships: A Comparative Analysis of American Common Law and Islamic Law</b>	
<i>Bander Almohammadi</i>	184
<b>The Law and Practice of Islamic Banking in Ethiopia: A Critical Review of Constitutional Legitimacy and Dispute Resolution</b>	
<i>Mohammed Ibrahim Ahmed</i>	205
<b>Transition of Marriage from Sacrament to Contract: Comparative and Critical Reflections on Women’s Rights in Hindu and Muslim Laws</b>	
<i>Shahnaz</i>	228
<b>Justice Delayed is Justice Denied: Post-Conflict Experiences of the Bangladesh War of Independence</b>	
<i>Mohammad Pizuar Hossain</i>	245
<b>The OIC and Women’s Rights: Exploring the Dichotomy of Representation</b>	
<i>Richa Chaudhary</i>	264
<b>Book Reviews:</b>	
<b>Islamic Finance: Law and Practice</b>	
Edited by <i>Craig R Nethercott &amp; David M Eisenberg</i> , Reviewed by <i>Ilias Bantekas</i>	278

**Islam and Muslim Resistance to Modernity in Turkey**

By *Gökhan Bacık*, Reviewed by *Emine Enise Yakar*

281

**The Objectives of Islamic Law: The Promises and Challenges of the Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿa**

Edited by *Idris Nassery, Rumea Ahmed, & Muna Tatari*, Reviewed by *Walid Ghali*

285

**Modern Hadith Studies: Continued Debates and New Approaches**

Edited by *Belal Abu-Alabbas, Michael Dann & Christopher Melchert*, Reviewed by *Mansur Ali*

290

## Post-Islamism: From Making Islam Democratic to the Politics of Myth

Fatemeh Sadeghi\*

“If a religion doesn’t ask questions about distribution and justice, it’s a dead religion.”<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Post-Islamism has been suggested as an intellectual and political response by which Islam and democracy become compatible. However, post-Islamism is not a homogenous discourse and involves at least democratic and social democratic inclinations. For democratic post-Islamism, freedom, democracy, and human rights were master signifiers, whereas, for social-democratic post-Islamism and anti-capitalist Muslims, justice is pivot of the intellectual constellation and religious criticism. Reviewing the main ideas and criticisms of the most recent post-Islamist intellectual discourses, this article investigates the ability of post-Islamism in addressing authoritarianism, inequality, and social injustice. Exploring the significance of the politics of myth for the meaningful intellectual and political endeavours, this article investigates the theological turn of the anti-capitalist Muslims and its significance for post-Islamism particularly in suggesting new understandings of the Qur’an. The article concludes that if Islamism is not seen primarily as a state ideology but as politics of myth, then post-Islamism requires to capture popular imagination.*

**Keywords:** Islamism; Post-Islamism; Neo-Liberalisation; Politics of Myth

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The term “Post-Islamism” was originally coined by Asef Bayat<sup>2</sup> to capture the dynamics of societal secularization at work in Iranian society during the 1990s. Shortly, it became a widespread notion

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<sup>1</sup> İhsan Eliaçık, ‘Interview with Turkish theologian İhsan Eliaçık: The Koran and social justice’ (Qantara.de 15/01/2014) <<https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-turkish-theologian-ih-san-eliacik-the-koran-and-social-justice>> accessed 4 April 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Asef Bayat, ‘The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society’ (1996) 5 (9) Critical Middle East Studies 43–52.



used by the well-known French sociologists of Islam including Gilles Kepel,<sup>3</sup> Olivier Roy,<sup>4</sup> and Henry Lauzire.<sup>5</sup> Reviewing some of the most seminal post-Islamist intellectual criticisms and the roots of its emergence, this article answers these questions: What are the main criticisms of post-Islamism and how does this discourse address the issues of democracy and inequality in Muslim countries? What are the commonalities and differences between democratic and social-democratic post-Islamism? Has post-Islamism been able to challenge social injustice and neo-liberal authoritarianism as the most significant problems of some parts of the Muslim world?

To answer these questions, I first briefly explain post-Islamism, its main critiques, and the differences between democratic and social-democratic versions of post-Islamism. Then I compare their qualifications and abilities in addressing the existing political challenges, particularly social injustice, and authoritarianism. Finally, the ability of post-Islamism in competing with mythical politics of Islamism will be explored.

Post-Islamism was originally used for some of the post-war socio and political trends in the Iranian society, though its usage was extended beyond Iran. Today it is ascribed to a wide range of intellectual, social, and political ideas, movements, or parties, whose investigation go beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, it restricts itself to some of the most recent intellectual “post-Islamist” discourses, in which Islam as the dominant form of religiosity or state ideology is criticized, redefined, and reformulated. Consequently, secular criticisms, though significant, will not be discussed in this article. Likewise, the article does not encompass the movements that are primarily political. Concerning social-democratic post-Islamism, the focus will be on the neo-*Shariati* discourse and the anti-capitalist Muslims, albeit the latter might not identify themselves as post-Islamist. My primary interest in this movement is its intellectual capacity in addressing the existing socio-political situation by making Islam a political theology of the oppressed.

By seeing Islam as state ideology, the Islamic state becomes impossible, as suggested by Hallaq.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Dokhanchi notes that “modern forms of globalization and the position of the state in the ever-increasing intensity of these forms are sufficient to render any brand of Islamic governance either impossible or, if possible, incapable of survival in the long run.” He then recommends, “to expose Islamism to post-modern critique, the result of which would not be a negation but rather a revival of Islamism that takes into account the contingencies of the post-modern condition.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gilles Kepel, ‘Islamism Reconsidered’ (2000) 22 (2) Harvard International Review 22–27.

