Political secularism and religious differences in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract

It was long assumed that one of the main outcomes of a secular political order was to encourage both emancipation and political equality for all religions within a polity, including religious minorities. This paper contends that such an assumption is now widely questioned in both Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). We have seen that violence and intolerance against religious minorities, including Christians, Ahmadis and Alevis, has increased in several countries in the MENA, coinciding with, but not necessarily caused by the 2010/11 ‘Arab Uprisings’ and their aftermath (Fox, 2016). Sometimes this development is explained, including by right-wing populist politicians in Europe and elsewhere, as an inevitable consequence of deep-rooted inter- and intra-faith conflicts and/or Islam’s supposed ‘inherent intolerance’ (Haynes, 2016). Yet, the context for a widespread context of increasing intolerance and violence in the MENA is governing regimes’ attempts to maintain themselves in power by using divide-and-rule tactics, including vilifying religious minorities in the name of ‘nation building’ (ibid.). In addition, Europe has recently seen a continuing refugee crisis, rise of (mainly) right-wing populism, and an increase in some countries of terrorism linked to extremist Islam. These developments have helped stimulate growing polarisation in many European countries between non-Muslim majorities and Muslim minorities, leading to growing intolerance and, for many people, declining ability to live together with people who are culturally and/or religiously different (Isaacs, 2017). The paper examines the rise of political secularism and associated religion-based conflicts in both Europe and the MENA.

Introduction

Societies’ secularisation and associated political implications has long been an important focal point of political science. Today, European countries are uniformly characterised by a high degree of secularisation. In recent years, however, Europe has experienced increasing social and political importance of religious and cultural issues, including: frequent political statements from leaders of Christian churches and expressions of desire for equality by immigrant groups, including Muslims. In the countries of the MENA, the issue of the relationship between often-secular political elites and religious actors has for long been an important political consideration. While European countries have exhibited for decades strong and continuous signs of secularisation, the MENA displayed a different trajectory following formal withdrawal of European control of the region after World War II. Taken together, recent developments in both Europe and the MENA highlight the problematic nature of political secularism and its impact, inter alia, on many religious minorities.

At the heart of secularisation theory is the claim that as countries develop economically,
politically and culturally they become ‘modern(ised)’ and necessarily and irrevocably increasingly secular. As a result, religion fades from public prominence, leading to marginalisation and eventually public ‘demise’ (Bruce, 2009). It is now widely – although not universally – accepted, that, because events have not followed the linear path suggested by secularisation theory, then the theory itself is fundamentally flawed. Instead, it is often suggested: religion has returned to political prominence. ‘Even’ in Europe, a region exhibiting clear and continuing signs of secularisation, religion’s public role is now more significant than a few decades ago (Kratochwil and Dolezal, 2015; Leustean, 2013). In the MENA, on the other hand, while the formal political importance of religion, manifested, for example, in the power of religious political parties at the ballot box, is patchy and unclear, it is overall more significant today compared to a few decades ago (Cesari 2014; Hinnebusch, 2015). In both regions, it is now implausible to talk confidently of the irrevocable progress of secularisation and the inevitable public demise of religion.

This is not however to assume or claim that, while secularisation theory is undoubtedly flawed, then secularisation has stopped or even paused, much less reversed. Thus, the counter-claim – that religion has ‘returned from the dead’, to exhibit increasing political influence in both Europe and the MENA, leading to a position where it is (re)acquiring significant social and political power – is disputed. Instead, as Fox (2015) has recently argued, what we are witnessing is neither the simple and irrevocable decline of secularisation theory as an explanatory tool for the relationship between religion and politics nor its mirror image: religion’s unstoppable return to political prominence around the world, including in Europe and the MENA. Instead, this paper argues for a third interpretation of what is happening: a novel form of interaction between secularism and religiosity, what Fox (2015) calls the ‘secular-religious competition perspective.’ This refers to a ‘middle way’ between, on the one hand, the positivist predictions of secularisation theory (that is, the eventual, inevitable demise of public religion) and the ‘return of religion’ approach (that is, the claim that today religion is an unexpectedly powerful and widespread political actor, reassuming a highly significant role in political discourse and completion in many countries, even in those previously thought to be inexorably secularising).

