

Reconfiguring Political Islam: A Discursive Tradition Approach

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Abstract

This article reconceptualizes Political Islam through the analytic lens of discursive tradition, restructured within the framework of social configurations. Departing from essentialist, universalist, nominalist, and reductionist readings, the study foregrounds the epistemological contingencies and internal pluralities that characterize Political Islam as a historically situated and discursively constructed phenomenon. Rather than treating political Islam as a fixed ideological project or a transhistorical expression of Islamic governance, the article theorizes it as a dynamic and contested field in which diverse actors articulate Islamic categories within distinct configurations shaped by contextual

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transformations, historical ruptures, institutional dislocations, regimes of reasoning, and so on. Drawing on Talal Asad's notion of discursive tradition, the analysis reconstructs its scope through the concept of social configurations, which enables a multilayered reading of Political Islam across three analytical levels: conditions of possibility, categorical and discursive formation, and social objectification. This theoretical reconstruction clarifies how Islamist discourses emerge not from doctrinal continuity alone, but through strategic negotiations over core issues such as temporality, authority, power, and legitimacy. Through comparative and context-sensitive examination of various Islamist traditions—from reformist to revolutionary, nationalist to transnational, moderate to militant—the article shows how Political Islam operates through a grammar of differentiation and reconfiguration within the broader Islamic tradition. The resulting framework not only situates Political Islam within shifting social terrains, but also offers an epistemological intervention into its interpretation as a plural, indeterminate, and generative discursive tradition.

Keywords: Political Islam, Islamism, Discursive Tradition, Islamic Tradition, Talal Asad

Introduction

Over the course of several decades, a range of terms including Political Islam, Islamism, fundamentalism, Jihadism, moderate Islam, Salafism, Wahhabism, and others have been employed to elucidate the increasing presence of Islam within the public sphere, particularly in the realm of politics. These conceptual frameworks and categories have been adopted by various scholars, each utilizing distinct approaches and pursuing different objectives to make sense of a wide array of phenomena. These phenomena encompass currents, discourses, movements, traditions, governments, parties, identities, actions, communities, dispositions, practices, ideologies, and all social entities that have sought to advance

diverse collective and political agendas, each grounded in distinct interpretations of the imagined Islamic tradition (Arjomand, 1995; Asad, 2011; Ayooob, 2004; Ayooob & Lussier, 2020; Ayubi, 1991; Bayat, 2013; Denoeux, 2002; Esposito, 1997; Esposito & Shahin, 2013; Hashemi, 2021; Hirschkind, 2013; Kepel, 2002; Lewis, 2003; Mahmood, 1994; Mandaville, 2014; March, 2015; Martin & Barzegar, 2009; Moaddel, 2002; Roy, 1994, 2006; Salvatore, 1999; Tibi, 2012; Voll & Sonn, 2009; Volpi, 2011b; Zubaida, 2000).

Within the broader context of Political Islam, a wide range of actors find their place, from the reformist ideas espoused by Seyyed Jamal al-Din al-Afghani to the revolutionary ideology propagated by Ayatollah Khomeini, and the radical jihadism associated with figures such as Osama bin Laden. Furthermore, this category includes movements from terrorist groups from Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Hamas, and the Taliban to Islamist movement and groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Ennahda Party, Jamaat-e-Islami, Hezbollah, etc., as well as the establishment of Islamic states in Sudan, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, and other regions, collectively falling under the umbrella of Political Islam and Islamism. These diverse and sometimes contradictory uses and implications have made political Islam a contested and problematic issue (Asad, 2003; Hashemi, 2021; Hurd, 2008; Ismail, 2003; Jong & Ali, 2023; March, 2015; Schwedler, 2011; Varisco, 2009). In the contemporary cosmopolitanized world, where multiplicity, interconnectivity, fluidity, and transnationalism have imposed a form of constant transformation and indeterminacy on social phenomena, the situation has become even more critical. The concepts of Islam and Islamism, within practical politics and various contexts, is constructed and reconstructed within different configurations and for diverse purposes alongside other categories by various groups. This process has effectively erased any fixed and given meaning or significance for these concepts. Consequently, utilizing this conceptual framework necessitates a variety of theoretical and conceptual considerations alongside taking historical conditions into account.

“Islamism,” also referred to here as “Political Islam”—though some scholars (Cesari, 2021; Emmerson, 2010; Ismail, 2003; Voll & Sonn, 2009) argue for a distinction, as it is largely based on a presupposed, *a priori*, and essentialized understanding of politics, power and Islam, whereby

“Political Islam” is seen as primarily oriented toward power, state and political authority, while “Islamism” is viewed as a broader tendency encompassing various dimensions of social and individual life. However, by suspending this essentialist conception of politics and approaching Islam as a discursive tradition, we can instead identify multiple, internally diverse discursive traditions within Islam—including both Islamism and Political Islam—whose internal pluralities are shaped in relation to the particular aims and trajectories of each discourse, thereby deferring and destabilizing any universal or essentialist definition of either “Islam” or “politics,” as both the nature of Islam, politics, and their relationship are contingently constituted within and through these historically situated discursive traditions—is primarily understood as a multifaceted socio-political and ideological movement that advocates for the comprehensive application of Islamic principles and norms in shaping individual lives and society, including the political and legal realms, as many scholars have articulated (Ayoob, 2004; Denoeux, 2002; March, 2015; Volpi, 2011a). Many scholars in the field of Islamic political studies have considered Political Islam in various frameworks, ranging from a social-political movement and a revolutionary current to an ideology, a way of life, an Islamic identity, religiosity, discourse, doctrine, governance, religious fundamentalism and conservatism, an alternative modernity and so forth (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996; Esposito, 1997; Ismail, 2004; Mahmood, 2005; Roy, 2003; Tibi, 2005; Voll & Sonn, 2009; Zubaida, 2004).

Political Islam also encompasses a diverse spectrum of beliefs and practices, ranging from moderate, peaceful activism to more radical and potentially violent approaches, all aimed at establishing an Islamic state or society governed by Shariah law or through extensive references to Islamic tradition and granting a higher authority to their imagined of Islam in the public sphere (Fuller, 2003; Roy, 1994). For many groups of Islamists, Islamism is characterized by its emphasis on the central role of Islam in guiding not only personal behavior but also the broader social and political structures, and it often involves cultural differentiation from the West and a reconnection with pre-colonial Islamic values (Lewis, 1976, 1993). Adherents of Islamism may actively assert and promote Islamic beliefs, prescriptions, laws, and policies, thereby shaping

and influencing political and social activities within Muslim-majority or minority contexts.

