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Imaginative landscapes of Islamist politics: An introduction to *takhayyul*

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ABSTRACT

While there is a tendency to use the word imaginary loosely in the broader social sciences, often referring to the unrealistic and irrational realms of life, its value as a political currency is palpable. This paper offers *takhayyul* (tahayyul/تخيل) as a heuristic concept to study imaginative elements in populist Islamist movements. *Takhayyul* refers to the terrestrial imagination that is realistic and worldly yet also prophetic. It informs doxastic thinking and political action and offers a particular relationship with reality and the ability to comprehend and expand possibilities. This paper explores how this non-Eurocentric theory evolved in the geography that it studies, the Balkans-to-Bengal Complex. In order to develop a theory that can encapsulate the nuances embedded in the intangible aspects of political formations including the imaginaries, cosmological references, and emotive attachments, this paper argues that it is essential to centralize theories that emerge from the very geographies we are ethnographically and historically focusing on.

KEYWORDS

Imaginary; decolonizing anthropology; Islamic politics

Despite the anthropologists' decades-long studies and interventions against Eurocentric hegemony on the term 'imaginary', the term is still used to denote the unreal or the irrational in the broader social sciences literature. This categorical dualism created significant theoretical obstacles in analyzing contemporary political movements and the imaginative forces that shape, connect, and expand them (Ayoob 2004; Cavanaugh 2002; Hogan 1992; Katznelson and Jones 2010; Shumsky 2018; Tounsel 2021). The political transformation at stake is something we social scientists are trying to make sense of. The political discourses are driven by ambitious aspirations like 'Make America Great Again' or 'Britain First'. The same pattern can be observed in Turkey, where President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's revivalist imperial dreams and neo-Ottoman aspirations operate through similar imaginative mechanisms as these Western populist movements (Sehlikoglu 2021a). Using hazy terms such as post-truth or irrational to explain the appeal of these movements reflects the need for historically sensitive and ethnographically

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grounded formulations of imagination and its political currency – with the power to shape political subjectivities and collective action.

A systematic study of how imaginaries operate is even more urgent for specific contexts. Islamist movements ranging from Erdoganism in the Balkans and the Middle East (Cagaptay 2009; Cetin 2014; Küçük and Türkmen 2018; Raudvere and Onur 2023; Rüma 2010; Tabak 2016; Walton 2010; Yavuz 1998), Pashtun Tahafuz movement, Jama'at-e-Islami in Pakistan or Hefazat-e-Islam in Bangladesh (Ahmad 2009; Iqtidar 2011; Riaz 2012; Uddin 2023) enchant a large and ethnically diverse following beyond national borders, by intimately connecting them to each other through emotive elements against the colonial powers, and with dreams of just Islamic polities and futures. A thorough study, offering new theories, would also contribute to avoiding the problematic trope of the 'irrational Muslim' (Lewis 1990; Peterson 2007; Stephens 2014).

The existing literature on contemporary political Islam and Islamic populisms across these diverse regions easily fails to capture the interconnected nature of imaginative forces for two reasons: (1) The vast transregional space spanning from the Balkans to Bengal defies conventional area studies categories, which typically divide this connected zone into separate regions like 'Middle East', 'South Asia', and 'Southeast Europe'; and (2) Rationality-oriented Eurocentric theories are limited in their ability to grasp and analyze the imaginative forces that are at stake. Understanding elements such as emotional attachments to charismatic leaders (*khalifa*), pre-colonial nostalgia, post-traumatic fantasies, impossible aspirations, and political dreams around a global *ummah* (Muslim Nation) require a broader theoretical framework and new methodological approaches in tracing those connections – one of which is combining historical and anthropological research.

The main question I ask in this paper is: how can we expand our understanding of the formation of populist Islamic political milieus through the imaginative, that does not fall into the dualistic traps of reductionism and rather offer new theoretical frameworks? And if so, how can we use historical references of the diverse yet still interconnected Islamic political movements while simultaneously avoiding the reductionist and misplaced Eurocentric categories that continue to dominate academic debates – categories that flatten complex political imaginaries into simplistic binaries of rational/irrational, modern/traditional, or progressive/regressive?

The persistent scholarly and vernacular tendency to position imaginative realms in opposition to reason, truth, or rationality perpetuates problematic Cartesian dualisms whose explanatory power falters beyond – and often within – Eurocentrism. Even where such dualistic frameworks retain some analytical utility, they present methodological challenges on two fronts. First, through the culturally contingent nature of the real-imaginary distinction, where the boundary between these domains proves perpetually mutable, context-dependent, and permeable across varying social, spatial, and temporal configurations. Second, through the oversimplification of what is a much more complex spectrum of real-imaginary relations. Consequently, anthropological investigations into imaginative realms represent an emerging theoretical frontier offering new conceptual approaches.

It is, therefore, somewhat agreed in anthropology that imaginative realms are to be studied as separate realities with distinctive social operations and particular political ramifications (Asad 1996; Engelke 2002; Saglam 2024; Wolfe 1997). This scholarship has yet to address the new populist imaginaries in the Islamic movements worldwide. That

is despite the recent work suggesting and highlighting the crucial historical and contemporary interconnectedness across the Islamic movements (Henig 2016; Li 2019; Marsden and Henig 2019) and their populist imaginaries (Sehlikoglu 2021a).

This paper has two aims. First, it pushes for recognizing the importance of imaginaries as political currency. It responds to the call for novel and more fluid heuristic theories, along with more careful ethnographic rigour. These theories not only provide a new way of studying and understanding Islamist politics and their intangible elements but also challenge established ideas about the social formation of political ideologies and movements. It joins the growing ethnographic and decolonial approach that complicates the notions of reason, reality, and rationality in understanding political imaginaries. Second, it particularly confers with several other scholars of Muslim societies who distanced themselves from various Eurocentric theories that failed to capture the complexity of imaginative realms and instead attempted to link those realms to a form of reality and of *truth* (Abenante and Vicini 2017; Desjarlais and Jason Throop 2011; Doostdar 2018; Ghoochani 2017; Mittermaier 2011; Pandian 2015; Saglam 2024; Talebi 2012; Taneja 2012; Vicini and Di Puppo 2024).