The aim of this paper is to evaluate comparatively the theoretical power and empirical persuasiveness of the ‘secular-religious competition perspective’ in relation to in both Europe and the MENA. The paper’s main hypothesis is as follows: While secularisation theory remains a useful starting point to understand religion’s role in politics and society in both Europe and the MENA, it is not analytically appropriate to accept the claim of religion’s uniform public ‘rebirth’. Instead, as Fox (2015: 33) puts it, today political ‘secularism competes with religion in the political realm’, and outcomes vary from country to country and context to context. In other words, outcomes are variable and cannot be predicted simply by referring to the apparent ‘return’ of religion to political significance or prominence in many countries in the MENA and, to an extent, Europe.

The idea of a ‘secular-religious competition perspective’ is not sui generis. In recent years, several scholars, including Hurd (2008), Mavelli (2012), Wilson (2012), and Mavelli and Wilson (2016), have examined the ideological and political impact of ‘political secularism’. It is clear that secularism is a controversial and contested term. On the one hand, the term ‘secularism’ can imply that government remains neutral on the issue of religion. On the other hand, it can also
mean something quite different: government restricts public expressions of religion, sometimes severely, as in France and Turkey, in favour of strongly pro-secular state ideological choices (Barras, 2014). Gill (2008) reminds us that a government’s policies in relation to religion are to a considerable degree linked to the interests and preferences of incumbent political elites. Given that those with power normally wish to hold on to it and those aspiring to replace them seek to acquire it, then the support of a significant or powerful religion can be a key asset which politicians aspire to receive whether in power or challenging it. Thus, choices made by a governing regime are strongly influenced by political and ideological factors: ‘Secularism’ is not an inevitable outcome of an ‘invisible hand’ process of secularisation, separate from what government believes and does.

**Religion and secularism in Europe**

Today, various religious expressions are socially and politically active in many European countries. Until recently, this was virtually unthinkable, following swift post-World War II regional secularisation. The current ‘return of religion’ to social and political concern in Europe, the most secular of all regions, coincides with and is often, but not always, focused on the increasing prominence of Muslim communities. Across the region, Muslims are demanding religious, political and social equality. As a result, ‘Islam’ is now central to European debates about the relationship between religion and secularism. To understand what is happening in this regard, we need first to review the European debate about multiculturalism, pointing to a remodelling and re-assumption of our understanding of Islam’s public persona in the region’s countries.

As already noted, Europe is filled with secular countries. For the purposes of this paper, a country is ‘secular’ when religion does not have the right to be heard regularly and with authority in the public realm. This implies a situation whereby even traditionally powerful religious organisations, such as the Church of England, no longer have the right – or perhaps even the expectation – to consistently engage in public life and be listened to by government and ‘ordinary’ people. Secularisation does not however necessarily imply that Europeans are becoming less interested in spiritual matters (Davie, 2000). Rather, secularisation implies: (1) dwindling of social and moral influence of religious leaders and institutions, especially if they are established and traditional, such as the Church of England, and (2) government policies pursued without heed to specifically religious injunctions or interdictions. Finally, secularisation also leads to a compartmentalisation of societies with growing secular spheres and declining religious domains (George, 2016: 49-55)

Some scholars regard Europe’s secularisation as continuous and continuing (Bruce, 2009). Others contend that, despite undoubted signs of secularisation, religion is still institutionally and sometimes socially and/or politically powerful in many European societies (Berger, 1999). According to Davie (2000), many – perhaps most – Europeans still perceive themselves to be differentiated or significantly affected by religious and/or cultural criteria, usually Christianity; some manifestations are relevant to social and political issues, including:

- **Catholic/Protestant divisions, especially in Northern Ireland.** Religious-cultural divisions are the main social basis of competing political parties in Northern Ireland,
such as the Catholic/nationalist Sinn Fein and the Protestant/loyalist Democratic Unionist Party and Ulster Unionist Party.

- Christian political parties. Many European countries have Christian Democratic political parties, with varying popular and electoral appeal.

- A variety of church-state relationships.

Politically speaking, however, such concerns are only intermittently important publically— for example, in relation to Northern Ireland’s continuing cultural divisions following the 1998 ‘Good Friday’ agreement. The 1998 Agreement has led to something approaching ‘normal’ political life between unionists and republicans in the province, highlighted by the March 2017 funeral of Martin McGuinness, former IRA commander, where unionist and republican leaders publicly shook hands; a gesture unthinkable prior to the 1998 Good Friday agreement.