Even in countries with a Muslim majority, where Islam—in its broad and pluralistic sense—constitutes an essential part of the individual and collective lives of Muslims, Islamists strive to impose and implement their envisioned version of Islam at both the public and political levels. They rely on their specific and exclusive interpretations and emphasize certain aspects of Islamic tradition to achieve this goal.

Furthermore, from an ontological perspective, many studies also view Political Islam as an epiphenomenon distinct and divergent from the secular and impartial public sphere, perceiving it as a regression to pre-modern forms of Islamic political order, a manifestation of fundamental economic and political interests, an outcome stemming from various social, political, economic, and cultural crises, an unprecedented intrusion of non-modern and irrational religious phenomena into the secular public sphere, or even as an invalid, fantastical, colonialist, and unreal category (Hirschkind, 2013; Hurd, 2008). However, the multiplicity and indeterminacy of the phenomena encompassed by these academic categories not only fail to enhance understanding but also distort and neglect the actual and objective realities. Therefore, in order to comprehensively investigate the intricate relationship between Islam and politics, it is crucial to explore more flexible, epistemologically complex, and efficient approaches that can accommodate the diverse array of phenomena and trends present in this domain.

In addressing these mainly theoretical and epistemological predicaments in conceptualizing phenomena categorized under Political Islam and Islamism, various theoretical and non-theoretical solutions have been proposed. One promising solution that offers significant potential for a more precise conceptualization of the complexities associated with phenomena categorized under Political Islam is to consider Political Islam as a discursive tradition. The idea of a discursive tradition was introduced by Talal Asad (2009) in his conceptual formulation of Islam as an object of anthropological inquiry amidst the dominant readings and definitions of Islam. A discursive tradition, as defined by Talal Asad, is a complex and evolving set of discourses that guide religious practice and

interpretation. It is characterized by its historical continuity, adaptability, plurality, and the interrelation of power and authority with tradition and discourse. This framework allows for a nuanced understanding of Islam that transcends rigid essentialist and nominalist definitions, acknowledging the dynamic interplay of historical, social, and cultural factors in shaping religious traditions (Asad, 2003, 2009, 2011, 2015).

This formulation, by juxtaposing the concept of tradition in the MacIntyrean sense with discourse and power in the Foucauldian sense and history in the Benjaminian sense, attempts to position Islam within and suspend the two central antinomies in Islamic studies in general and the anthropology of Islam in particular. These antinomies include essentialist and nominalist definitions of Islam, as well as the dichotomy between lived Islam (low Islam) and theological Islam reliant on tradition (high Islam). Asad seeks to argue in favor of a third state relative to these dichotomies by highlighting Islam as a discursive tradition and to move beyond them (Anjum, 2007; Asad, 2003, 2009). Given the conceptual capacity and appeal of this notion in Islamic and religious studies, this idea has been adopted by various scholars as their primary analytical unit. Among these scholars, some have utilized this idea in the study of Political Islam to address the aforementioned challenges (see: Hirschkind, 2013; Hurd, 2008; Ismail, 2003, 2004; Jong & Ebrahimzadeh, 2024; Mahmood, 2005).

However, it should be noted that Talal Asad did not engage deeply and precisely in formulating this concept, and the lack of precise theoretical, epistemological, historical, and empirical foundations has resulted in further ambiguities, both epistemological and empirical, in making sense of various related objects. In studies related to Political Islam, the application of the idea of a discursive tradition has been employed merely for historicization or to make Political Islam more concrete, multifaceted, and complex (Hirschkind, 2013; Ismail, 2003, 2004; Mahmood, 2005), or solely to critique the general approaches of radical essentialism or constructionism in Political Islam (Hurd, 2008). In these studies, the notion of Political Islam as a discursive tradition has neither been explained nor referenced in terms of its epistemological foundations, implications, or methodological application in understanding phenomena categorized

under Political Islam. Instead, the discursive tradition in these studies has only provided some general clarifications in the examination of Political Islam.

However, any precise reference to and use of this idea necessitates a thorough understanding of its epistemological foundations and theoretical and discursive implications for its application in more concrete analyses. The central claim of this research is that examining the epistemological foundations of the idea of the discursive tradition, promoting it, and reinterpreting it based on the post-foundational epistemological premises of social configurations (Jong, 2023) will clarify, and expand the capacity of this concept. This, in turn, will more precisely and realistically address the aforementioned challenges related to the conceptualization of Political Islam. To this end, the article will review the epistemological foundations of the idea of the discursive tradition in defining Islam, particularly the antinomies of universalism/singularism, essentialism/nominalism and tradition/experience. It will then re-contextualize and revisit these foundations based on the premises and promises of social configurations. The study will also explore the implications of this examination and reinterpretation for inquires in Political Islam and more specifically in political Islamist thought.

It will be shown that, this effort allows for a comprehensive and flexible understanding of Islamist discourses and movements by revealing that they are constructed within an intricate network of relationships and a matrix of categories, ideas, tendencies, and variables that emerge within specific temporal and spatial contexts. The argument put forth emphasizes that the consideration of Political Islam as a discursive tradition necessitates viewing the subject of inquiry in a relational manner, in relation to other phenomena, discourses, and currents. Moreover, it entails acknowledging that these phenomena are not predetermined, or static based on rigid categories, religious principles, or dominant orthodoxy, but rather shaped as configurations within a historical constellation under specific conditions of possibility. These configurations encompass a network of interrelated categories and diverse internal and external relations. Ultimately, it will be demonstrated that one of the most significant implications of considering Political Islam as a discursive tradition

is the ability to situate and understand it as a configuration within the broader Islamic discursive tradition—alongside other strands such as Salafis, Sufis, reformists/modernists, traditionalists, and the ulama.

Political Islam and the Discursive Tradition, Some Epistemological Considerations

The definition and nature of the object of inquiry in religious studies—namely, religion—in Islamic studies—namely, Islam—or in studies of Political Islam—namely, Political Islam or Islamism—represent a fundamental issue with significant ontological and epistemological implications for these fields. Talal Asad (2009), amidst prevailing definitions and debates surrounding the essence of Islam, proposes a novel definition of Islam as an object of anthropological inquiry. This definition, articulated in Asad's (2009) article "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," leverages the concept of a discursive tradition and offers extensive potential for rethinking Islam as a distinct object of study. Asad's approach directly engages with definitions framed around the antinomies of tradition versus experience and essentialism versus nominalism (and constructionism), while also addressing the predicament of historicism versus non-historicism indirectly (Anjum, 2007; Asad, 2009; Jong & Ali, 2023). The following sections will preliminarily introduce and reinterpret these antinomies through the broader epistemological framework of universalism versus singularism. Addressing and transcending this antinomy promises to tackle a central epistemological challenge in Islamic studies, especially regarding Political Islam (Jong, 2023; Jong & Ali, 2023). The controversies surrounding the conceptualization of Islam, in both its ontological and epistemological dimensions, are crucial for understanding and addressing issues related to Political Islam.