It accomplishes these two aims by introducing a heuristic concept, 'takhayyul' (tahayyul/تخيل), that has been pivotal for examining the imaginative aspects inherent in the political movements. *Takhayyul* is often translated simply as 'imaginary', yet it has deep roots in Classical Arab scholarship (CAS), the scholarship in the works of al-Kindi, Ibn Arabi, Al-Farab, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Sīna, and others.[1] Takhayyul refers to a particular faculty, a human capacity, through which perception is achieved and enhanced (Van Gelder and Hammond 2009). As explored in the following pages*, takhayyul* refers to both imaginative and imaginary realms, simultaneously. *Takhayyul* thus enables the type of imagination that has a *potential* to turn the impossible into reality. Building on the debates in CAS, I offer *takhayyul* as the terrestrial imagination that is simultaneously realistic and worldly yet also prophetic and Godly; therefore it informs doxastic thinking and political action.

The theoretical framework of *takhayyul* to address what I call 'the imaginative landscapes of Islamist politics', the interconnective nature of the Islamic political imaginaries is also based on the initial findings of a five-year project that took place in eleven countries across what the late Shahab Ahmed famously coined as Balkans-to-Bengal Complex (BtB) (2015).[2] The theory I offer in this paper is already advanced by CAS of philosophy and social thought that evolved over 700 years across those very same geographies. By centreing theories developed within the regions being studied rather than imposing Western philosophical frameworks, this approach challenges the common academic practice of analysing non-Western phenomena exclusively through Eurocentric lenses – a practice that often claims universal applicability while ignoring rich intellectual traditions outside the West (Mignolo 2018).

Islamic populism and interconnectivities: across Balkans-to-Bengal complex

It is not uncommon for scholars working on political imaginaries to find ways of moving beyond the conventions of borders (of nation-states) or of area studies. Although neither of them works on Islam nor on the geographies I do, Caroline Humphrey's (2003), Jack

Goody's (2015), and Chris Hann's (2016) work on Eurasia as they push beyond the 'Atlantic bias' and trace historical and contemporary connectivities, have inspired me in this pursuit – to think and formulate geographical categories differently. Built on Goody's approach (2015), Hann pushes for the term Eurasia to correct the bias that somehow irons out the significant differences and interconnections between Asia and Europe (Hann 2015, 2016). This conceptual approach benefits contemporary studies by fostering a comparative historical anthropology that challenges Western-centric narratives of world history while examining economic, historical, social, and political movements across this expansive region. Similarly, to understand what I call 'the imaginative landscapes of Islamic politics' we need a geographical framework that captures the interconnections transcending conventional territorial boundaries.

In an attempt to address this need, the late Harvard scholar of Islamic intellectual history, Shahab Ahmed (2015), has introduced the term Balkans-to-Bengal Complex (BtB), the vast region from contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina and spreading to the Eastern end of Bangladesh, encapsulating Southeastern Europe, the Middle East, and Central and West Asia. He did so to move beyond the limits of area studies (as imposed by the Eurocentric academia as an institution) in his reportedly manifesto-like volume *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. The interconnectivity of the Islamic movements is so hard to grasp through the conventional area studies, that BtB has been used and become a significant geographical reference amongst the scholars of Islam and Islamic politics (Bauer 2021; Ewing and Corbett 2019; Hefner 2018; Ingram 2018; Mandaville 2020; Marsden and Henig 2019; Osella and Soares 2020).

The geographical framework in this analytical approach matters, also since the challenge in studying interconnectivities across diverse Islamist and Islamic politics (Devji 2005), let alone the imaginaries, is not divorced from the challenge of defining what is *Islamic*. This challenge has attempted to be remedied in different ways. While Talal Asad (1986, 1993) has famously introduced the term 'discursive tradition', as an attempt to rectify Clifford Geertz' (Geertz 1971) historically flattening reading of Islam across Morocco and Indonesia and his ontological essentialism in terms like 'Islamic consciousness'[3]; Marshall Hodgson ([1974] 2009) has offered a distinction between Islam and Islamicate, facilitating separate analytical frameworks for individual and non-individual operations of Islam. The particular need to offer a geographical reference beyond the conventions of area studies that encapsulates socio-political connections in the lives of Muslims living in diverse parts of the world offers a politically and scholarly intricate challenge. While Cemil Aydın (2017) disputed the historical inaccuracy of the category 'the Muslim World', its broader connections are not to be dismissed, as he also demonstrated.

In his posthumously published book, Ahmed developed a sophisticated framework for understanding what constitutes 'Islamic' thought and practice, as indicated by his title 'What is Islam?' His concept of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex first appears when he describes how Ibn Sīna's (Avicenna) theology was taught consistently for over centuries (from the fourteenth to the nineteenth Centuries) at *madrasa*s thoughout North Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans, and extending across Central and East Asia (18–19). The term Balkans to Bengal, or, as he later on specifically calls the 'Balkans-to-Bengal complex' (p.32), or 'Balkans-to-Bengal canon/region' (p.44), made an immediate sense to several groups of Muslims and scholars of Islam and especially those who have been in intellectual engagement with multiple geographies and had experienced the

moments when they discovered traceable similarities and connections in terms of vocabularies and cosmological references.