In Europe, there is however an issue of general and increasing prominence involving a particular faith: Islam, and its religious, cultural, social and political position. Important issues in this context include:


- Turkey’s bid to join the European Union. Fears of Islamic extremism/terrorism stimulate some Europeans to oppose mainly-Muslim Turkey’s bid to join the European Union. Would Turkey’s entry open Europe to increased infiltration from Islamist extremism and terrorism? Would Europe’s ‘Christian cultural identity’ be destroyed by admission of Turkey, with its 80 million – mostly Muslim – people?

- Religious, social and political position of Europe’s Muslim minorities. For many Muslims in Europe, Islam is an important basis of identity that impacts in various ways on Muslims’ religious, social, economic and political concerns and positions.

- Blasphemy issues. Many Muslims demand parity with Christianity in relation to attacks on their religion. Blasphemy – that is, irreverence toward supposed holy personages, religious artefacts, customs, and beliefs – is now a key civil liberties issue in many European countries, especially in relation to Islam.

The rest of this section examines the relationship between religion and secularism in Europe through a focus on Islam. It seeks to explain why and in what ways these interconnected issues are now publicly important – despite Europe’s continuing secularisation. In addition, it aims to shed light on the issue of the societal and political position of Europe’s Muslim minorities, in the context of the region’s dominant ideology: political secularism. Does Europe’s ‘secular-ness’ encourage emancipation and political equality for Muslims?

So far, we have noted that in Europe, the religious, social and political have to a considerable degree disengaged from each other, largely because of post-World War II secularisation. Surprisingly, given this background, we can also note a ‘return of religion’ to social and political
significance, especially in relation to issues connected to Islam. Yet, there is a paradox here: on the one hand, in many European countries institutionalised religion’s social and political significance continues to decline. A consequence of this is that many established religious elites have now lost much of their once highly significant social, cultural and political importance. This is underlined by the fact that in Europe, political rulers now no longer require endorsement of their policies – whether directly or indirectly – from religious elites, although this is not to say that political leaders – such as Britain’s prime minister, Theresa May, or Germany’s chancellor, Angela Merkel – do not prefer if possible to have such support. On the other hand, a new set of concerns has emerged linked to the strengthening existence of Europe’s Muslim communities, which connect in many Europeans’ minds to fears of regional and extra-regional expressions of Islamist extremism and terrorism; in short, to an Islamic takeover of (once) Christian European societies. Over the last few decades, as Zemni (2002: 158) notes

The debate on multiculturalism has taken shape as a legitimising paradigm of the Western democracies, and of the European Union itself. It has developed into a cultural-political cornerstone of societies simultaneously in full transition towards economic globalisation on the one hand, and potentially prey to the advent/resurgence of far-right and/or fascist political organizations on the other hand (emphasis added; Zemni 2002: 158).

Zemni points to the impact of post-Cold War globalisation, especially its capacity to undermine and often reduce the state’s power, authority and legitimacy. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny that, despite significant changes in recent decades, Europe’s governments for the most part still retain much power (Haynes et al., 2017). What has globalisation done to affect the capacity of the region’s governments to represent their citizens? It is sometimes argued that if there is a relatively high degree of cultural homogenisation, whereby most citizens are able routinely to identify both with the state and each other, then the government’s task of representation is made easier. On the other hand, it is also suggested that the more ethnically or religiously diverse a country’s inhabitants are, the more difficult potentially is the governmental task of representing all citizens, including when the issue is projected as between non-Muslim majorities and Muslim minorities. In this context, Europe’s (secular) governments are said to find the task of representing all their citizens increasingly difficult, especially when some societies appear to polarise on cultural and religious grounds (Haynes and Hennig, 2011). In Europe, such schisms are exacerbated by recent events, notably regular incidents of Islamist extremism both in the region and outside of it. In addition, the post-2015 refugee crisis, with its many putative entrants to Europe hailing from mainly Muslim countries, such as Syria, has led many Europeans to assume that there is generally a generic ‘Muslim problem’ in Europe which needs ‘dealing with’ by making extra efforts to exclude new Muslims from the region while seeking to find novel ways to control and dominate those already resident. Finally, such concerns feed into the narratives of the region’s right-wing, anti-Muslim populist leaders which across Europe have enjoyed growing support, following perceptions of ‘floods’ of Muslim migrants demanding entry into Europe, mainly for economic reasons, in the context of the post-2015 refugee crisis (Haynes, 2016; George, 2016).