The fundamental question that arises in the conceptualization of Islam, specifically in relation to Political Islam or Islamism, is whether Islam is a universal and trans-historical category that can be derived from sacred texts, rituals, teachings, and its broader historical context, allowing for a general definition, characteristics, or laws and traditions. Alternatively, is Islam merely a temporally constructed and contextually

transformed phenomenon by Muslims in specific times and places, under distinct historical and sociological conditions? Are we encountering a universal, official, theological, and standardized Islam that coexists with some historical and local representations (as proposed by Orientalists, politicians, theologians and some other scholars), or is Islam fundamentally comprised of singular entities and concrete phenomena, only implemented contingently and empirically, subject to specific conditions, and possessing limited universality and determinacy?

This situation can be extrapolated to the realm of Political Islam. Fundamentally, there exists a query as to whether Political Islam is a universal phenomenon rooted in overarching Islamic teachings, history and its relations to politics, thereby possessing inherent legitimacy, and subsequently, allowing for the examination of various representations of this universal Political Islam. Conversely, is Political Islam a contingent and diverse phenomenon arising from specific historical circumstances? Can Political Islam be considered as an episodic or singular manifestation emerging within particular contexts due to distinctive interpretations of Islamic teachings or reliance on specific references to the Islamic tradition? Framed in epistemological terms, does Political Islam represent a universal category encompassing timeless attributes, capable of encompassing diverse phenomena under general characteristics about the relations between Islam and politics? Or does it essentially function as an incomplete and singular category, accommodating limited phenomena contingent upon particular assumptions, conditions and relations between different forms of Islamicity and politics? (Jong & Ali, 2023)

Conversely, and as another means of approaching this issue, Talal Asad's formulation of the concept of discursive tradition brings attention to the debate over how to define Islam itself (Anjum, 2007; Asad, 2009, 2015; Iqbal, 2017). Essentialist approaches seek to establish Islam as a universal, given, completed and transhistorical category, derived primarily from sacred texts, traditions, rituals, teachings, and its broader historical context. On the other hand, constructivist perspectives view Islam as a temporally constructed and contextually transformed phenomenon, molded by specific historical and sociological conditions. In this dispute, Islam or Political Islam is considered an empty term or name

for phenomena that, at an empirical level, exhibit only minimal similarities necessary to construct a singular, distinct phenomenon identified as Islam or Islamism. The central issue here is who or what carries the label or name of Islam and who participates in constructing the reality that is referred to as Islam. And fundamentally, what realities does the name Islam signify? However, these approaches tend to oversimplify the complexity and diversity inherent within Islam as a lived tradition and fail to account for the transformative claims and diverse interpretations and references made by contemporary Muslims (Asad, 2009).

The problem of tradition and experience, embodied in the idea of discursive tradition, further complicates the discourse surrounding the definition of Islam (Anjum, 2007; Asad, 2009; Iqbal, 2017). Traditional, mainly theological and static understandings of tradition often emphasize a replication of the past, leading to static and fixed conceptions. However, the experiences of Muslims in modern times challenge these rigid notions of tradition. Should Islam and Political Islam be understood in relation to pre-existing theological traditions, jurisprudential schools, or the narrow circles of scholars, religious interpreters, and Islamists? Or is Islam merely the lived experience of Muslims in various societies and times, based on their diverse references, understandings, and uses of elements deemed Islamic, alongside other elements—without regard to their theological logic? Here, should we speak of *Islams*—especially at the level of lived experience—based on contexts, actors, and various interpretations of what is considered Islamic? Or is Islam, particularly in terms of sacred texts, teachings, and its general history, a single source or reality with multiple representations or historical developments?

In dealing with these antinomies, Talal Asad introduces the concept of “discursive tradition” to understand Islam beyond essentialist, constructionist and nominalist approaches as well as the dichotomy of experience and tradition (Anjum, 2007; Asad, 2009). This approach integrates elements of tradition, as conceptualized by Alasdair MacIntyre, with the Foucauldian idea of discourse and the idea of history by Walter Benjamin (Iqbal, 2017). For him, a discursive tradition encompasses a set of discourses that instruct practitioners on the correct form and purpose of particular practices within specific historical and material

contexts. According to Asad, an Islamic discursive tradition is “a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present” (Asad, 2009: 20). This definition highlights the dynamic nature of tradition, emphasizing that it is not merely a replication of past practices but involves an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation. In this framework, tradition is actively engaged with the present and future, allowing for a continuous evolution of practices and beliefs.

In general, Asad views discursive processes and power relations as central to shaping the nature and identity of religion, particularly in contrast to categories such as the secular, the nation, the state, and other related constructs, across different historical periods and spatial contexts (Asad, 2003). However, in his essay “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” he argues that Islam constitutes a uniquely discursive tradition, setting it apart from other religions (Asad, 2009). In Asad’s conceptualization, the discursive tradition is underpinned by the interrelation of tradition, discourse, and history, each contributing to a complex, evolving framework that resists static and essentialist interpretations. Tradition, rooted in MacIntyre’s notion of a historically extended and socially embodied argument, reflects a continuity that is not merely preserved but actively interpreted and reinterpreted within the ever-shifting contexts of social and political life. This continuous re-engagement ensures that tradition remains a living discourse, responsive to the demands of the present while being anchored in the past (MacIntyre, 1988). According to Asad, Muslims refer to and engage with Islamic tradition—including sacred texts and prophetic traditions—through various modes of reasoning, interpretation, and argumentation within different discursive, temporal, and spatial contexts. This dynamic process of reference and interpretation is particularly prominent in Islam’s engagement with diverse public issues. Discourse, drawing on Foucault’s insights, is the medium through which the power dynamics within a tradition are articulated and contested. It is within these discursive practices that the authority of religious texts and practices is both constructed and challenged, shaped by the socio-political forces at play. Asad’s emphasis on discourse highlights the critical role of power relations in the formation

and transformation of tradition, revealing how religious practices and beliefs are not simply inherited but are subject to ongoing negotiation and adaptation. (Enayat, 2017).