Indeed, the initial findings of an ongoing research project that I am leading, reflect on the imaginative, discursive, and aspirational interconnectivities between diverse political movements across the BtB. Our starting point was to study the historically, political, and socially interconnected Islamic political landscape of the BtB by focusing specifically on the contemporary imperial Islamist political dreams, in the homes of the three greatest Islamic Empires often referred to as Islamdom: Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal/Timurid. The ethnographic fieldwork sites across the BtB ended up offering a non-coherent ethnographic framework, as expected, because of their intertwined spaces, histories, communities, and post-imperial trajectories. Although political dreams are calibrated differently in each one of these three regions that we designed as post-Ottoman, post-Safavid, and post-Mughal, imagination still holds much currency within their discursive and aspirational references to use nostalgia as a political power. They have been using very parallel elements of nostalgia to pre-Western colonial times, often using the periods before those colonial encounters as the ideal and most prosperous periods of their past. The set of shared vocabularies in religious terminologies and other cosmological elements, such as in references to friendships, intimacies, devotion, and disappointment, was also striking. Yet, in particular, political dreams are calibrated differently. For instance, while focusing on Turkey required looking closely at its desire to achieve leadership in the Muslim world, its neo-Ottoman self-imaginaries and the ways in which Turkey's imperial-oriented populism has been using the discourses around colonialism, Iran has been more oriented towards what it means to live in the *aftermath* of political imaginaries, after the dreams of resurrecting a just Islamic society has faded away. These differences in calibration do not only help with a comparative perspective. Rather, they offer an interconnected landscape of imaginaries where political visions, dreams, and aspirations travel and circulate across borders, tailoring themselves to local and temporal dynamics.

It is essential to remind ourselves that the geography that connected the three Islamic Empires that span across the BtB hosted an influential scholarship of *madrasas* (universities) for centuries, and the language of education for sciences and social sciences was Arabic. It is also one of our critical reflections that the primacy of Arabic scholarship holds beyond the remit of BtB. Especially the scholarship on Islamic politics and political movements in Southeast Asia suggests the imaginative connections on political Islam stretch in fact far beyond the BtB (Hadiz 2016). In line with the recent critiques of the limits of the term BtB (Marsden and Henig 2019), the classical scholarship is quite significant in the Islamic regions ignored by the term BtB, especially in South East Asia and Eastern Africa.

The scholarly and historical interconnectivities across the BtB in their cosmological references have taken another turn when combined with the colonial history as a shared experience, including for those such as Iran, which was never colonized but could not have escaped from its cultural colonialism. Colonialism as a shared experience has resulted in the circulations of a number of Islamic texts that are revisiting the ideas of resistance (jihad), Islamic resurgence, and Muslim suffering. The references collected in the interviews conducted during our five-year research project across the BtB include how today's Turkey owes its independence from the threat of colonialism to Muslim India's financial support (dramatic descriptions of women sending off their golden

bracelets given to them as wedding gifts) in the early twentieth century or how Palestine and Bosnia and Herzegovina were both suffering due to their Muslimhood at the same time.

Further, the affective and emotive aspects of the followers' enchantment to Islamist political movements surface as another shared aspect. For instance, the idea of 'Muslim Suffering' (*mazlum*) became a shared sentiment amongst Muslims in 1990s across the BtB. The act of genocidal violence against Bosnian Muslims in 1995 and the first Intifada in Palestine were portrayed as the inevitable fate of Muslims across the globe: to be victims of suffering. The idea of Muslim suffering is supported by the narratives of how the earliest followers of Prophet Mohammad were oppressed and tortured (*zulm*-ظلم) at the hands of idol-worshippers (*zalim*). The word *zulm* means tyranny and oppression, but it also means darkness, and the darkest time of the night is just before the dawn. The *takhayyul*, the imaginative political of *zulm* is crucial since it not only connects space (Bosnia and Herzegovina to Middle East, to South Asia) and time (600s, 1990s), but it also promises the *mazlum* better days if they hold onto Islam, like early Muslims did. Islamist resurgences, therefore, tap into and generate emotions, collective affect, and desires that enchant 'the masses' and turn those elements into political currency.

The historical interconnectedness imposed by the imperial Islamic past across the BtB informs and shapes the ways these political actors tap into the imaginative capacities of their potential followers that is deeply rooted in their audiences' various social references, religious cosmologies, nationalist discourses, resentments, and other imaginative realms. Islamist actors appropriate those existing affective and emotive registers to further their highly ambitious, often universalist politics (Li 2019), including the dream of resurrecting the Islamic Empires or of connecting them under a unified leadership for the Muslims in their region.

Anthropology of the imaginative

Like other intangible concepts such as intimacy, desire, agency, and temporality (see Sehlikoglu 2015, 2016, 2018, 2021b), imagination is one of the most captivating concepts for anthropologists and non-anthropologists alike. The phenomena that fall into imaginary realms are simultaneously about the psyche and the social. The narratives about them are shared, exchanged, and collectively expanded. The theories of reason and mind neighbour the analytical discussions about the imaginary realms.

Further, there is a tendency to use the word imagination almost as a filler for the inexplicable. It may be used to refer to a diverse range of matters encountered during the fieldwork, including fantasies, dreams, even aspirations (combining hope and imagination) and capacities of comprehension and envisioning (an unimaginable).

Several anthropologists have pointed out the almost unreliable nature of imagination and the realms of the imaginative (Salazar 2012). Stankiewicz (2016) also famously challenged the reliability of the concept of imaginary/imagination as a theoretical framework, for lacking a conceptual grounding. He successfully guides us through the different strands in studies of imagination, ranging from 'horizon of possibility' represented by Kant and Castoriadis, to an 'analytical-hermeneutic imagination' represented by Geertz and Crapanzano. The conclusion he draws based on these multiplicities and unreliabilities, to which I do agree almost completely, brings him to a conclusion different than

mine, though. Rather than providing a ground for a more reliable theory of imagination as I am offering here, he refutes imagination-imaginary as an analytical device/trope, since, in his conclusion, they do little 'to illuminate these complexities' and instead 'blur analytical and theoretical nuance' (807). In a much less detailed effort in describing his reasons and connecting his critique to the broader literature, Ingold also finds the term imaginary unreliable and refers to it as a 'modish alternative to the more traditional notions of culture or worldview' (2021, 4).

This particular scholarly terrain is in part a result of a prolonged analytical neglect of the imaginary realms specifically in political analysis for almost a century. What happened instead was that, imaginaries and the imaginative realms, the two interlaced concepts, along with the cosmologies through which they connect to one another, are repeatedly lumped together under the category of *belief*. It is in this Cartesian framework that what I call 'dualist genesis' was formed. In turn, realms of politics are constructed by rationality and reason, and realms of belief are constructed by imagination and the unreal. Indeed, at the very heart of anthropology lies a scholarly (Ewing 1994) and methodological (Bialecki 2014) atheism. This epistemological atheism then feeds into a failure to adequately capture the political imaginaries that are also Islamic, religious, or Godly.