It was however a pivotal issue a decade earlier which focused European attention on Islam and its ‘correct’ place in the region’s countries’ societies. The publication on 30 September 2005 of
the infamous ‘Prophet Muhammad cartoons’ in a Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten* (in English, *The Morning Newspaper/The Jutland Post*) became a global *cause célèbre* (George, 2016: 62). ¹ All the cartoons portrayed the Prophet Muhammad deleteriously; some seemed to equate him with terrorism. The purpose of the cartoons, the newspaper claimed, was to contribute to a public debate regarding the position in a secular society of the right to critique religious beliefs, including those associated with Islam. The effect however was almost certainly not what the newspaper intended: publication of the cartoons was followed by public protests from Danish Muslim organisations, ² which helped to disseminate knowledge about them around the world. Following a slow start, the controversy swiftly grew, with newspapers in over 50 countries reprinting some or all the cartoons. The result was often violent protests in many countries, especially in the Muslim world. Both *Jyllands-Posten* – whose office received a bomb threat in January 2006 – and Denmark became a focus of global Muslim anger. Demonstrators in the Gaza Strip (Palestinian territory) burned Danish flags, Saudi Arabia and Libya withdrew their ambassadors to Denmark, Danish goods were boycotted across the Middle East, and many Middle Eastern and Asian countries saw violent clashes, with demonstrators attacking the Danish and Norwegian Embassies in Tehran and thousands of protesters taking to the streets in Egypt, the West Bank, Jordan and Afghanistan. Overall, critics expressed their dislike of the cartoons, which they felt were both Islamophobic and blasphemous. Their purpose, it was claimed, was to humiliate a marginalised Danish minority and more generally to insult Muslims in the global ummah. Denmark’s then prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen announced in February 2006 that the ‘Prophet Muhammad cartoons’ controversy was Denmark’s worst international crisis since World War II (‘70,000 gather for violent Pakistan cartoons protest’, 2006)

Overall, the ‘Prophet Muhammad cartoons’ controversy emphasised how the topic of Islam and the position of Muslims in European countries generates intense debate both in Europe and around the world, while also highlighting sometimes problematic relationships between some religious actors and secular governments. Many such governments in Europe also wish to encourage multiculturalism in their country, whereby citizens of whatever ethnic and religious background and cultural preferences are free to express their identity without intolerance or antipathy from others in the society. Yet, as Zemni (2002: 158) notes

> Multiculturalism is much more than the de facto acknowledgement of the living together of people with different religious traditions, ethnic loyalties or national affiliations. *Multiculturalism is the basis of a (supra-national) societal project with universal aspirations.* In that sense defining multiculturalism has become a stake of political conflict, one of the irreversible references for self-respecting democracies (emphasis added)

The linked issues of identity and multiculturalism are increasingly controversial in Europe, including among second and third generation Muslims, offspring of immigrant parents or

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¹ *Jyllands-Posten*, based in a suburb of the city of Aarhus, is Denmark’s biggest selling daily newspaper, with a weekday circulation of approximately 150,000 copies.

² Denmark is home to approximately 150,000 Muslims, amounting to less than three percent of the overall population of 5.4 million. Around a quarter are of Turkish ethnic origin. Earlier migrants came primarily for economic reasons; most later ones, from the 1980s, came as refugees. Currently about 40% of all Muslims in Denmark have a refugee background. Most Muslims live in Denmark’s larger cities; most inhabit Copenhagen ([http://euro-islam.info/pages/denmark.html](http://euro-islam.info/pages/denmark.html))
grandparents. Many Muslims today, especially among the young, confront religious and national identity issues in ways that differ from their parents’ often more fixed cultural personalities (Cesari, 2010). This contrasts with the position a few decades ago when Islam was virtually unknown in Europe, when the faith was physically manifested in only a handful of mosques in a few major population centres. The situation began to change with the expansion of Muslim migration in the 1970s, when the issue of multiculturalism also began to surface.