In Asad's anthropological reframing of Islamic tradition, history is not apprehended as a linear continuum but as a constellation of discontinuous moments, deeply informed by Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (2003). Asad (2009) draws implicitly from Benjamin's notion of messianic time and the interruptive force of historical materialism, in which the past is not a sequential inheritance but a site of critical intervention—blasted out of the continuum of history. This conception allows Asad to theorize tradition as a temporally fractured, power-laden field, where the past is neither inert nor nostalgically restored but reactivated through selective retrieval, rupture, and re-signification in the present. The Islamic discursive tradition, in this light, is not a continuous lineage of doctrines but a strategic and contingent engagement with the past, shaped by crises, interruptions, and recontextualizations. What Asad articulates is a form of historical reasoning where the authority of tradition is not premised on stability but on its capacity to be reconfigured in response to shifting political, epistemological, and institutional conditions. Thus, tradition is a performative site, not simply of transmission, but of contestation—where theological and political categories are re-encoded through historically situated discursive practices. This Benjaminian sensibility embedded in Asad's thinking repositions Islamic tradition not as preservation but as revolutionary citation, where moments of the past are seized in order to rethink the present and project alternative futures—making tradition itself a field of temporal and ideological struggle (Asad, 2009; Enayat, 2017; Benjamin, 2003).

Discursive traditions accommodate a plurality of voices and interpretations, recognizing that religious practices and beliefs are context-dependent and subject to historical and social influences. The theological and religious aspects of Islam are deeply intertwined with the practical experiences and actions of Muslims. This interconnectedness highlights the role of lived experiences in shaping and reshaping religious traditions. While discursive traditions emphasize continuity

with the past, they also incorporate critique and transformation. This dual focus ensures that traditions remain relevant and responsive to new conditions and challenges. In this context, this predominantly interpretive idea of Islam—as a discursive tradition—seeks to address and go beyond essentialism and nominalism, or historicism and non-historicism, as well as Islam as lived experience versus tradition, by highlighting the multiplicity of discursive articulations within Islamic traditions across different temporal and spatial contexts. These articulations are constructed by various actors within different power relations. Asad aims to suspend these issues by emphasizing that the Islamic phenomenon is constructed within a particular discursive tradition and specific temporal and spatial contexts, shaped by interactions among discursive and interpretive forces, relations, and discursive practices (Jong & Ali, 2023). In his various works, Asad attempts to elucidate this logic of articulating discursive traditions with illustrative examples. His examples include the revival of the tradition of *naṣīḥah* (advice) in contemporary Saudi Arabia for forming consultative and critical councils by ulama (Asad, 2003), the construction of the tradition of *al-amr bi-al-ma'rūf wa-al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (enjoining the right/honorable and forbidding the wrong/dishonorable) in contemporary Egypt as a form of political critique (Asad, 2015), and various references to texts or Islamic figures in Arab nationalism or Islamism in the contemporary Muslim world (Asad, 2003). All of these examples serve as instances of Islam configured as a discursive tradition.

In his article, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” Asad (2009) concludes his discussion with definitions and general considerations about discursive tradition without delving into the specific implications of this idea for the aforementioned epistemological contradictions and antinomies. It remains unclear and analytically underdeveloped how the concept of discursive tradition can practically resolve the tensions between essentialism and nominalism, or between historicism and non-historicism. Many key concepts such as the notion of time and space, the concept of practice, the role of dispositions, contexts, text, the problem of foundation, the structure-agency issue, contingency, regimes of interpretive, scale, etc., which are crucial in articulating discursive

traditions, are not thoroughly examined. This leads to epistemological ambiguity in the idea—an idea fundamentally constructed on epistemological debates—and its specific methodological implications. The concept holds some intellectual and theoretical potential for examining Islamic thought, but its practical applications are limited. This limitation is apparent in the overly general, imprecise, and non-operational use of the concept of discursive tradition in Political Islam studies, where scholars typically reference it in a broad, non-specific manner, often as a general enlightening and insightful idea. The notable exception is the work of Saba Mahmood (2005), who genuinely understands and appropriately applies the concept.

Moreover, scholars like Samuli Schielke (2007) and Hadi Enayat (2017) argue that Asad's focus on continuity over transformation is another point of contention. His work, while indebted to Foucault's genealogy of discursive formations, tends to emphasize coherence and continuity within Islamic traditions. This focus can obscure the inherently dynamic and often contradictory nature of historical developments within these traditions, thus failing to fully capture the transformative aspects of Islamic practices and beliefs. Furthermore, the concept of discursive tradition can lead to the erasure of significant transformations and the invention of artificial breaks within Islamic history. This can result in an oversimplified and ahistorical portrayal of Islamic traditions. Additional critiques highlight how Asad's framework might inadequately address the interplay between Islamic traditions, modernity, and modern power structures. The colonial and post-colonial contexts have significantly shaped Islamic discourses, and any comprehensive analysis must account for these power relations and their influence on the construction of Islamic traditions.

The extreme complexity of contemporary societies and the emergence of hybrid and indeterminate identities and collective entities further challenge Asad's framework. Muslims in diaspora communities navigate multiple cultural and religious influences, shaping their understanding and practice of Islam in ways that traditional discursive frameworks might not fully encompass. Within the framework of Asad, discursive traditions with high orthodoxy are more amenable to

examination, while other configurations with lower degrees of orthodoxy are almost disregarded (Anjum, 2007). This underscores the need for a more nuanced approach that can account for the fluidity and hybridity of contemporary Islamic identities. Moreover, while Asad's concept highlights the importance of authoritative discourses, it may underplay the agency of individual practitioners. The lived experiences and personal interpretations of Muslims are crucial for understanding how traditions are dynamically maintained and transformed. These individual practices and interpretations offer rich insights into the ongoing negotiation and redefinition of Islamic traditions (Jong & Ali, 2023). To address the epistemological limitations inherent in both the category of Political Islam and Talal Asad's conception of discursive tradition, this article proposes a reconstruction of the latter through the analytic framework of "social configuration."

Political Islam as Discursive Tradition and the Idea of Social Configuration

Unlike classical sociological units such as action, society, social fact, field, civilization and so on—which presume internal coherence, ontological unity, and normative closure—social configurations are post-foundational, historically contingent, and relational formations. They emerge not from essential and completed foundations, but from processes of partial grounding, which are always provisional, contested, and situated within shifting networks of social practices. A social configuration is composed of diverse and potentially incongruent elements—discourses, actors, symbolic orders, materialized practices—whose interaction forms a temporally-bound and spatially-situated assemblage. These formations are neither fully open nor deterministically structured; instead, they are defined by indeterminacy, internal tensions, and the boundary work that actors engage in to delineate "inside" from "outside." Social configurations are not universal, singular, or foundational, but rather constantly (re)negotiated through the dynamic interplay of contextual constraints, strategic alignments, and epistemic constructions. Their intelligibility depends on the relational positioning of categories and practices, and

their coherence is always partial—sustained through practices of cultural compromise, categories and discursive ordering, social closure and differentiation. Thus, when discursive tradition is reconceived as a social configuration, it no longer appears as a discursively articulated formation, whose boundaries are porous, whose internal logic is open to rupture, and whose continuity is sustained through active reconfiguration in response to political, theological, and historical contingencies (Jong, 2023, 2024, 2025).