To elaborate, Cartesian approach to the imaginary realms rooted in early anthropology's bias towards their research 'subjects', creating artificial distinctions that continue to shape our understanding. This approach imposed a singular, Eurocentric separation between the real and the imaginary, suggesting that those who seemingly couldn't differentiate dreams from reality lack a 'theory of mind' (Spencer 1895) – the ability to understand and differentiate between reality and beliefs. Edward B. Tylor (1871) exemplified this thinking when he coined 'animism', to describe belief in spiritual entities, characterizing it as an elementary attempt to comprehend the distinctions between life and death, or waking and dreaming states.[4] Even more sophisticated approaches, such as Bloch's (1970) differentiation between nocturnal dreams and 'yet-to-be-conscious' diurnal reveries, maintained this fundamental separation. The consequence was profound: when studying non-Western societies (problematically labelled as 'primitives'), early anthropologists created false compartmentalisations, categorizing interconnected realms of social life as either 'religious' or 'political' based on Western taxonomies. This artificial separation between belief/religion and rationality/politics represents exactly the dualistic thinking that takhayyul transcends by recognizing how the imaginative, the political, and the spiritual are fundamentally entangled rather than opposed.

In other words, the dualist genesis establishes a false binary between religious and political spheres based purely on Eurocentric assumptions. Furthermore, this dualist genesis has created lasting damage in social studies by embedding a fundamental methodological bias in how we approach the study of different societies' political and religious institutions.[5] My critique centres on how this categorical separation between religion and politics created lasting methodological damage in studying political formations, which is different from Needham's (1972) critique of belief that focused on its linguistic and philosophical limitations as a cross-cultural category. This dualist genesis not only affected how we approach religious and political practices but also how we theorize imagination and comprehension in political movements. This bias continues to influence contemporary scholarship, making it difficult to understand political formations that don't conform

to Eurocentric categories of analysis. The deep connections between the political and imaginary realms, then, get less and less visible.

James Wiley is another figure who systematically addresses the perpetual effects of this dualist genesis (2016). He points out that '(e)mpirical social scientists tended to reduce politics to economic, social, or psychological processes while normative political philosophy tended to reduce it to metaphysics or ethics' (10). As he suggests, this causes 'methodological disputes between political scientists and political theorists', resulting in the core problem of 'devaluation of the political' (2016). To underline the severity of the harm caused, he concludes by explaining that 'if most political theorists start with ethics, human nature, language, metaphysics, or method, and deduce theories of politics from them, theorists of the political proceed in the opposite direction' (11). This is interesting since the very dynamics that caused the devaluation of the political in one scholarly circle then simultaneously resulted in centralizing reason-oriented analysis in political theories.

The dualist genesis restrains epistemological and methodological approaches that also, amongst other issues, result in inadequate or depleted delineation of the imaginative elements in political formations.[6] As soon as the belief is juxtaposed against the political reason, complex operations of the imaginary realms are also immediately juxtaposed against the factual, the real, and the reasonable. That is despite anthropology's enthusiastic interest in the intangible realms, such as magic, witchcraft, ghostly and spiritual beings, and dreams.

Thanks to the poststructuralist turn, recent work enabled us to look closely at the imaginary realms. They have instead theorized them as an element of subjecthood, with its ability to escape from the systems of control (Luhrmann 2006; McNay 2008; Moore 2011; Ortner 2005; Pile 2008). Specifically, anthropology started providing a distinct vantage point from which to study political movements by incorporating affective (Fadil 2009; Stewart 2007; Winegar 2012), emotive (Davies and Spencer 2010; Hage 2009; Lutz and White 1986; Ozyurek 2018), and imaginative aspects such as dreams (Edgar 2006; Ewing 1990; Gonzalez-Vazquez 2014; Mittermaier 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Stewart 2017), spirits (Gordon 2008; Kwon 2008; Mueggler 2001; Ngai 2005) and aspirations (Chua 2014; Liberatore 2016; Schielke 2009).

The imaginary realms are also simultaneously social, intelligible, and meaningful in the way they can be transmitted, shared, and exchanged. This makes the imaginary something that can be studied and theorized ethnographically. As we learn from Peter Collins (2016), Namibian youths at Rundu Graphics re-imagined their lives and those of their peers beyond their immediate realities through music, studio work, and religious preaching. This imaginative process allowed them to envision a world of success, limitless possibilities, and redemption, demonstrating imagination's transformative power in reshaping both personal and communal lives.

Several anthropologists have thus been contributing to the formulation of the imaginative realms through deep and detailed ethnographic research, partly as a remedy to the dualist genesis. Scholars such as Pun Ngai (2005), Avery F. Gordon (2008), and Heonik Kwon (2008) have famously expanded the realms of imaginaries beyond individual mental processes to focus on their collective dimensions. In their work, collective memories and emotions take form through culturally meaningful intangible beings – such as ghosts, spirits, or ancestral presences – that become socially active agents within

communities. These shared imaginative entities not only facilitate social connections but also provide communities with ways to process and escape from the *unimaginable* and unbearable aspects of life. Others connected the social and the self in their studies of dreams, such as Amira Mittermaier's (2011), Charles Stewart's (2017), Elisabeth Kirtsoglou's (2010) offer us a careful reading of the theories of the self and *other*. Where the self and other connect, often through the psyche, is the playground of the imaginative realms. In that connection, narratives often become quite significant as they interpret and translate the imaginaries into the everyday. In the literature on *dreams*, Mittermaier questioned the way we formulate them not as a realm of the psyche, but as the realm of the unknown, that is to be better studied beyond the Eurocentric references and frameworks. She proposed to study *al-ghayb* with its social and political value (Mittermaier 2017), and connected her proposal to the wider studies on the anthropology of invisible actors (ie. Gordon 2008; Kwon 2008; Mueggler 2001), which fit well within the anthropology of Islam as stimulating debates on the invisible, the intangible, and spirituality have recently demonstrated (Al-Qobbaj, Marshall, and Alsaud 2024; Bubandt, Rytter, and Suhr 2019; Hauter 2023; Schmeding 2024; Vicini 2024; Vicini and Di Puppo 2024).