<sup>4</sup> Olivier Roy, ‘Le Post-Islamisme’ [1998] 85–6 Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée 11–30; Olivier Roy, ‘The Transformation of the Arab World’ (2012) 23 (3) Journal of Democracy 5–18.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Lauzire, ‘Post-Islamism and the Religious Discourse of Abd al-Salam Yasin’ (2005) 37 (2) International Journal of Middle East Studies 241–61.

<sup>6</sup> Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics and Modernity’s Political Predicament* (Columbia University Press 2012) 9.

<sup>7</sup> Milad Dokhanchi, ‘Post-Islamism Redefined: Towards a Politics of Post-Islamism’ (2020) 1 (1) Journal of the Contemporary Study of Islam 28.

My argument is that the power of Islamism lies not simply in its antagonism with modern political apparatus. In this dynamic, Islamism complies with certain contemporary expectations. It seems also to be rooted in its ability to critically address the contemporary situation by mobilizing the past through remembrance, reinvention, reimagination and reappropriation. Islamism as both movement and state ideology, is a politics of myth constructed on a dialectic with an imaginative past. Such dynamic, I think, makes Islamism a post-enlightenment and post-modern phenomenon. Islamism seems to be post-Islamist in the sense that it draws not on the past, but primarily on an imaginary past.

## II. FORMATION OF POST-ISLAMISM

Before delving into the questions raised in part I of this article, a brief description of post-Islamism and its inner development seems necessary. The studies on post-Islamism have two approaches: 1) descriptive; and 2) prescriptive approach. As a descriptive approach, it tends to understand and explain an ideological, socio-political, and intellectual shift in various parts of the Muslim world since 1990s because of which Islamist politics of revolution and *jihad* was gradually replaced by a concern for civil society, democracy, and human rights. As a prescriptive approach, post-Islamism was an agenda in which “a commitment to Islamic values is married to genuine faith in democracy and human rights.”<sup>8</sup>

For Bayat, the program of Iran’s post-war reconstruction under President Rafsanjani marked the beginning of post-Islamism.<sup>9</sup> Later he also applied post-Islamism to the developments of other Muslim contexts ranging from Indonesia to Morocco, where Islamism had been once the dominant ideology. Bayat suggested that the Muslims world is “on the verge of a new path, in which political Islam undergoes a significant transformation.”<sup>10</sup> While Islamism as state ideology conflates politics and religion,<sup>11</sup> post-Islamism recognizes a plurality of interpretations, strategies, and models generating from Islam.<sup>12</sup> Post-Islamism takes Islam not the main source but a source of reference, though a significant one. That is how democracy and pluralism can be merged.<sup>13</sup>

According to Bayat, “whereas Islamism understood as a deployment of Islam for the political project of establishing an Islamic state was unlikely to embrace democratic order, post-Islamism could and did.”<sup>14</sup> He concludes that “Post-Islamism represents a critical break from and an

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<sup>8</sup> Meisam Badamchi, *Post-Islamist Political Theory: Iranian Intellectuals and Political Liberalism in Dialogue* (Springer 2017) v.

<sup>9</sup> Asef Bayat, *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam* (Oxford University Press 2013) 39.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid* x.

<sup>11</sup> Bayat (n 9) 136.

<sup>12</sup> Ihsan Daghi, ‘Islamism à la Turca’ in Bayat (n 9) 71-108.

<sup>13</sup> Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford University Press 2007) 11.

<sup>14</sup> Bayat (n 9) x.

alternative to Islamist politics.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, unlike the Islamist “Leninist” approach based on seizing the state via “the war of maneuver”, post-Islamists were more inclined to a “Gramscian” attitude of becoming hegemonic in civil society through a “war of positions”.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, for Mandaville, post-Islamism implies “a broader generational and strategic shift identifiable in Muslim movements across several settings today.”<sup>17</sup> It is unclear though whether such strategy was adopted due to the ideological shift or simply because of the lack of political opportunity. This means that post-Islamists might also be interested in political state power. In both Turkey and Iran, “post-Islamists” politicians are highly engaged in politics, which contradicts the previous perception. It is also worth mentioning that although a political shift has occurred in Turkey from Islamism,<sup>18</sup> there is no consensus over its post-Islamist character, considering the ruling party’s swinging between being a neo-Ottoman empire state and a modern nation-state. This gives more credit to the definitions, in which post-Islamism is seen as a more cultural than a political turn. Nilufer Göle, for example, describes post-Islamism as a “banalizing process” that provides people the opportunities to embrace individualistic, professional, and consumerist values.<sup>19</sup>

Bayat’s democratic post-Islamism is highly influential. However, a new post-Islamist critique is emerging in recent years that seems to be inclined towards a “democratic socialism” drawing extensively on intellectuals such as Ali Shariati, Mohammad Nakhshab, and Mahmoud Taleghani. I shall return to this later in part VI of this article.

### **III. POST-ISLAMISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

Post-Islamism has been criticized from various angles. The following discussion briefly reviews some of these criticisms.