Initially, Muslim immigrants were principally defined by the host society vis-à-vis their economic function (for example, in Germany where Turks were referred to by their status (as gastarbeiter, that is, ‘guest workers’), their skin colour or their nationality, and to a lesser extent by their culture and/or religion. Writing two decades ago, Nonneman (1996: 382) argued that ‘this reflected the migrants’ own perception of their place in their European surroundings, and ‘their relative lack of concern with opportunities for socio-religious expression within the context of the host society’. In Europe today, while Islam is still primarily associated with immigrant communities of recent origin, recent years have seen growing numbers of Muslims in the region. This has occurred at a time of periodic economic recessions in Europe and an international environment characterised by international friction between some Muslim-majority countries, such as Iran, and some Western states, notably the USA (Cesari, 2014).

Referring to Islam’s religious and cultural dimensions in Europe, the consequence of decisions taken three or four decades ago by European governments has led to a significantly changed Muslim presence, from one of numerically small, often-autonomous groups of migrant workers to larger, more complex, permanent communities. Over time, regularised contacts and interactions between Muslims communities and host societies has increased. In the late 1980s, there were collectively about five million Muslims in Britain, France and Germany – countries where male Muslim ‘guest workers’ families could join them (Fetzer and Soper, 2005: 1). Today, there are more than 20 million Muslims living in the 28 countries of the European Union (http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/19/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/) Many of Europe’s Muslims are increasingly politicised, especially those of the second or third generation. This is because, born in Europe, many are familiar with Western egalitarian assumptions about citizens’ political participation. In some European countries – for example, Britain and France – it was relatively easy to acquire citizenship. An effect of accompanying expectations was that many Muslims demonstrated increased willingness to agitate for what they perceived as their social, cultural, religious, political and economic rights.

What causes outbreaks of extreme religious intolerance in democratic societies, such as that which followed the publication of the ‘Prophet Muhammad’ cartoons in Jyllands-Posten? Such occurrences are often assumed to be intuitive and impulsive. But are they? Many Europeans found it all too easy to assume that among the religiously committed, especially the ‘religious fundamentalists’, there are many waiting expectantly to vilify someone or some group for their real or imagined egregious insult of their religion. But, as George (2016) shows, this is not the case. George explains that such reactions are anything but spontaneous and in fact are the outcomes of well-planned, coordinated and focused political campaigns by cynical and manipulative politicians concerned primarily to forward their own interests rather than defend ‘their’ religion.
The aim of this section was to highlight the ‘return of religion’ to secular Europe, especially the controversial position of Muslims in many regional countries, and to explore ramifications of Islam’s increasing public presence for political and social relationships between the region’s Muslim minority and the non-Muslim majority. The section indicated that secular regimes do not necessarily guarantee either politicians or citizens’ open mindedness and tolerance to ‘outsiders’, especially when the latter are regarded as guilty of behaviour seen as socially and culturally anathema by a significant number among the non-Muslim majority. Such a position is however encouraged not only by the events themselves but also exacerbated by sometimes less than even-handed media coverage. On the one hand, European media have had a field day reporting Islam-linked extremism and terrorism both in Europe and elsewhere and, on the one hand, the distressing position of tens of thousands of refugees and migrants trying to enter Europe, many of whom are Muslims fleeing civil war in Syria and sectarian conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa more generally, added fuel to media outrage at ‘culturally alien’ Muslims trying to take over Europe. In conclusion, being secular is not a guarantee of an even-handed approach to religious minorities in Europe, with a declining social, societal and political position for many Muslims linked to governments’ indifference and media hostility.