Several scholars have adopted Durkheim's concept of *collective consciousness* – a term originally from psychology that he expanded to sociology. While I approach this concept cautiously, it nonetheless helps us recognize crucial moments when shared emotions and reactions become so intense that they transcend or deviate from established institutional frameworks (Cohen and Rapport 1995; Combs and Kripner 2008; Duncan 1999; Némedi 1995). As Mazzarella (2019) argues, these heightened emotional states should not be dismissed merely as regressive enchantments or signs of delayed modernity in so-called 'magical' postcolonial states. Rather, they represent a universal social dynamic that exists in all societies, but is often obscured by the appearance of smooth institutional functioning.

Individuals globally rely on implicit, influential images and concepts, ranging from extraordinary fantasies to ordinary daydreams, to form diverse and frequently contradictory identifications of the Self and Other. Imaginations of the world (including Others) and of oneself as an individual or a societal component are always interconnected (Castoriadis 1987). These constructs, whether descriptive or prescriptive, can perpetuate subtle power dynamics and privileges that may not be apparent to those who have internalized them. While social imaginaries contribute to group cohesion (Taylor 2004), a significant challenge lies in the discrepancy between projected ideals and aspirations, on the one hand, and perceived and experienced realities, on the other.

These anthropological insights into collective imagination demonstrate how the imaginary transcends individual psychological processes to become potent social forces that shape political realities. Anthropologists have shown how imagination functions not merely as individual fantasy but as a shared resource that communities draw upon to make sense of their worlds, challenge power structures, and envision alternative futures. Through detailed ethnographic attention to dreams, spirits, collective memories, and shared affective states, anthropology offers unique methodological tools for understanding the social life of the imaginary. These approaches provide crucial groundwork for the theoretical framework of *takhayyul*, which builds upon and extends these anthropological insights by incorporating classical Islamic scholarship's sophisticated understanding of imagination's relationship to truth, perception, and political transformation.

Takhayyul as a theoretical framework

This paper represents a epistemological shift away from applying Western theoretical frameworks to non-Western contexts, instead embracing intellectual traditions that emerged from within the studied regions themselves. In particular, I focus on *takhayyul* as a concept with deep historical roots in Classical Arab Scholarship (CAS) that offers sophisticated theoretical tools for understanding political imagination in contemporary Islamic contexts. Evolving from the Platonian theory of metaphysics found in the 'Cave Allegory', *takhayyul* was first defined in CAS in the ninth century as the imaginative reflection of unseen *truth* (*hakikat/haqiqa/* حقيقة). The Cave Allegory, simply put, describes human access to the truth as an indirect one as humans are enchained into a cave facing the opposite of the cave entrance. While the truth, the outside world, is behind them, under the lights, bright and shiny, the chained humans can only see the shadowed reflections of that truth on the cave wall. This powerful imagery critiques humans as those imprisoned to worldly matters, desires, and even norms while locating the truth as something too powerful for humans to face directly. The way truth is formulated has also informed the way diverse imaginaries are formulated in CAS.

CAS and even Sufism had long been fascinated by this allegory (Adamson 2006; Al-Kindī 1950; Griffel 2010). It allowed a strong theory of truth and imaginary, which did provide a metaphysical depth to the truth, allowing the scholars to carry a strong appetite for sciences. The concept *takhayyul* was developed in CAS by diverse polymaths of that period, many of whom were also philosophers. Specifically, the first recorded fascination by the concept imagination can be found in Al-Kindi (Adamson 2006; Al-Kindī 1950) in the 800s where Aristotle's *phantasia* (Φαντασία) was translated as *khayal*(خيال). In Aristotle's formulation in De Anima, *phantasia* is similar to perception yet it also offers a capacity for movement (affect) (Aristotle 1986; Watson 1982). One of the most significant contributions to the concept's evolution was accomplished by Al-Farabi (Macy 1986; Matar 1996) of the tenth century. Al-Farabi, just as his modern Western peers did over a thousand years later (Stankiewicz 2016; Coates and Sehlikoglu forthcoming), felt a need to introduce a diverse range of projections of imagination and imaginaries, in his book *Treatise*. These projections include *takhayyul muhakhayyile*, *yukhayyil* and *yukhayyal*, each referring to diverse nuances in different forms of imaginaries and their ability to connect to reality, expand one's ability to comprehend it, to imagine a better future and thus transform/improve their contemporary state. Matar (1996) draws our attention to how Al-Farabi deals with *takhayyul* is very particular as he both complicated the concept and carefully removed the neighbouring concepts, such as *wahm* (speculation or doubt) from his formulation.[7] These negative concepts had formerly been discussed by Al-Farabi's predecessors each time *takhayyul* or *khayal* were explored. Yet, in Matar's account, Al-Farabi carefully avoided those negative connotations, which enabled him to implant *takhayyul* conceptually into truth.

The depth of Al-Farabi's formulation does not end there. He also offered different stages of imaginaries that can be achieved if the faculty of imagination is advanced. He introduced both action and creativity to the upper stages of it, *takhayyul* being on the top layer. According to Al-Farabi's formulation, the first layer, *khayal* is the end result of imagination, aka the imagined, and can appear both in humans and animals. The next stage *takhyil,* however, is more about action and either directs one to action, or, at

least, manifests a desire towards it. The third stage, *takhayyul,* is about creativity (Matar 1996, 102). *Takhayyul* thus specifically refers to creative imagination, yet it is immediately intrinsically embedded into *haqiqa,* the truth. This connection means that expanding one's capacity for imagination requires moral and spiritual development – an investment in one's virtues that allows imagination to operate within the realm of truth rather than mere fantasy. In other words, through Al-Farabi's formulation, *takhayyul* did not simply obtain a meaning of truth and creative and action-oriented imaginaries. He also introduced the *ethics* of imagination to the CAS.