These social configurations can be analyzed on three levels. The first level involves the conditions of possibility of their emergence, encompassing their contingency and historicity based on the partial determination of their foundations. At this level, the conditions of possibility of the emergence of these configurations, i.e., the identification of foundations within a constellation of historical and non-historical relationships shaped through the positions, interactions, practices, and dispositions of specific actors at a particular moment, are examined. These configurations in Islamist political thought can be constructed or reconstructed on foundations such as liberation, anti-colonialism, the establishment of an Islamic society (*ummah*), freedom, justice, the implementation of Shariah, and more, in specific temporal and spatial contexts and under particular conditions of possibility. The second level attempts to explain the process of construction and the characteristics of these configurations. A dual process of identity and difference is at work here. Configurations are fundamentally constructed around specific categories, their order, the unique relationships among them, their discursive expression, and their external relations. At this stage, the grammar of these configurations, at the moment of their actualization, will be precisely identified through identification of their key categories and expressions through parameters such as Islamist time and space, interpretations of the present, interpretations of history, the imagined community, orthodoxy, desired conditions and objectives, regimes of reference to sacred texts, regimes of reasoning and argumentation, and more. Just as a justificatory regime is formed around these categories and their ordering, a parallel regime of othering and differentiation also emerges in the construction of the “others” of these configurations. In Islamism, both regimes are legitimized through

different systems of reference and reasoning in relation to the Islamic tradition and sacred texts. The third level analyzes the construction of social realities and the tangible consequences related to these configurations, including the creation of various collective identities, social groupings and closure, collective actions, and social realities (Jong, 2024). At this level, the external and socialized aspects of these configurations will also be identified and analyzed based on the formation of various regimes of othering, methods and means of struggle, and the framing of their determination within movements, parties, states, and so on.

In this post-foundational approach (Jong, 2023, 2025), different actors (here, Islamists) with varied backgrounds but specific goals engage in interactions. These interactions generate an order of categories rooted in pre-existing traditions, social structures, and shaped by given conditions, as well as their perceptions and expectations. Consequently, elements from different traditions with diverse objectives are reconstructed within a configuration based on incomplete foundations (from religious to political, national, cultural, economic, etc.) at a particular moment. These foundations, which serve as the basis for the formation of configurations, are themselves shaped under specific conditions of possibility, yet they exist in a state of becoming and transformation. As such, they are neither permanent nor completed. Consequently, the configurations they give rise to are also not fixed or complete. On the other hand, this construction manifests through specific categories, their categorical order, and their discursive expression, forming the basis for social closures and social realities at another level. Thus, these configurations are contingent, and their characteristics—whether universal or singular, their historicity, orthodoxy or heterodoxy, transformation, rationality, regularity, authority, durability and objectivity—are all contingent upon a particular configuration within specific conditions of possibility. These conditions are continuously (re)constructed temporarily. Therefore, the starting and ending point of analysis is entirely limited to the configurations and the identification of the various relationships and characteristics pertinent to that configuration.

By considering the discursive tradition within the framework of social configurations, Islam, from an epistemological perspective, is

situated at the level of the particular, positioned between the singular—representing the lived and historical Islam—and the universal, which encompasses universal Islam or the trans-historical Islamic tradition. The particular represents a unique amalgamation of universality and historical singularity. Epistemologically, the particular signifies the intersection of the universal and the singular within a specific historical moment, giving rise to diverse discursive traditions with singular characteristics that possess distinct regularity, universality, consistency, and stability particular to each discursive tradition or configuration. Furthermore, this discursive tradition is in a perpetual state of transformation and evolution. This transformation is itself the result of the unfinished nature of the foundations of these discursive traditions, which are in a state of constant grounding. This means that an Islamic discursive tradition may ground around a political foundation such as liberation, or around a political-economic foundation such as distributive or consumer justice. However, the meaning of these concepts may quickly shift, or the foundation itself may, under changing contextual conditions, be reconfigured and take on a non-political character. Therefore, it is not possible to conceive of a permanent or finalized foundation for Political Islam, nor to attribute to it a fixed, stable, or universal essence. These features may apply to a specific range of Islamist configurations within particular historical periods. Thus, their generality is limited to this defined scope—derived through comparative studies and the identification of family resemblances among them. This is precisely what is meant by particularity: something that occupies a space between universality and singularity. Thus, the Islamic discursive tradition is comprehended as a historically evolving assemblage of discourses, embedded within the practices and institutions of Muslim societies and communities, intricately interwoven with the material existence of its adherents.

In this understanding of the Islamic discursive tradition, discourses are situated within the traditions embedded within power relations and the levels and types of orthodoxy related to that power regime. These have a temporal and spatial dimension and exist within a specific configuration. This means that religious power or authority is not solely related to religious texts and traditions. Instead, the power structures

significantly influence the way these texts are engaged with, interpreted, the rationality and mode of argumentation and reference, and even the interpreter within a specific configuration. Consequently, the Islamist discursive tradition is characterized by a distinctive rationality, foundational principles, different levels of orthodoxy, specific conceptions of time and space, regimes of reference to the Islamic tradition, modes of reasoning and argumentation, and so on, all intricately interwoven with textual sources, historical trajectories, power relations, and institutional frameworks (Jong, 2023; Jong & Ali, 2023).