To start with, the linear perception of post-Islamism has been challenged. The reason is that post-Islamism has not always been an outcome of Islamism, but in some cases, it emerged even before or parallel to Islamism. Pierre’s analysis of the Syrian Muslim Brothers,<sup>20</sup> and Abdelwahab El-Affendi’s study on Sudan are two examples demonstrating that post-Islamist attitudes were widespread before being wiped out or oppressed by the state in these two countries. The Syrian Muslim Brothers was almost entirely suppressed by the Assad regime between 1979-1982.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid* xi.

<sup>16</sup> Bayat (n 9) 5.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (Routledge 2007) 114.

<sup>18</sup> Kamran Bokhari and Farid Senzai, *Political Islam in the Age of Democratization* (Palgrave McMillan 2013) 173ff.

<sup>19</sup> Nilufer Göle, ‘Islamic Visibilities and Public Sphere’ in Nilufer Göle and Ludwig Ammann (eds), *Islam in Public: Turkey, Iran, and Europe* (Bilgi University Press 2006) 3-43.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Pierre, ‘Syria’s Unusual Islamic Trend: Political Reformists, the Ulema and Democracy’ in Bayat (n 9) 321-441.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*.

Similarly, in Sudan, the “post-Islamist” movement inspired by Mahmoud Mohamed Taha operated alongside of Islamism, before being marginalized by the Islamists, who controlled the state.<sup>22</sup> As Pierre states, “the very idea of looking for a paradigmatic shift-or for its absence-might lead to a distortion of reality in order to make it fit a preconceived narrative.”<sup>23</sup>

For Bokhari and Senzai, “post-Islamism is exiting Islamism and possibly heading toward secularism that is not based on rejecting religion’s role in public affairs.”<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Yilmaz understands post-Islamism as a stage in which the actors either move forward and leave Islamism altogether or revert to Islamism. Whereas post-Islamism is considered as “neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic nor secular”,<sup>25</sup> for Yilmaz it is non-Islamism, which in a general sense can also be referred to as secularism.<sup>26</sup>

Problematizing Asef Bayat’s definition of post-Islamism, Dokhanchi, on the other hand, defines post-Islamism “as a revival of Islamism that takes into account the contingencies of the post-modern condition. Similar to post-Marxism and post-anarchism, post-Islamism maintains the ethos of the traditional canon, Islamism in this case, while rejecting its authoritarian and universalist tendencies.”<sup>27</sup> Dokhanchi’s post-modern Islamism is “radically different from what Bayat had in mind. Since the term ‘post’ in other Western political traditions implies revival of a tradition after exposing it to a postmodern/post-structuralist framework.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, according to him:

“[P]ost-Islamism denotes the philosophical and practical approach in which Islamism becomes a subject of scrutiny and revival, having in mind the limits of modernity. This postmodern or post-structuralist Islamism is still in its early stages and is a project to come. Post-structuralist Islamism puts an end to Islamism’s obsession with the state and sublimates the energy of Islamism to various struggles pertaining to social justice, combating state oppression, and reviving spiritual and ethical practices. Whatever post-Islamism may be, it must be more than what Bayat understood it to be: a scene in which ‘underground music, illicit sex and dating games, drug use and fashion’ has proliferated throughout the social sphere. Post-Islamism is a struggle to create alternatives outside the state, even though these struggles will still be within the grid of *raison d’état*.”<sup>29</sup>

It seems that when obsession with state politics is concerned, not a big difference separates Islamism and post-Islamists, contrary to Bayat’s expectation. The case of the Muslim Brotherhood

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<sup>22</sup> Abdelwahab El-Affendi, ‘Islamism in Sudan: Before, After, in Between’, in Bayat (n 9) 301-320.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre (n 20) 322.

<sup>24</sup> Bokhari and Senzai (n 18) 183.

<sup>25</sup> Bayat (n 9) 11; El-Affendi (n 22).

<sup>26</sup> Ihsan Yilmaz, ‘AK Party between Post-Islamism and Non-Islamism: A Critical Analysis of the Turkish Islamism’s Transformation’ (2011) SSRN <<http://ssrn.com/abstract=1771905>> accessed 31 January 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Dokhanchi (n 7) 28.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid* 49.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*.

in Egypt and Al-Nahda in Tunisia, not to mention the Iranian reformists, are the recent examples of this complementarity. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood changed their Gramscian strategy of working in civil society<sup>30</sup> before the opportunity of seizing power opened after the 2011 Revolution. In Tunisia too Al-Nahda seized power following the 2011 Tunisian Revolution.

It could be suggested then that not necessarily the association of state, but the ways in which the state is associated is a key distinction between Islamism and post-Islamism. The above-mentioned cases indicate that the difference does not rest in beliefs, but in the political condition, in which Islamism or post-Islamism grows. If political context is not welcoming, then it is more likely that a Gramscian approach is adopted and when the political condition is favourable, a Leninist approach is adopted. Furthermore, the Gramscian and Leninist approaches seem not mutually exclusive but complementary. The Gramscian approach can pave the way for the Leninist approach and vice versa.

Apart from this, post-Islamism seems to be a category under which various, and in some cases contradictory, social trends are classified. For instance, whereas according to an Egyptian survey, of 466 women appearing in public in Cairo (at the Book Fair), 80% were veiled, and the remainder included non-Muslims,<sup>31</sup> in Iran, around 50% of the respondents believe that veil should not be obligatory as indicated by a survey conducted in 2015.<sup>32</sup> The same survey on Iran demonstrates that 31% of the respondents believe in the conflation of religion and politics.<sup>33</sup> The dissatisfaction resulted in successive events started with the protests against the compulsory *hijab* (aka the Girls of the Revolution Street) in 2018 and subsequent civil unrests in 2018 and 2019 across the country.