The reason as to why imagination could acquire such dynamism, multiplicity, and agency is due to the way reality is structured. Built on the Cave Allegory and expanding on it, the CAS in both philosophy and sciences, reality is not formulated through dualism (i.e. real vs unreal), but instead through trialism: the sensible, the imaginable, and the intelligible. This trialist structure is suggested to offer a 'great advantage over dualist thought that proposes only two realms of the sensible, or matter, and the intelligible, or ideas' (Marks 2018, 335). *Takhayyul* then had been very dynamically used as a repeating reference concept to signify ethical imagination and knowledge in the works of Ibn Arabi (Corbin 2013) and Ibn Sīna (Avicenna) (Burrell 1992; Karnes 2011; Sebti 2005; Yaldir 2009), for hundreds of years across the BtB. In this formulation, *takhayyul* does not simply offer a connection between the truth and imagination as a continuum, it suggests a continuum that is not necessarily dualist.[8]

Takhayyul is also theorized as distinctly different from an abstract imagination (*tasawwur*), which refers to an ability to visualize. Unlike *takhayyul*, *tasawwur* is not perceived as something that can lead to an immediate action, political or otherwise, nor is it connected to the truth, or to future reality. For centuries*, takhayyul* was widely seen to be the essential element of estimative and transformative power in CAS theories as well as by ruling elites (Rosenthal 1958).

Although *takhayyul* has been significant in the way ethical and later on political imagination is constructed and acted upon, studies of it have so far been limited to historians of philosophy, sciences, and Arab literature (Adamson 2006; Alon 1989; Druart 2016; El-Bizri 2005; Hammond 2008; Heath and Sina 1992; Heinrichs 1978, 2008; Lameer 1994; Matar 1996; Ossipova 2013; Shafi 2009). The significance of imagination in everyday politics and its effects in the formation of today's populist Islamisms has been ignored, even though *takhayyul*, has long been the crucial/critical element in social, political, and military changes and transformations across the BtB.

The reason why *takhayyul* leads to action or practice is that it is suggested to have emerged from, or rooted in, a celestial reality where prophetic knowledge is also bestowed. The realm of *takhayyul* can only be known by terrestrial imagination, but, because it is connected to the celestial truth, *takhayyul* is essential for positive social and political transformation. A common example given in support of this is that the Prophet Muhammad remained in a state of dreaming for six months and was made ready for the social, physical, and emotional burdens of his Prophecy, which lasted for twenty-three years. This is why it is suggested that dreams (*alem-al khayal* / state of imagination) are the one forty-sixth part of the religion (Hermansen 2001), mathematically referring to the six-month dreaming period.

In Classical Arab and Islamic philosophy, *takhayyul* is formulated as a human capacity to expand the possibilities. At one level, it is not too different from comprehension, which,

in humans, is believed to be always limited. As an example, someone who has never seen the ocean, as stated by Attar, can only *imagine* it with reference to the smaller amounts of water they have seen. This example, appearing in various intellectual texts during Islamic revivalism, is used to support the importance of *takhayyul* in political and even military expansions (Apaydın 1997; Çelebi 2010; Edgar 2006; Guenon 2008; Hermansen 2001).

More contemporary theories on politics and imagination, although they move beyond the belief-politics dichotomy created by the dualist genesis and attempt to capture political imagination, they continue to juxtapose imagination against reason. Most notably, Arjun Appadurai (1996, 2000) theorizes the ways in which globalization forms and perpetuates not 'real' but imagined connections and imagined worlds. Unlike *takhayyul*, the imagination in Appadurai's work does not create but mediates the operations of consciousness and their engagements with the world. Similarly, Walter Benjamin's *dream-world* is also insufficient. Arguing that it is created by political actors to enchant the public to form a collective mental state, it remains outside of their reality (Buck-Morss 2000). As they do not move beyond the imagination-reality binary, they then leave a very narrow room for possibility for transformation within the political-imaginary continuum. On the one hand, imagination is already about the ability to *visualize* reality as well as possibility. It is an exercise in being able to picture both the possible and the impossible. It is related to being able to move beyond the limits diverse power mechanisms have been offering to us. Yet, at this point, the very act of envisioning possibilities as realistic has been left underexplored. *Takhayyul* theory does that by removing the responsibility of judgement from the people. The *haqiqa* (the unseen truth, or the ultimate reality) is not something we, as worldly beings, can know with certainty. Instead, it is an object of desire for those searching for it.

The very way possibility is embedded into *takhayyul* shares a resemblance to Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis' 'The Imaginary Institution of Society'.[9] According to Castoriadis, whose scholarship I find very close to the CAS – probably due to his embeddedness in the ancient Greek philosophy, 'the imaginary does not come from the image in the mirror or from the gaze of the other. Instead, the 'mirror' itself and its possibility, and the other as a mirror, are the works of the imaginary, which is creation ex nihilo'. (1987, 3) In this sense, the creation of the image is agentive.

Takhayyul offers an epistemic break with this binary, and a form of imaginary intertwined with the making of the world. As such, *takhayyul* refers to a unique realm where the imaginary and the real are inseparable and indistinguishable from each other. *Takhayyul* is more deeply connected with the reality and cosmology of the local followers of Islamist and populist Islamic actors.

Takhayyul is drawn into complicated shared histories and religious terrains as it encounters and rubs up against the ethical imagination of others. Like ethical imagination, *takhayyul* deals with the self in its relation to others, both proximate (other Muslims) and distant (the non-Muslim distant other), and as such provides an opening for multiple historical possibilities. In contexts of social change and transformation, *takhayyul* is brought into play with the advent of new information and new ideas, new ways of being and acting, and new forms of representation and their mediation. However, *takhayyul* does not always involve conscious thought. It is informed by cosmological references, which have been established through hundreds of years of interaction,

belief, and political action across and beyond the BtB. Neither is it always based on a privileging of language, which is why *takhayyul* easily escapes from discursive analysis.