Accordingly, understanding Islam as a discursive tradition within this framework provides a powerful conceptual lens through which to interrogate the multiplicity and complexity of Political Islam. Rather than treating Political Islam as a fixed ideology or a monolithic expression of Islamic politics, this approach foregrounds its heterogeneous and context-dependent nature as a field of competing discourses, interpretations, and practices articulated under specific historical, social, and cultural conditions. This framing disrupts essentialist or nominalist accounts that seek to locate a transhistorical and invariant essence linking Islam to politics, the state, or the public sphere. Within this configurational and discursive horizon, the longstanding opposition between universalism and singularism—whether Political Islam is the manifestation of a timeless Islamic core or a set of historically contingent articulations—appears less as a dichotomy to be resolved than as a terrain to be problematized. Universalist approaches posit a normative and continuous relation between Islamic revelation and political order, often assuming coherence across space and time; singularist views, by contrast, stress the discontinuities, ruptures, and contextual variations that characterize the emergence of Islamist formations. Yet, within the discursive tradition framework, these polarities are not mutually exclusive but are dialectically entangled: Political Islam operates precisely through the tension between Islamic universality and its plural actualizations at the particular level. It draws from a shared semantic archive of symbols, concepts, and texts, while simultaneously being refracted through diverse historical mediations and sociopolitical imperatives. Thus, Political Islam is better understood not through fixed typologies or taxonomic

definitions, but as a field of discursive production where categories such as Shariah, *ummah*, *jihād*, or *ḥākimiyyah* acquire meaning through situated interpretation, strategic deployment, and institutional embedding. Discursive traditions do not merely preserve doctrinal content; they actively shape the conditions under which meaning is generated, contested, and stabilized. This approach enables scholars to attend to the plurality, indeterminacy, and internal complexity of political Islamic discourses while recognizing their embeddedness in shifting relations of power, temporality, and community rather than assuming a singular political logic of Islam. It is precisely this emphasis on multiplicity and contingency that allows for a more accurate and conceptually rigorous engagement with Political Islam, not as a deviation from liberal political norms or an expression of essential religiosity, but as a historically evolving tradition of political reasoning (Asad, 2003, 2011, 2015; Hurd, 2008; Ismail, 2003; Zemmin, 2018; Jong & Ali, 2023).

Building on this framework, any coherent analysis of Political Islam as a discursive tradition must begin with an account of its conditions of possibility, that is, the historically contingent and structurally mediated arrangements that render certain Islamic discourses thinkable, sayable, and actionable at specific moments. The concept of social configuration foregrounds precisely this analytical starting point: that discursive traditions do not unfold from internal theological logic or doctrinal transmission alone, but emerge from a dynamic field of relational dependencies, contextual transformations, institutional reconfigurations, and epistemic ruptures (Jong, 2023, 2025; Jong & Ali, 2024). As indicated earlier, a social configuration is not a stable or bounded entity; rather, it is an indeterminate formation composed of shifting alignments among actors, categories, and regimes of intelligibility. It is within such formations that particular discourses crystallize and are rendered authoritative. Situating Political Islam within this framework enables a more precise account of how the fragmentation of premodern religious authority, the violent disruptions of colonial rule, the rationalizing logics of post-colonial statehood, and other contextual transformations reshape the very grounds upon which new forms of political Islamist configuration, discourse, referring, reasoning and so on become possible (March, 2015;

Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2014; Zubaida, 2009; Asad, 2003; Volpi, 2011a; Esposito, 1997; Moaddel, 2002; Roy, 1994, 2003, 2006). For example, the Islamist thought of Abul A'la Maududi arises from a configuration marked by the collapse of the Mughal-Islamic political order, British colonial hegemony, and the secularizing impulse of nationalist modernity in South Asia (Ahmad, 2009; Nasr, 1996). Within this condition of possibility, categories such as Shariah and *ḥākimiyyah* are resignified—not as juristic doctrines—but as the building blocks of a theopolitical order that contests both colonial sovereignty and postcolonial nationalism. Similarly, the Iranian revolutionary configuration out of which Khomeini's *velāyat-e faqīh* emerges is shaped by the theological vacuum produced by the Imam's occultation, the centralizing reforms of the Pahlavi state, and the mobilizing capacities of Shi'i ritual networks (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2014; Kurzman, 2004). In this context, the temporal category of *ghaiba* (absence) is collapsed into political immediacy, and sacred authority is reassembled within the structure of modern state sovereignty. In both cases, Islamist discourse is not merely an ideological project but a configurational response to altered structures of intelligibility. Foundational categories such as *ummah*, *jihād*, or *shūra* are not mobilized as stable tokens of Islamic authenticity, but are instead hierarchized, disarticulated, and strategically recomposed in relation to the specific problematics each configuration seeks to address—be it civilizational decline, colonial domination, state repression, top-down secular modernization, a crisis of legitimacy, state inefficacy, or epistemic fragmentation. Political Islam, therefore, must be analyzed not in terms of abstract textual continuity, but through the situated architectures of meaning that emerge within each social configuration—assemblages of discursive, institutional, and affective practices that generate new grammars of Islamic political agency.

Once the conditions of possibility have reconfigured the discursive terrain, the second analytic layer of Political Islam as social configuration centers on how specific Islamist formations are constructed through a selective ordering of categories, regimes of meaning, and justificatory practices. Here, Political Islam is not defined by the mere invocation of Islamic concepts, but by the way these concepts are prioritized,

articulated, and interrelated within a relational architecture of meaning. This involves a dynamic process of categorical selection, internal hierarchization, discursive justification, and differentiation—processes through which key signifiers such as *jihād*, *shūra*, *ḥākimiyyah*, *ummah*, or Shariah are not only activated but imbued with distinct semantic valences. Crucially, these categories are never deployed in isolation. They are embedded within particular discursive grammars and structured by regimes of reference and reasoning that authorize their meaning through intertextual citation of Qurʾān, *ḥadīth*, classical jurisprudence, and other interpretive traditions. In this framework, what defines an Islamist configuration is not the presence of certain concepts per se, but their specific arrangement—the relative priority assigned to categories, the justificatory logics that stabilize their meaning, and the rhetorical and institutional devices that mediate their application. For example, in revolutionary configurations such as Maududi’s or Khomeini’s, concepts like *ḥākimiyyah* and *velāyat-e faqīh* take precedence as anchoring nodes around which all other categories are ordered, whereas in reformist or participatory Islamist configurations—such as those associated with figures like Rachid Ghannouchi or Malaysia’s Anwar Ibrahim—the grammar is recalibrated to emphasize *ijtihād*, ethical normativity, and institutional negotiation (Ahmad, 2009; Nasr, 1996; Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2014; Euben & Zaman, 2009). These differences are not merely discursive preferences but expressions of a deeper configurational logic: each tradition organizes its categories around a specific vision of Islamicity, a desired political order, and an interpretation of the present crisis and its historical genealogy. The internal coherence of these traditions is maintained not through theological consistency but through the activation of distinct justificatory regimes that legitimize the configuration’s ordering of values, political goals, and relations to sacred texts. Simultaneously, a logic of differentiation is at work: in constructing themselves, Islamist configurations generate a field of “others”—secularists, liberal reformers, traditionalists, or rival Islamist currents, and so on—against whom their internal ordering gains both contrast and legitimacy. This dual process—of intra-discursive construction and inter-discursive opposition—produces not only the content of Islamist thought but also its boundaries, modes of reasoning, and claims

to authenticity. It is through this interplay that configurations become intelligible as particular formations—bounded yet dynamic, plural yet rooted, and politically consequential.