Egypt seems to be moving towards the opposite direction, however. The widespread dispute and public anxiety on the *urfi* (customary) marriage of the personal status law proposed in Egyptian parliament in 2000<sup>34</sup> denotes deep conservatism in matter of women and gender. Even the traditionally liberal dailies such as *Al-Wafd* expressed anxiety over the proposed law and the fear that it would subjugate men and disturb the harmony and stability of the family.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Egypt's Muslim activists are not much involved in political contestation for women's rights in contrast to their Iranian counterparts, who embrace autonomy, freedom, and equality. Islamist women internalize this attitude that men's sins are mostly rooted in women's behaviour. Therefore, unveiling that they call "women nakedness" is considered as the main cause of the many social corruptions. Whereas this notion was widespread in pre-revolutionary time, it is becoming outdated in today's Iran. In Egypt, this perception is still strong.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bayat (n 9) 5.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Research Institute of Culture and Communication, *The Survey on the Iranians' Values and Attitudes, Third Wave* (The Publication of the Research Institute of Culture and Communication 2015) 218.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Bayat (n 9) 195.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* 202.

Whereas in Egypt women's personal virtue is embedded in the observation of the *hijab*, in Iran, the more we take distance from the 1979 revolution, the more women's quest for piety and virtue becomes detached from dress code. As a result, many religious women are increasingly showing interest in spirituality and mysticism, yoga, meditation, and spiritual circles such as the *Erfan-e Halqeh*.<sup>37</sup>

Both Iran and Egypt are conservative societies, especially when women and gender are concerned. However, socio-political dissent in these two countries is in significant cases moving towards the opposite directions. Furthermore, the gap between the establishment and the people is widening in Iran. This is the reason of the growing numbers of Iranians leave their religion and convert to Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Bahaimism.<sup>38</sup> We might suggest that while the Iranian society is experiencing the individualization of religion, in Egypt, religiosity is still strongly considered as a social obligation. These divergent phenomena are hardly able to be described under the rubric of post-Islamism.

#### IV. SECULARIZED ISLAMISM

Islamism is seen primarily as a politics of religion to the extent that its leniency is ignored for the most part. The power of Islamism lies not only in its employment of the sacred but also in its pragmatism and capability to respond to everyday requirements and to become secular if necessary. Islamism is Janus-faced. This pragmatism is best exemplified in Ayatollah Khomeini's attitude towards *sharia* before and after the revolution. Before the revolution he insisted that "the sacred legislator of Islam is the sole legislative power. No one has the right to legislate, and no law may be executed except the law of the divine legislator." But after the revolution he declared publicly that the expediency of the political power is above the divine law:

"The sovereign [of the Islamic state] can unilaterally abolish its legitimate agreement with people, if that agreement is against the conveniences of the country and Islam, and it also can nullify or prevent every statute of whatever kind that is against the convenience of Islam."<sup>39</sup>

As indicated in this letter, Islamism as state ideology possesses a strong secular aspect as it makes Islam a mundane ideology of political power. Theological notions underlie the political concepts of modernity. In Carl Schmitt's word, "All significant concepts of the modern theories of state are

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<sup>37</sup> Alireza Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam and the Uncanny* (Princeton University Press 2018) 151.

<sup>38</sup> The Economist, 'The not-so-Shia-State: Disenchanted Iranians are Turning to Other Faiths' *The Economist* (London 23 January 2021) <<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/01/23/disenchanted-iranians-are-turning-to-other-faiths>> accessed 8 March 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifey-e Imam Khomeini* (The Center for Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works 1999) 170.

secularized theological concepts.”<sup>40</sup> Islamism can also be seen as a modern political ideology that draws on theological concepts. Such combination creates a potentiality allowing it to take advantage of both secular and sacred political constellations.

Cornelius Castoriadis explains the dialectic between the sacred and secular in Islamism as a double heteronomy. Whereas religion decides for human beings on matters of life and death, without the possibility of questioning the religious laws and the cognitive means to do so, state is a secular setting. Thus, Islamism, he believes, faces a double heteronomy: the first one is trust in the supranatural without having the right to question; and the second is the trust in the state, again without having the right to question its decision. More importantly, Islamism as state ideology instrumentalizes religion by the secular institutions of the modern state. This act strips religious institutions of the capacity to define and interpret their own religion. The issues of faith, death or life that were already slipped out of the hands of human beings, now, with the externalization process and the intervention of the state, increasingly mingle with majority politics and are in another type of hands, namely those of the politicians and governing institutions.<sup>41</sup>

We can conclude that Islamism has been to some extent post-Islamist and post-Islamist is partly Islamist. In other words, the demarcations between Islamism and post-Islamism are blurred, when the relation of the secular and the sacred are concerned. We may suggest that if Islamism is a secularized religion, then post-Islamism would be simply its handmaid rather than its adversary. What is needed, then, would not be further profanation as post-Islamism suggests, but de-secularization by which religion reclaims its sacredness.