Takhayyul theory joins the relatively recent scholarship of the last fifteen years during which we have witnessed a more fundamental transformation in anthropology and in its study of the intangible and invisible (Bubandt, Rytter, and Suhr 2019) as well as calls for more anthropologies of the multiple forms of intangible realms. Even the psychoanalytic approach to dreams was criticized heavily for divorcing dreams from the social and collective elements and fixating on the individual dreamer (Hammond 2008; Heo 2013; Mittermaier 2012a; Shenoda 2012). This thread of thought provides a new way of studying and understanding Islamist movements, and challenges established ideas about the study of the social formation of political ideologies in general through an anthropology of imagination.

This theoretical shift towards understanding the collective and social dimensions of imaginative realms is exemplified in Ali Reza Doostdar's (2018) rigorous examination of supernatural uncertainties among urban middle-class groups in Tehran, Iran. He focuses on the power of modern scientific reason 'to adjudicate metaphysical truth, but this power cannot be separated from the broader esteem that Iranians accord the modern empirical disciplines' (2018, 7). He convincingly explains to us how this is different from *al-ghayb*, the unknown, yet it does test the limits of reality. By demonstrating how this differs from *al-ghayb* (the unknown) while still testing the limits of reality, Doostdar's work illustrates the importance of expanding our conceptual understanding of 'what is real ' – an expansion that parallels Boellstorff's (2010, 2016) explorations of reality in digital spaces and avatar lives.

This conceptual expansion is crucial because, as we must acknowledge, identification and fantasy often proceed through forms of unknowing and types of incomprehensibility. *Takhayyul* thus emerges as both a theoretical framework and a methodological tool that allows us to engage with these seemingly incomprehensible aspects that traditional disciplinary approaches have often ignored or dismissed. It provides a reference point for understanding how the imaginative, even when it appears to defy conventional comprehension, can be meaningfully studied as part of social and political life.

Power of possibilities, ambiguities, and other gray matters

The theoretical framework of *takhayyul* emerged during a period in CAS (roughly 700s to 1400s) when any knowledge was formulated as a probe rather than certainty – in a manner that left room for creativity and possibilities. Even Islamic knowledge itself, as studied by diverse scholars during that period, embraced ambiguity rather than certainty – a sharp contrast to the rigid doctrinal approaches found in many modern and post-colonial forms of Islam (Iqtidar 2020, 2024). In the contemporary forms of Islamic knowledge claims, we observe almost a rivalry of certainties. This historical contrast is crucial for understanding how *takhayyul* operates as a heuristic theoretical tool that embraces both possibility and truth. Supported by the Prophet's famous saying, the disagreements over knowledge, interpretations of Quran and Islam, had been perceived as a *blessing* in classical period. Thomas Bauer discusses this in his famous *Die Kultur der Ambiguität* (2011), later translated as *A Culture of Ambiguity* (2021) under a term he coins, 'cultural ambiguity'. He argues that the CAS has embraced and advanced ambiguity as a crucial

academic practice and explains that CAS diverges 'conspicuously from mainstream Western traditions, whether of classical or medieval times, which in many eras (although not all) rejected ambiguity'. (12) This historical approach to ambiguity helps to explain the etiquette of knowledge-production within which *takhayyul* emerged. Bauer compares this with Cartesian thinking. Whereas, in his account, Arab scholarship has rejected the idea of eliminating ambiguities by establishing strong critique against the ancient Greek ideas, such as, he explains, 'Aristotle's employment of the word *amphibolia* as a term for (syntactical) ambiguity, which for him means a linguistic blemish'. Instead, CAS embraced Greek figures like Heraclitus as he used ambiguity to render complexity (12-13). The culture of ambiguity embedded in political imaginaries, their limits, their ability to adapt to norms and resistance, and even their intelligibility are also crucial here. This wide array of ambiguity enables diverse political actors to turn imaginaries into political currency. The Islamist populist movements land themselves onto these ambiguities.

This classical appreciation of ambiguity's productive potential has recently been addressed by the scholars of Islam. Magnus Marsden (2005) and Samuli Schielke (2009), for instance, have demonstrated that ambivalences, multivocality, and contingencies shape the lives and actions of ordinary Muslims on a daily basis. Indeed, as this body of scholarship suggested, 'struggle, ambivalence, incoherence, and failure must also receive attention in the study of everyday religiosity' (Soares and Osella 2009, 11). A substantial body of literature challenges the scholarly tendency to treat paradoxes, inconsistencies, and self-contradictions as ethical weaknesses. Instead, this critical literature argues that such apparent contradictions should be viewed as opportunities to deepen and enrich our analysis (Dave 2019; Sehlikoglu 2018; Sehlikoglu and Kurt 2024). Further, several recent anthropological works provide us with both ethnographic guidance and theoretical confidence in making the ambiguities less ambiguous – not necessarily by repeating the ragged critique against Cartesian dualism but instead by offering us ethnographically-grounded theories that connect the ambiguous landscapes of native cosmologies vis-à-vis subjectivities. Notably, the 'anthropology of destiny' (Elliot and Menin 2018) offered a significant approach through a 'comparative anthropology of the multiple ways in which people conceptualise, imagine, and reckon with different forms of what we (they) call "malleable fixity"'. (293) A parallel reflective thinking on possibility, ambiguity, and imaginaries can be observed in Yonucu's (2023) recent work where she portrays us 'inspirational hauntings' in the lives of Turkey's Alevi and Kurdish revolutionaries. These hauntings draw power from past injustices while energizing future resistances, creating a distinctive temporal ambiguity. These contemporary explorations of ambiguity echo the theoretical richness that makes *takhayyul* such a powerful tool for understanding the transformative capacity of political imagination. The very tension Elliot and Menin addressed between fixity and malleability, or in Yonucu's temporal ambiguity, is also where *takhayyul* lies in CAS. While this angle is explored sporadically by anthropologists and studied more systematically by scholars of Islam, these parallel scholarly traditions have largely developed in isolation from one another. Moving forward, a more deliberate dialogue between anthropological approaches to ambiguity and Islamic scholarly traditions of *takhayyul* would enrich both fields – providing anthropology with historically grounded conceptual tools while bringing contemporary ethnographic insights to Islamic studies. Such interdisciplinary engagement represents a

promising path toward more nuanced understandings of political imagination and its transformative potential across diverse contexts.