At the third level of analysis, the social configuration of Political Islam manifests through its objectified effects, that is, its capacity to generate concrete social realities, institutional arrangements, collective identities, and political imaginaries. These outcomes are material articulations of the discursive configurations previously described. Through the performative enactment of prioritized categories such as *ummah*, Shariah, or *jihād*, Islamist traditions construct not only internal logics but external structures of authority, community, and contestation. These social articulations unfold across multiple domains: political institutions (Islamist parties and movements), juridical frameworks (Shariah-based reforms or legal pluralism), pedagogical infrastructures (madrasas, *da‘wah* networks), ethical regimes (moral policing, Islamic economy, or family law reform), among others. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt reconfigured the category of *al-amr bi-al-ma‘rūf wa-al-nahy ‘an al-munkar* from a private moral responsibility into a communal obligation that structured public engagement, electoral politics, and social services—thus giving ethical discourse a political and institutional embodiment (Ismail, 2003; Mandaville, 2007; Wickham, 2013). By contrast, some Salafi-inspired actors often deploy a decontextualized literalism that depoliticizes Islamic categories, restricting them to ritual compliance and doctrinal purity while rejecting institutionalized politics altogether (Meijer, 2009; Wiktorowicz, 2006). Meanwhile, groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon mobilize categories like resistance, *velāyat*, and martyrdom within a theological-military grammar that fuses political sovereignty with eschatological symbolism—redefining communal identity around the axis of anti-colonial *jihād* and theological militancy (Hamzeh, 2004; Roy, 2006).

More radically, Jihadist formations such as the Taliban and ISIS reconfigure these categories within hyper-politicized and violently exclusivist grammars. The Taliban’s configuration is anchored in an ethno-religious vision of Islamic governance centered on *amr wa-nahy*, *ḥudūd* punishments, and tribal customary law (*‘urf*) as sources of both divine and social

authority—converging into a form of postcolonial Islamic authoritarianism rooted in both Deobandi orthodoxy and Pashtun identity (Rashid, 2000; Giustozzi, 2009). By contrast, ISIS articulated a globally expansive and totalizing configuration built on categories like *khilāfah*, *takfīr*, and *hijrah*—not only declaring a caliphate but legitimizing mass violence and institutionalized slavery as expressions of divine sovereignty and anti-modern rupture. Their ideology fused scriptural literalism with apocalyptic temporality, constructing a theology of purification through blood, and violently excluding not only non-Muslims but Shi'a, secular Muslims, and even rival Islamists (Gambhir, 2015; Bunzel, 2015; March, 2015). These configurations do not arise from doctrinal innovation per se, but from strategic reordering and resignification of inherited Islamic categories in response to perceived crises of authority, colonial subjugation, and theological fragmentation, among others. As such, they generate new social realities—territorial rule, gender regimes, legal orders, militant networks—through the operationalization of a particular Islamic grammar embedded in historical ruptures and antagonistic relational logics. These effects reveal that Political Islam's discursive traditions are not merely interpretive spaces but materially consequential formations. They not only inscribe meaning onto texts but inscribe power onto bodies and landscapes—structuring the moral economies, institutional architectures, and communal boundaries of the societies in which they intervene (Jong, 2024; Hurd, 2008).

Within the framework of social configuration, the issue of power and authority is not reducible to legal formalism or theological orthodoxy but must be examined as a discursively constructed and strategically mobilized phenomenon. In Islamist configurations, authority is not merely derived from divine texts, but is produced through interpretive acts, institutional alignments, and positional negotiations within complex epistemic fields (Schäbler, 2016). The legitimacy of Islamic political authority—whether in the form of the ruler, the jurist, the scholar, the party, or the movement—is contingent upon its capacity to mobilize recognizable regimes of reference and reasoning that situate its claims within a broader archive of Islamicity. That is, who speaks for Islam and with what authority is not resolved by recourse to timeless standards,

but through discursive practices that construct orthodoxy, authorize inclusion, and delineate heresy. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood grounded its authority in its ability to integrate classical jurisprudence with mass mobilization and social welfare, thus reframing Islamic leadership as a synthesis of scholarly lineage and popular legitimacy (Wickham, 2013). Similarly, Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of *velāyat-e faqīh* displaced traditional quietist Shi'i jurisprudence—a doctrine he himself had followed earlier in his clerical life—by inserting the jurist into the center of political sovereignty, thereby redefining divine representation through a restructured epistemology of eschatology and immediacy (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2014). By contrast, ISIS rejected both state-based clericalism and democratic legitimacy, instead asserting *takfīrī* orthodoxy through direct scriptural citation and violence, collapsing textual authority into performative domination (Bunzel, 2015). These examples show that Islamic authority is not a static inheritance but a dynamic outcome of discursive boundary work—where regimes of reasoning (e.g., *ijtihād*, *qiyās*, *maṣlaḥah*) and regimes of referencing (e.g., Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, classical texts, modern fatwas) are activated to validate political claims. Within this logic, traditional sources such as *taqlīd* (emulation) or *ijmā'* (consensus) are not simply repeated, but strategically repositioned to serve emergent political grammars. Authority becomes not the repetition of a past norm, but the reconfiguration of a relationship to the tradition under novel conditions of intelligibility. Thus, what appears as theological continuity often conceals deeper ruptures in the grammar of justification. Islamist discursive traditions selectively activate and silence elements of the Islamic archive—producing new forms of *fiqh al-siyāsah* (jurisprudence of governance), legitimating new institutional actors (parties, movements, jurist-states), and delegitimizing rivals through claims to scriptural purity or political betrayal. The very structure of othering—whether of secularists, traditional ulama, or rival Islamist currents—is itself part of the performative construction of authority, through which configurations distinguish their epistemic center from deviance, error, or compromise (Euben & Zaman, 2009; Hurd, 2008; Denoeux, 2002). Political Islam, then, does not inherit a stable structure of religious authority; it constructs it anew within contingent

historical, institutional, and semantic fields, by aligning textual references, interpretive regimes, and political institutions into a coherent—if always contested—configuration of legitimacy.