## **V. POST-ISLAMISM AND NEO-LIBERAL AUTHORITARIANISM**

In Iran, Rafsanjani’s government, marked by Bayat as a post-Islamist state,<sup>42</sup> started a reconstruction program that in many ways signified a break with the revolution. It was not only the economy that private ownership was supposed to cure, but also the society and politics. As Ehsani pointed out, “There seems to be a consensus across the political and ideological spectrum that public ownership of economic assets is the cause of a host of social and political ills, from authoritarianism to corruption and nepotism.”<sup>43</sup>

Several aspects of the post-revolutionary Iran including urban, intellectual, and economic life were dramatically impacted by this incomprehensive consensus. As a result, the legal regime of property

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<sup>40</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapter on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge MA: MIT University Press) 36.

<sup>41</sup> Benoit Challand, ‘Religion and the Struggle for People’s Imagination: The Case of Contemporary Islamism’ in Chiara Bottici and Benoit Challand (eds), *The Politics of Imagination* (Birbeck Law Press 2011) 156.

<sup>42</sup> Bayat (n 9) 39.

<sup>43</sup> Kaveh Ehsani, ‘Survival through Dispossession: Privatization of Public Goods in the Islamic Republic’ (2009) 250 Middle East Report <<https://web.archive.org/web/20100620042536/http://merip.org/mer/mer250/ehsani.html>> accessed 8 March 2021.

has been gradually replaced by a new one in total harmony with the global trends. Consequently, environment, education, and health care were gradually but decisively commodified while public assets such as water, electricity, and common lands were increasingly privatized.<sup>44</sup>

This process contradicted the Iranian Constitution declaring them as national assets that belong to all Iranians.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, economic privatization impoverished various strata of the society, and increased precarity, unemployment, and socio-economic inequalities; not to mention environmental crisis, dislocation and massive immigration. Apart from cronyism, nepotism, and increasing level of corruption, these policies resulted in riots of the marginal and suburban disenfranchised of Tehran and Mashad and some other cities. These riots were brutally suppressed.<sup>46</sup>

The reformist and post-Islamist government of Khatami (1997- 2005) attempted to relatively harmonize between economic and political liberalization. However, as soon as the “hardliners” seized power in 2005, privatization of the public assets accelerated resulting in the strengthening of government’s oppressive force. The miraculous “survival through dispossession”<sup>47</sup> multiplied by the drastic oil revenues during Ahmadinejad’s presidency, was accompanied by enormous allocation and redistribution of economic resources to the state’s clients.<sup>48</sup>

When Hasan Rohani has elected in 2013 as president, his government already faced with a severe financial crisis. Instead of pausing the process, however, his administration continued the unaccounted allocations of the public assets to the Guardian Corps (*sepah*) or the government’s own contractors under the name of privatization.<sup>49</sup> The already shattered economy enormously deteriorated by the international sanctions against Iran.

Whereas previously, providing job opportunities, eliminating poverty, and providing social welfare were hypothetically incumbent upon the government, the post-war states have increasingly inclined towards capital accumulation at the expense of welfare state and state’s social obligation.<sup>50</sup>

Similar trends seem to have taken place in Egypt where, contrary to the Constitution of 1964, the military benefited the control of the large part of the economy since the introduction of the

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<sup>44</sup> Ehsani (n 43).

<sup>45</sup> The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, art 44.

<sup>46</sup> Mostafa Shoqi, Rebel against Construction (documentary) (2019) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DuoYCF1IoA>> accessed 8 March 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Ehsani (n 43).

<sup>48</sup> Mohammad Maljoo ‘Capital Accumulation Chain in Post- revolutionary Iran’ (2020) 48 (4) Critique 432, 433; Mehrdad Vahabi ‘The Economic Role of Sepah (The Guardians of Revolution) in the Iranian Economy’ (2015) 6 (2) Mihan 6, 7 <<https://mpira.ub.uni-muenchen.de/68531/>> accessed 18 May 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Maljoo (n 48) 433.

<sup>50</sup> ibid 432.



neoliberalist policies (*infitah*) by Anwar Sadat in 1970s. In 1977, Mubarak had realized that the subsidies were a drain on national budget and tried to remove them. According to Inmonti:

“Between 1991 and 2009, 382 state companies were sold by Mubarak administration to private investors for a total of 9.4 billion dollars [...] In spite of the impressive improvement, the overall unemployment rate remained above 9 percent and 25 percent for the youth that comprise a majority of the Egyptian population.”<sup>51</sup>

This is while the military owns 92% of the country’s lands. Thus, people have little opportunities to get access to farming lands. In such a context, charity activities of the Muslim Brotherhood were successful particularly in *ashwaiyyat* (slums) as ruralizing areas of the urban settlements that have been growing because of deteriorating economic conditions of the Egyptian farmers,<sup>52</sup> who had no alternative than leaving their villages.

Policies of privatization have had major impacts of unemployment, increasing rate of poverty and a profound sense of insecurity. As Hanieh notes:

“These examples show that the process of neoliberal reform is driven by the ability of a highly centralized political core to frame the context of decentralized implementation of its policies. This dialectic of centralization and decentralization has been the distinguishing feature of the institutional restructuring of the neoliberal state in the Middle East region— rhetorically founded upon “good governance” and “accountability,” while simultaneously strengthening the tendencies toward authoritarianism. By creating this form of decentralized, horizontal competition between different parts of the state, vertically constrained through the concentration of political power at the center, neoliberal governments naturalize the reduction of state activities as a normal part of everyday operations.”<sup>53</sup>

Economic privatization, high level of unemployment, precarity, poverty, and lower wages particularly among the youth are the main reasons of Egyptian Revolution.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, the Muslim Brotherhood that took over after the 2011 Revolution also advocated privatization of the state-owned industries soon after seizing power. Mohammad Mursi, the abducted president of Egypt followed the same trend of the previous years, similar to his Iranian counterparts.<sup>55</sup> In an

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<sup>51</sup> Felix Inmonti, ‘Egypt for Sale’ *Oilprice* (11 September 2013) <<http://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/Africa/Egypt-for-Sale.htm>> accessed 8 March 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Amsterdam University Press 2010) 188ff.