Conclusion

Cartesian dualist thinking establishes a rickety starting ground to grasp both Islamic and non-Islamic populist resurgences. Roxanne Euben (1999), two and a half decades ago, called for 'broadening the parameters of political theory' (1999, 10). Centralizing non-Western theories of truth, knowledge, and reality is essential for this pursuit, a direction that aligns with current trends in anthropological theory.

The relatively recent anthropology of imagination offers a strong starting point, as addressed in this paper. However, there are two main positions necessary to seize how imaginative realms are made sense of by large followings. One is to engage with the maverick attempts in anthropology (Thomassen and Szakolczai 2019) to both theoretically and ethnographically capture the imaginative. The second is to excavate a scholarship that is already native to the geographies studied, not just by having evolved and advanced over hundreds of years, but by making sense to the very people whose imaginaries we attempt to theorize.

As anthropology has repeatedly revealed, imaginative realms are not necessarily juxtaposed with the real; rather, these two often coexist, intermingle, and feed one another. Yet, their conventional formulation leaves little room for multiplicities beyond the real-imaginative continuum. While the imaginary can possess various meanings within the same context, indicating the need for more nuanced and non-Eurocentric approaches, there remain methodological limitations in studying imaginative realms. These limitations can only be overcome by simultaneously engaging with native scholars,[10] both ancient and contemporary. Thus, this paper joins Euben's call by developing theoretical frameworks that emerge from ethnographic fieldwork while engaging with native scholarship.

Part of what I offer here aligns with 'European' theories about the constructed-ness of reality since human understandings (imaginaries) form the basis of these constructions (see the introduction to this issue). This convergence with theories from the Global North may reflect our analytic desire to categorize and organize social praxis into meaningful maps. Consequently, this endeavour to grasp the reverberations and operations of *takhayyul* might be viewed as a transfigured extension of 'European thought'.

At this critical moment when scholarship on Islamist politics needs theoretical approaches that can nuance (or move beyond?) binary understandings – of reason and dream, belief and reality, tangible and intangible, spiritual and political – *takhayyul* emerges. This paper offers not an absolute nor final, but a productive conversation by presenting *takhayyul* as a heuristic concept. Its significance lies in being both non-Eurocentric and native – emerging from and developed within the very geographical and intellectual traditions it studies. This theoretical rootedness enables *takhayyul* to capture nuances and complexities that might be missed by frameworks imposed from outside these traditions. The theoretical framework of *takhayyul*, originated from the geographies under ethnographic scrutiny and thus is well-positioned to understand the subtleties embedded within the intangible aspects of political formations – such as imaginaries, cosmological references, and emotive attachments. *Takhayyul* also enables us to reflect on how

geographical interconnectivity as historical and imaginative realms are interwoven and oriented towards the new political milieu. This non-Eurocentric theory provides a study vis-a-vis the political dreams that expand the imaginative capacity beyond physical and actual possibilities and which develop a shared Islamic vision and community.

Most importantly, *takhayyul* is offered not as an object of inquiry but as a heuristic tool for analysis, similar to performativity (Butler), habitus (Bourdieu) or parrhesia (Foucault). While often translated simply as imagination' (Lameer 1994), *takhayyul* refers to terrestrial yet celestial imagination. As a heuristic theory, it fundamentally challenges canonical studies and their rebuttals, providing sound theoretical ground for delineating how Islamist politics forge imaginative landscapes beyond nation-state borders and across time.

One of the conceptual challenges facing scholars of religion-based political movements lies in the very genealogies of religious studies. While this article provides only glimpses toward a comprehensive theoretical analysis, it opens space for future discussions of these complex interconnections.

Notes

1. What I refer to here as Classical Arab Scholarship is often referred to as the Golden Age of Islam. For the purpose of this paper, I use the term Arab Scholarship as the scholarly feature connecting the scientific and social scientific advancement was the language, something I explored elsewhere (Sehlikoglu 2024), which also includes Jewish and Christian scholars who published their work in the Arabic language.
2. These eleven countries are: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia., Lebanon, Turkey, Iran, Palestine, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.
3. For Asad's detailed critique that is written specifically on 'Islam observed', see his 1983 article 'Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz'.
4. For a thorough critique of Taylor's reductionist approach to dreams, see Mittermaier 2011.
5. There have been some notable attempts to turn this dualist approach into a productive analysis. Marshal Sahlin's work (2017a, 2017b) on the 'original political society', for instance, provided an enjoyable intellectual exercise within the limits of cartesian thinking yet they have not broken the zero-sum game.
6. I believe the Eurocentrism we are looking at is also deeply and highly masculinist in terms of its methods and epistemology, as several feminist and queer scholars later on addressed in the last three and a half decades. For further discussions, see Weiss 2011; Sundberg 2003; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 2016; Sehlikoglu 2018, Moore 1988; Abu-Lughod 1990; Stacey 1988.
7. Yet, in Ibn Sīna's more complete system, *wahm* (doubt) maintains a specific role as a faculty that processes meaning from sensible objects in non-sensible ways, functioning alongside but distinct from the imaginative faculties.
8. Ibn Sīna developed a sophisticated classification of the soul's faculties that helps explain the operation of *takhayyul*. He identified three manifestations of the soul (vegetative, animalistic, and rational), with the animal soul performing the functions of apprehension and sensation through both external and internal senses (Nusseibeh 2018; Sebti 2005). In this system, *takhayyul* emerges from the faculty *mukhayyila*, which works alongside sub-faculties, including *mutakhayyila* (sense of imagination) and *mufakkira* (intellectural/opinion). While common sense (*hiss mushtarak*) apprehends shared references, their imprints are preserved collectively through *al-khayal*. This framework has maintained continuity through Sufi teachings, even as its application in social sciences has been less consistent.
9. The original French copy of the book was published in 1975. In this article, however, I am citing the English translation of the book, published in 1987.
10. I am fully aware of the loaded nature of the term native. In this text, it is used simply as an intellectual and scholarly investment against imposing Eurocentrism.

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