Religion and secularism in the Middle East and North Africa

As already noted, the continued validity of the secularisation thesis tout court is now strongly questioned. Critics allege that its explanatory power is comprehensively undermined by, inter alia, a public return of religion to Europe, long believed to be the most secular of global regions, which long appeared to give credence to secularisation theory. A similar claim is made regarding the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In general terms, the secularisation thesis asserts that religiosity would everywhere eventually become a private, individual issue, a key component of a universal trajectory from ‘tradition to ‘modernisation’ and, ultimately, ‘modernity’. Due to secularisation, religion would necessarily retreat from public life, with attendant loss of influence, status and prestige. Despite the positivist assertions of the theory, the outcome was different: secularisation theory’s expectations turned out not to be plausible or, ultimately, realisable, in many parts of the world. Instead, in many countries, including the more than 20 in the MENA, religion has palpably not quit the public realm – and today shows no signs of doing so. Instead, various expressions of religion continue to perform important social and, in some cases, political functions, which almost everywhere in the region go beyond narrowly defined ‘religious affairs’. For example, Iran’s 1978–79 Islamic revolution, Algeria’s civil war in the early 1990s between Islamists and Secularists, Syria’s civil war from 2005, increasingly couched as conflict between Sunnis and Shias, and Egypt’s 2011-2013 interregnum during which power was held in by a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government, are a few prominent examples over several decades – of course, many more might have been selected – which individually and collectively highlight the region’s prominent political participation of numerous religious actors.

Despite secularisation theory’s dichotomous worldview, it is clear that the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ are not mutually exclusive. Instead, in many MENA countries, while a demonstrable measure of secularisation did occur and may indeed still be taking place (Bruce, 2009), this does not imply that ‘religion’ has exited the public realm. How might one measure secularisation? It is posited that secularisation can be measured by the decline of traditional religious authority, the

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3 The opening paragraphs of this section draw on Haynes and Ben Porat (2013/2014).
increasing clout of secular institutions, and growing popular adoption of secular practices, including by many individuals who would nevertheless still identify themselves as religious people or refuse to identify themselves as ‘secular’ (that, for many people, implies ‘godless’). What might religious leaders do under such circumstances? Some seek to apply counter-pressure, agreeing to work with other non-religious entities, such as, political parties and civil society organisations; that is, make ‘religion’ work harder by linking it to traditionally secular concerns and actors. Such interactions of religions (often involving a perceived or actual religious ‘resurgence’), religious institutions and actors with secular entities are often politically controversial, emerging as central to many issues today society and politics in the MENA. The result is that, as Fox (2015) argues, clear dividing lines between the religious and the secular are absent in the countries of the MENA, just as they are increasingly in Europe. The unclear division between the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’ is important regarding questions of freedom and rights in the MENA, just as it is Europe. In some MENA countries, it is religious actors who seek to shape and lead the debates, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists in Egypt before and after the 2011 fall from power of President Hosni Mubarak. To be politically effective they often find it useful to employ new – secular – political language, highlighting human rights, democracy, civil society and the rule of law, and, which in turn influence local debates and practices. George shows that such issues became politically controversial when those in power or aspiring to power choose to highlight them for personal, rather than religious, reasons, including, in the issue we noted above, the ‘Prophet Muhammad cartoons’ controversy following their publication in a Danish newspaper (George, 2016: 63-65).

Increased involvement of various religious actors in recent political developments in the MENA reflect, on the one hand, a widespread process of religious ‘deprivatisation’. The result is that, as already noted, many religious actors in the region now openly pursue a variety of public and political goals, increasingly in the context of seeking in individual countries democratising or democratic politics. According to Casanova (1994: 6), religious deprivatisation began three decades ago, when ‘what was new and became “news” . . . was the widespread and simultaneous refusal of religions to be restricted to the private sphere’. Religious deprivatisation implies that religious actors are no longer willing to accept their place in the private sphere assigned to them by the state. Instead, they seek to be champions of alternative options that when included in political competition invariably impact upon the state’s claim to unchallenged legitimacy and autonomy. In both social and political contexts in the MENA, religious actors are often raising questions about, inter alia, interconnections of private and public morality and claims of states and markets to be exempt from extrinsic normative considerations.