<sup>53</sup> Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East* (Haymarket Books 2013) 68.

<sup>54</sup> Raji Assaad and Caroline Krafft, ‘Excluded Generation: The Growing Challenges of Labor Market Insertion for Egyptian Youth’ (2020) 24(2) *Journal of Youth Studies* 186-212.

<sup>55</sup> Inmonti (n 51).

October 2011 interview, Hassan Malek, a leading Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood businessman, emphasized that the main problem with the economic policies of former president Hosni Mubarak, was not the policies themselves but the corruption of businessmen, who were close to the regime.<sup>56</sup> These instances suggest that no matter a state is secular, Islamist, or “post-Islamist”, a similar trend is visible, i.e., the increasing inclination of the states to privatize the state-owned assets and to allocate them to the clients and allies. As Hanieh notes, “The last three decades have seen the sustained erosion of basic economic and social rights as a direct consequence of neoliberal policies.”<sup>57</sup> Consequently, Arab uprisings must be seen not only as protests against authoritarianism, but also free market economic policies.

## VI. MAKING ISLAM SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC

The decline of the reformist politics in Iran, the bitter disillusionment in the aftermath of Arab Spring, and the oppressive neo-liberal politics of the post-Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, to name a few examples, created a frustrating situation required a novel intellectual endeavour with the aim of both description and, if possible, relevant prescription. Whereas Islamism failed to fulfil its promises, post-Islamism also seemed to have contributed to the existing situation and the resilience of undemocratic governments.

The emergence of new post-Islamist discourse seems to be the outcome of a condition of “‘exhausted epistemic’ of nativist Islamism, hyper ethnic, neoliberal capitalism, right-wing populism, and autocratic socialism.”<sup>58</sup> The new post-Islamist intellectuals started rethinking the relation between religion, society, and politics. Their primary concern seems to make Islam not only democratic, but also social democratic.<sup>59</sup> This is made by relocating inequality and injustice at the heart of religious criticism and intellectual endeavour.

Within this context, return and reinterpretation of the thinkers such as Ali Shariati and his “socialist Islam” seems both intellectually and politically relevant. For Mahdavi, as a post-Islamist, Shariati, Taleghani and the socialist theists such as Nakhshab are the pioneering figures.<sup>60</sup> “The Socialist Theists”, remarks Mahdavi, “challenged the hegemony of any privileged class over others and fought simultaneously at least on three fronts: first and foremost, they were anti-clerical in the context of Islamic tradition. Second, they were critical of the actual existing of western liberal democracy, and finally, they challenged the state-cantered soviet-style socialism. There is no

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<sup>56</sup> Wael Gamal, ‘Lost Capital: Muslim Brotherhood’s Neo-Liberal Transformation’ (Carnegie Endowment Middle East Center 1 February 2019) <[https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2-1-19\\_Gamal\\_Muslim\\_Brotherhood.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2-1-19_Gamal_Muslim_Brotherhood.pdf)> accessed 8 March 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Hanieh (n 53) 71.

<sup>58</sup> Mojtaba Mahdavi ‘From Nakhshab to Neo-Shariati: Three Generations of Iran’s Modern Muslim Left’ in R. Jahanbegloo (ed), *Mapping the Role of Intellectuals in Iranian Modern and Contemporary History* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books; Rowman & Littlefield 2020) 275-76.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid* 275.

<sup>60</sup> See, Eliaçık (n 1).

clerical “class” in Islam, they argued. “The clergy, instead of emphasizing Islam’s progressive social and economic messages, had focused on metaphysics and has imbued Islam with bizarre mysteries, miracles, and in general, superstition.” Socialism, they argued, was the essence of Islam; they interpreted the Qur’anic concept of *showra* (consultation) as a form of democratic socialism and reinterpreted the Qur’an in light of *humanist* (not Soviet) socialism.”<sup>61</sup>

Democratic socialism, or the “neo-*Shariati*” discourse as Mahdavi calls it,<sup>62</sup> attempts to reread religion from the perspective of contemporary concerns for justice and freedom, similar to *Shariati* who believed “social justice without freedom undermined human dignity, and spirituality without freedom and social justice ignored the core/essence of our humanity.”<sup>63</sup> In a sentence that best exemplifies this social turn, Mahdavi summarizes this critique as follows: “for Shariati, ‘social objectivity creates religious subjectivity,’ [sic] not the other way around.”<sup>64</sup>

The neo-*Shariati* post-Islamists started rethinking the role of religion in society and to reconnect religion and social question. Parallel to this shift, democracy is looked at from the perspectives of political philosophers such as John Rawls, whose justice as fairness and political liberalism are employed as heuristic approaches for the elaboration of a democratic society in Muslim-majority countries.<sup>65</sup>

Neo-*Shariati* (or may be post-*Shariati*) critique meritoriously addresses the social question that had largely been ignored by democratic post-Islamism. Nevertheless, the political relevance of this project and the extent of its influence on socio-political developments remain uncertain. This is because this critique seems hardly able to gain momentum beyond some intellectual and academic circles if it is not translated into a meaningful political project.

## VII. POLITICS OF MYTH: THE ANTI-CAPITALIST MUSLIMS

Critique of the dominant forms of religiosity and politics may also extend to those intellectuals, who do not identify as primarily post-Islamist and yet their intellectual criticism has many things in common with the neo-*Shariati* post-Islamist intellectuals. The best example would be the anti-capitalist Muslims, and İhsan Eliaçık, the Turkish theologian and the main intellectual voice of this group.<sup>66</sup> The anti-capitalist Muslims “do not identify with any of the terms or conditions such as Islamism, political Islam, or post-Islamism for that matter.”<sup>67</sup> The reason seems to be that

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<sup>61</sup> Mahdavi (n 58) 277; Mojtaba Mahdavi, ‘The Muslim Left in Iran in Three Episodes: From Nakhshab to Neo-Shariatis’ (2018) (6) *Azadi-e Andisheh* 202-229.

<sup>62</sup> Mahdavi (n 58) 275.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid* 279.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>65</sup> Badamchi (n 8) 13ff.

<sup>66</sup> Ayca Tomac, ‘Rejecting the Legacy, Restoring the Honor: The Anti-Capitalist Muslims in Turkey’ (2020) 11 (11) *Religions* 3.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid* 1.

Eliaçık suggests not merely an intellectual criticism. Rather, he presents a theological turn with reference to the mythical narratives of the Islamic origin.

Like the neo-*Shariati*, for Eliaçık, *Shariati* is a chief influence, whose approach towards Quran seems quite contemporary. Inspired by *Shariati*'s reading and interpretation, Eliaçık observes that:

“[A] clear contradiction between the Koran and the capitalist system. One of the first things that the Koran objects to is wealth. “Karim” means generosity. That’s why we carried a banner at the protest with the words: “Property Belongs to God. Down With Capital”.<sup>68</sup>

Eliaçık maintains, “if a religion doesn’t ask questions about distribution and justice, it’s a dead religion.” He also suggests that “the Qur’an must be understood as an anti-capitalist text. The Qur’an contains many verses that declare unequivocally the accumulation of wealth and monopoly ownership, either by the one person or one group, to be highly problematic ethically and socially. Qur’anic verses attend frequently to the issues of ownership and the accumulation of wealth.”<sup>69</sup> Eliaçık’s “living Qur’an” repudiates both the “dead” Qur’an and the “antiquarian” Qur’an.<sup>70</sup> It seems that his direct attachment with the holy text of Islam suggests the ability to remythologize Muslim politics. Mircea Eliade defines myth as:

“[A] sacred history; myth relates an event that took place in primordial Time. ... In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality ..., or only a fragment of reality ... [such as] a particular kind of human behavior. ... Myth tells only of that which *really* happened. ... In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred ... into the world. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really establishes the world and makes it what it is today.”<sup>71</sup>

Myth has the ability to haunt the popular imagination and create a political awareness upon which mobilization is built. Chehabi<sup>72</sup> explores the ways in which the myth of Moses was deployed in the Iranian Revolution and produced a political imagination, in which the Islamic uprising resembled the Jewish exodus from Egypt to the promised land. Islamic government served as a utopia embodied in the imaginative landscape. The myth of Exodus was also used in Pakistan, where some considered the not very pious founder of Pakistan, M. A. Jinnah, a Moses.<sup>73</sup> In Egypt,

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<sup>68</sup> Eliaçık (n 1).

<sup>69</sup> İhsan Eliaçık, ‘The Critique of Capitalism in the Light of Qur’anic Verses’ (2015) 28 (4) *Studies in Christian Ethics* 391.

<sup>70</sup> Eliaçık (n 1).

<sup>71</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, Willard R. Trask (trans) (Harper & Row 1963) 5-6.

<sup>72</sup> Houshang Chehabi, ‘Li Kull Fir‘awn Musa: The Myth of Moses and Pharaoh in the Iranian Revolution in Comparative Perspective’ *Crown Paper* 4. Waltham (Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University 2010) 1-42.

<sup>73</sup> Chehabi (n 72) 12.

Sayyid Qutb, one of the founders of modern Islamism, devoted a significant part of his massive commentary on the Quran, to explicating the exemplary nature of Moses's struggle against Pharaoh. Thus, when Anwar Sadat, was assassinated in 1981, his assassin shouted after opening fire: "I am Khalid al-Islambouli, I have killed Pharaoh, and I do not fear death."<sup>74</sup>

The mythical aspect of social life is neither recent nor exclusive to Muslim politics. The Puritans who crossed the Atlantic, left the "Egypt" of old England for the "Canaan" of New England in their own mind.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, "the Protestant Pilgrim Fathers and the Catholic friar Savonarola, Afrikaner trekkers and anti-apartheid liberation theologians, the founders of the State of Israel and three decades later those of the Islamic Republic: They were all inspired, to a greater or lesser degree, by the myth of Moses and Pharaoh."<sup>76</sup>

The anti-capitalist Muslims' reading of the Quran revives the original narrative. According to Eliaçık:

"The Qur'an does not concern itself with an abstract religious faith, theism, atheism and so on. On the contrary, it concentrates on the accumulation of wealth and property and equal distribution. In all its stories and each historical example, the Qur'an criticises every social order in which its spoiled wealthy elites tried to find a divine justification for their own social status. Based on the teachings of Qur'an, no social order founded on a monopoly of wealth and property can be regarded Islamic or religious. That is why the Qur'an harshly criticises those who observed all religious rituals in pre-Islamic Mecca but neither fought poverty nor avoided the exploitation of others. An Islamic anti-capitalist critique might first and foremost be directed against self-righteous, pious Muslims. It is the case, since the Qur'anic criticism in the Muhammadan era is equally applicable to the practices and religious perspectives of modern Muslims."<sup>77</sup>

In this mythical history, the concept of the just God is fundamental to the structure of the sacred community (*ummah*). This interpretation is pretty much in line with the promise of the Qur'anic verse: "Yet We wanted to endow those who were considered inferior on earth and make them into leaders and make them heirs"<sup>78</sup>.