On the other hand, the relationship between religion and politics in the MENA also reflects the capacity of some political leaders to exploit real or imagined inter-religious frictions for their own benefit. We have already noted this is relation to the Mubarak government in the wake of the Danish cartoons controversy of a decade ago. This highlights that politicians’ desire to exploit real or imagined religious frictions is made easier when religious entities are forceful and vocal in pursuit of their goals. When they are less so there are fewer opportunities for politicians to make capital. To help prevent politicians’ being able to exploit controversial issues involving religious beliefs, it helps if religious actors keep a low profile, eschewing overly strident attempts to right wrongs as they see it and, instead, use approaches which are less public but perhaps more effective. In other words, avoid direct and public confrontation for behind-the-scenes lobbying and encouragement to right wrongs out of the public eye. This is the approach adopted by Jamiat
ald-Adl wal-Ihsan (‘Justice and Charity’) in Morocco, a religious non-governmental organisation, which operates at the level of civil rather than political society. While Jamiat’s public activities are informed by a pronounced social activism, it does not ‘spill over’ into overt political activity, as it shuns involvement in formal political competition, including and attempts to capture political power through the ballot box. While part of the explanation for Jamiat’s approach is that the Moroccan constitution does not permit religion-based political parties, a wider point is that a public ‘return’ of religion in the MENA in the last few decades should not obscure the fact that religion never went away in terms of its societal influence. What it does however suggest is that even in highly religious countries such as Morocco – where more than nine out of ten people self-identify as Muslims – the capacity of significant religious entities to make a consistent and significant impact on public debates has been until recently denied by the power of the state to marginalise them, often by non-democratic means. This has occurred during a process of secularisation leading to ideologically-rooted secular regimes which rarely admit for long the legitimacy of religion-based political actors, as has been seen in recent years in Egypt, with the abrupt political decline of the Muslim Brotherhood. On the other hand, there is a widespread public return of religion, a ‘coming out’ of religious entities which are no longer willing to be side-lined and seek to gain political significance, despite the state’s wish to see them publicly marginalised or excluded tout court. A recent article on Egypt by Al Yafai (2012) talks of the ‘[t]he death of Arab secularism [which] is the story of a country that no longer exists and a world almost impossible to imagine’. What he relates is the story of state-imposed secularism in Egypt which was achieved not because Egyptians became ‘less religious’ but because the Egyptian state was able to exclude religion from a public political and social role, if necessary by force, even when actors such as the (now-banned) Muslim Brotherhood were manifestly popular, community-rooted, and keen to play a public role. This is what a ‘public return of religion’ often means: a highly political and politicised (re)entry into public, often gender-focused, debates that incumbent governments are at best nervous about allowing or encouraging and at worst work hard to deny their legitimacy, relevance or appropriateness.

While the trend of religion-influence political actors challenging secular governments in the MENA has been going on for many years, since at least the Iranian revolution of four decades ago, a more recent development is the increasing regional persecution of religious minorities (Fox, 2016). Rivalries between Shias and Sunnis are often a focal point of a wider trend of intra-faith polarisation which may be expressed via the trading of extremist or terrorist tactics and atrocities, as has been recently seen in both Iraq and Syria. Part of the fallout, an aspect of the ‘collateral damage’ in this region-wide dichotomy, is that religious minorities across the region are being squeezed and their security compromised, chased away from their homes by terrorism, sometimes at the hands of the state, sometimes at the hands of non-state ‘religious’ actors of various kinds. While over the years ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ or simply ‘Islamism’ has attracted much attention in this context, we can also observe increasingly serious sectarian division and conflict across much of the MENA, especially in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The situation was exacerbated by the Arab Uprising and its aftermath – where state weakness or breakdown combined with the impact of politically assertive religious actors to put increasing

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4 An ‘Islamist’ is a Muslim who is willing to use various political means to achieve his/her faith-derived objectives.
pressure on religious minorities to convert to the dominant religious tradition or, failing that, to flee for their lives. 

Arriviste terrorist entities such as Islamic State (IS) thrive, indeed make it a key goal, to deepen and exacerbate sectarian divisions, while targeting religious minorities, often to IS key exemplars of un-Islamic behaviour. Given the widespread diminution of state capacity in the MENA following the Arab Uprising and the linked expansion of aggressive Sunni entities, such as IS, then it seems highly likely that in the short- and medium-term we will continue to see many sectarian conflicts in the MENA, which will cause significant friction and, in some cases, see a targeting of religious minorities. In addition, tensions between Shiite Iran and the Saudi-dominated Sunni Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are likely to remain high in the next few years – not least because each is seen to support one sect of Islam only. However, not all Shia movements will necessarily be pro-Iranian and not every Salafi or Wahhabist Sunni movement kowtows to Saudi Arabia. Indeed, there are significant Shiite minorities in most GCC countries, as well as a growing (Sunni) Salafi movement in Iran. Sectarian tensions also reflect socio-economic disparities and are likely to escalate if governments do not address these fundamental issues. For example, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, where economic inequality between Sunni and Shia is pronounced, are highly likely to see tensions rise consequently. In addition, globalisation, in part reflected in influential satellite television channels and social media, will play a growing, perhaps pivotal, role in spreading anti-government rhetoric and sectarian mistrust, which in turn can exacerbate pre-existing tensions and conflicts between religious majorities and minorities. In addition, over the next 20 years, we are also likely to see growing tensions within Sunni and Shiite communities. Sunni Islam is particularly likely to become increasingly factionalised. As Salafist groups grow in prominence around the world, a backlash may emerge from moderate Sunnis. Correspondingly, Shiite Islam also contains several internal divisions, with some entities, such as Turkey’s Alevis, not necessarily regarded as ‘proper’ Muslims.