The anti-capitalist Muslim's call for the just God might seem anachronistic for a post-truth era, when God was announced to be dead and religious politics, as we have seen, has become increasingly secularized. Nevertheless, it seems to be the reinvention of the original myth and its

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<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *ibid* 8.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid* 23.

<sup>77</sup> Eliaçık (n 1) 410.

<sup>78</sup> The Holy Koran [Qur'an] 28, 5, Muhammad Habib Shakir (trans) (EZreads Publications 2009) <<https://quran.inoor.ir/en/ayah/28/5/>> accessed 23 July 2021.

reappropriation through remembering it differently. This implies bringing God back to the socio-political scene that would terminate God's death and alienation from itself and the world.

## VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Post-Islamism emerged as a solution to the unfulfilled promises of Islamism,<sup>79</sup> or a replacement to it.<sup>80</sup> If, following Bayat, post-Islamism is identified with the post-war Iranian states including Rafsanjani's and Khatami's reformist governments,<sup>81</sup> it for the most part deepened social inequality without being able to challenge the undemocratic polity. In a post-colonial world, where inequality and suppression prevailed and persisted, this version of post-Islamism is hardly defensible unless it seriously takes the increased injustice, and socio-political and economic inequalities into account.

More importantly post-Islamism of this kind profoundly suffers from the lack of mythical politics making it incompetent as a rival of Islamism. The fact that Islam belongs to the past, does not necessarily imply that Islamists inhabited in the past and are detached from the present time. If, Islamism is defined as the conflation of the question of the political order with a theological interpretation of Islam,<sup>82</sup> then what matters for Islamism is not the historical past, but the past the way it is desired to be imagined. As Abu-Rabi' suggests,<sup>83</sup> the Islamist political imagination is not driven by the historical events of the distant past as much as by the events of the existing world such as the bankruptcy of the ruling elites in the Arab and Muslim world. This would imply that the very endeavour of the return to the past is in fact rooted in the present. Islamism is a post-enlightenment phenomenon, in which the past is invoked to serve the present. It employed imagination, myths, memories, emotions, and dreams, which belong to the realm of "irrationality". In Islamism, the inquiry into the past through a set of references such as the return to the self, exodus, the myth of Moses, the exit from *Jahiliya* (ignorance), religious awakening, and *jihad* against the infidels, creates a universal imaginative landscape in competition with the enlightenment and the myths it produced such as reason, progress, and disenchantment of the pre-modern world.

Secular ideologies such as nationalism and Marxism also heavily draw on myths and mythical histories.<sup>84</sup> A good example would be the Pahlavi monarchy in Iran, in which reimagining and reinventing the mythical glory of pre-Islamic Iran served as a legitimizing ground for the Pahlavi monarchy. Similar strategy has been adopted in recent years by the Iranian monarchists, who

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<sup>79</sup> Dokhanchi (n 7).

<sup>80</sup> Bayat (n 9); Mahdavi (n 58).

<sup>81</sup> Bayat (n 9) 136.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi', *The Contemporary Arab Reader on Political Islam* (Pluto Press & The University of Alberta Press 2010) ix.

<sup>84</sup> See Sertac Sehlilikoglu, 'Global Far Right and Imaginative Interconnectivities' (Wiley Online Library 07/05/2021) <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1469-8676.13039>> accessed 18 May 2021.

attempt to portray the pre-revolutionary Iran as the era of prosperity, abundance, glory and an idyl that lost after the 1979 Revolution. In such fabrication, the pre-Islamic and the pre-revolutionary times become identical being pitted against both Islamic and post-revolutionary times.

Neither Islamism's failure nor disenchantment and frustration with it seem to be sufficient reasons for the success of post-Islamism. Acknowledging the criticality of this situation and the deficiencies of the democratic post-Islamism, the social democratic post-Islamism gradually emerged with the aim of relocating the issue of justice and inequality at the centre of religious intellectualism. Social democratic post-Islamists and anti-capitalist Muslims are meritorious in addressing the exhausted political situation and the increasing forms of inequality. However, the political implications of them and their ability to change the situation particularly in the contexts, such as Iran and Turkey, remain uncertain.

In this situation Islamism is still dominant, though without being hegemonic. A powerful intellectual and political critique, on the other hand, is currently neither dominant, nor hegemonic, at least for the moment. Islamism won once the struggle exacerbated by the new media not necessarily because people had become more religious, but mainly by association with an original narrative. This politics of myth and its subsequent ability to mobilization needs to be seriously taken into account. Till that time, the existing situation can be described as a "no longer- not yet" situation, in which "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born",<sup>85</sup> as noted by Gramsci.

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<sup>85</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (International Publishers 1991) 276.