Both Iraq and Syria have suffered greatly from decades of systematic political, sectarian and racial repression and mass killings at the hands of their aggressively secular governments. The latter have encouraged foundation, emergence and development of the world’s leading ‘death cult’, IS, partly a reaction against such rulers harsh, unjust and discriminatory behaviour. What makes Iraq and Syria’s situation direr is the world’s apparent incapacity to condemn the oppression of those in power, by turning a blind eye to the roots of IS’s extremism while, due to political considerations in the West, also failing to help deal with the continued existential threat that IS poses to swathes of the MENA region. It is no longer about a choice between countering terrorism and respecting human rights. It is impossible to win the fight against terrorism in the MENA region without addressing the oppression and lack of opportunity that many regional governments encourage, not least by blatant and serious attacks on religious minorities. Defending human rights and confronting religious extremism, ending discrimination against Syrian and Iraqi Sunni populations, as well as more generally against religious minorities, are essential first steps in what will almost certainly be a task to deal successfully with human rights violations in the MENA.

Of the more than 20 countries in the Middle East and North Africa, only Tunisia underwent a post-Arab Uprising transition to democracy which, at the time of writing (April 2017), appears to endure.
If nothing is done to ameliorate the situation, tensions between Sunni and Shia in the MENA could spread to neighbouring regions, including Europe. For example, in 2012, Belgium’s largest Shiite mosque was fire-bombed by hard-line Sunnis. However, while there may be an increase in such incidents, particularly in response to events in the MENA, it is unlikely that large-scale violence between the different sects will occur in Europe itself, not least because of the small number of Shias. On the other hand, attendant publicity, especially in the increasingly vituperative right-wing media in European countries, is likely to result in further pressure on Muslim minorities in Europe, given that the media is unlikely to miss the chance to highlight and comment on what it would see as another example of ‘radical Islamic terrorism’.

**Conclusion**

Today, Islamist terrorism is increasingly focused upon sectarian divisions between Shia and Sunni which are becoming globalised, often inspired by Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry. The division is not based on theology but political conflict. Just as in the case of Christianity, the major religious differences within Islam, including the distinction between Sunni and Shia, can be traced to political conflict rather than theological debate. However, such religious differences have become real religious and/or theological distinctions. Whether a Muslim believes in independent reasoning and the ongoing interpretation of the Qur’an, or believes that the gates of independent reasoning and interpretation, or *ijtihad*, have been closed, is one example of an important religious difference that may not necessarily be driven by pre-existing political orientations. Whether one believes that God continues to reveal her/himself by using human reason, or one believes that God has revealed her/himself once and for all and that a good Muslim must simply apply the Qur’an and Hadith without contextualisation, is an important theological difference of opinion. These intra-Islamic differences, like intra-Christian differences, may have political origins and political consequences, but they are essentially religious differences – differences concerning what one believes about God and how God is to be worshipped.

The complex array of religious issues in the MENA has arisen at the same time as the region has experienced decades of secularisation at the hands of post-colonial governments, which very rarely come to power or continue to rule by democratic means. Thus, we have the position of secularism setting the scene for the region’s serious and deepening sectarian crises, whereby religious minorities are targeted because of their unwillingness to assimilate into numerically dominant religions. As in Europe, the situation for religious minorities in the MENA looks increasingly bleak in the context of both Shia and Sunni bids for assertion and, with entry to Europe increasingly problematic, it is difficult or impossible to see how the issue can be resolved, especially when many regional governments, such as Egypt’s, seem to be unconcerned by continuing attacks on religious minorities in the country.
References