Within the grammar of Political Islam as a discursive tradition situated in social configurations, time and history emerge as core axes of semantic struggle and ideological production (Jong & Ebrahimzadeh, 2024). Islamist discourses do not operate within a secular-linear temporality that charts historical development along a continuum of progress and rupture (Asad, 2003). Rather, they recalibrate temporality through selective genealogies, theological imaginaries, and strategic anachronisms that reconfigure the past, interpret the present, and project the future in Islamic terms. The invocation of foundational Islamic epochs—whether the Prophetic Era, the Rightly-Guided Caliphate (*khilāfah rāshidah*), or the classical jurisprudential centuries—does not signify a return to doctrinal authenticity per se, but functions as a temporal device for authorizing political futures. These moments are not merely commemorated but are reinscribed into the present through acts of citation, appropriation, and resignification. In Maududi's vision, for example, the Shariah is reimagined not as a juristic code frozen in time, but as a totalizing theopolitical order capable of displacing colonial legality and modern secularism. Similarly, the concept of *ḥākimiyyah* (divine sovereignty) is not merely a theological proposition, but a discursive weapon that collapses sacred temporality into the field of immediate political confrontation (Ahmad, 2009; Nasr, 1996; Euben & Zaman, 2009; Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2014). The Taliban and ISIS provide stark examples of how Islamist temporality can be mobilized to structure both political agency and violence. The Taliban's claim to restore a puritanical Islamic Emirate is not a nostalgic revival but a selective reconfiguration of historical Islamic order within the ruins of colonial fragmentation and Afghan state collapse (Giustozzi, 2019). ISIS, by contrast, collapses eschatological and historical time through its vision of an impending apocalypse—strategically deploying the imagery of early Islam to frame its Caliphate as both a return and a final rupture (McCants, 2015). Such projects reveal that Islamist time is not chronological but kairological—a series of divinely significant moments whose invocation reorders political agency and

moral urgency (Asad, 2003; Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2008). Furthermore, the very critique of the present—secularism, corruption, Westernization, decline, occupation, imperialism—is often structured as a temporal lament, marking a fall from divine order, while solutions are articulated as redemptive futures, legitimized through scriptural intertextuality and historical analogy. This discursive logic transforms time itself into a political resource: crises become signs of divine trial, stagnation becomes a call for *tajdīd* (renewal), and rupture becomes the ground for theological reentry and strategic intervention (Roy, 1994; Euben & Zaman, 2009; Esposito, 1997). The conceptual elasticity of Islamic categories—such as *ummah*, *jihād*, *shūra*, or *velāyat*—enables their redeployment as temporal signifiers that organize experience and reauthorize political order in the face of dislocation. Thus, Islamist discursive configurations do not simply react to historical events; they produce a reconfigured temporality that links divine sovereignty with worldly strategy, theological pasts with aspirational futures, and sacred narratives with political contestation (Jong & Ebrahimzadeh, 2024). In this regard, history is not merely a backdrop to Political Islam but a performative archive, whose fragments are continually reassembled to structure the meaning, legitimacy, and direction of political struggle.

Thus, in this discursive framework, Political Islam should be understood as a tradition constituted by a historically dynamic reservoir of configurations—contingent, relational, and contestable formations that crystallize around unstable yet recurring categories such as Islamicity, historical decline and revival, textual authority, governance, Shariah, gender, othering, the collective imaginary of the *ummah*, among others. As mentioned, these categories are never absolute; they are activated, ordered, and hierarchized differently depending on specific social and historical predicaments. It is in this process of configuration—and not in any essential feature—that the Islamist discursive tradition gains coherence. The case studies and comparative engagement with other Islamic traditions, such as Sufism, Salafism, modernist-reformist thought, traditionalism, and the authority of the ulama, reveals both the points of convergence and the deeply embedded axes of epistemological, theological, and strategic divergence (Denoeux, 2002; Euben & Zaman, 2009;

Esposito, 1997). These divergences constitute the grammar through which Islamism defines itself. For example, whereas some Sufis articulate Islam through inward spiritual transformation, other Islamists externalize Islamic values into political form and public normativity (Zaman, 2002). Salafis may share Islamists' invocation of return, but they reject their historicist interpretive regime in favor of a decontextualized literalism (Haykel, 2014). Many reformists and modernists, by contrast, center *ijtihad* and contextual ethics, seeking to reconcile Islamic tradition with modern knowledge formations—whereas many Islamists often reconfigure tradition as a counter-hegemonic project anchored in resistance to secular modernity (Haykel, 2009; Safi, 2003; Rahman, 2008; Salvatore, 1999). Some traditionalists and ulama, for their part, foreground the continuity of inherited norms and scholarly lineages, while many Islamists frequently contest, reorient, or attempt to subsume these authorities under new political or ideological arrangements (Zaman, 2002; Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996). These general comparisons, which must be specified through case-by-case analysis, reveal the multiple and often conflicting logics through which Islamic discursive traditions engage core categories—logics that are activated differently within each configuration of Political Islam.

These axes of difference reveal that Islamist configurations are shaped not by fixed content but by how categories are ordered, prioritized, and articulated in relation to other traditions and the shifting historical conditions under which they emerge. Islamists may share with some Sufis a referential attachment to divine authority, yet radically differ in the domain of its application: private spirituality versus collective governance (Euben & Zaman, 2009; Wiktorowicz, 2006). With many Salafis, Islamists may echo the rhetoric of authenticity but diverge in epistemic method—favoring historicized, even strategic, interpretive regimes over Salafi literalism and anti-political purism (Lauzière, 2016). When contrasted with modernists and reformists, the divergence deepens at the level of conceptual method: Islamists often reject modernity as a normative horizon, while reformists embrace it as a site for rethinking Islam (Wickham, 2004; Voll, 1983, 1991; Zemmin, 2018; Rahman, 2017; Salvatore, 1999). Against some traditionalists and ulama, many Islamists

frequently assert their own modes of legitimacy—challenging inherited scholarly hierarchies while simultaneously attempting to reconstruct religious authority within new political frames (Mandaville, 2014; Euben, 1999; Wiktorowicz, 2000; Zaman, 2002, 2012). Across all these discursive encounters, the boundaries are porous, and overlap is inevitable, but the activation and hierarchy of categories—such as the role of the state, the centrality of Shariah, interpretive mediation, or the treatment of gender and religious others—differ systematically. These differences define how Islamist configurations construct meaning, authorize action, and position themselves within the broader Islamic field.

Thus, Political Islam as a configurational discursive tradition is best conceptualized as a space of shifting, relational configurations—each defined by the particular arrangement of categories, interpretive strategies, and socio-political orientations. These configurations are never complete or stable; they are marked by incompleteness, contestation, and strategic adaptation. They do not map neatly onto conventional labels such as “fundamentalist,” “utopian,” or “anti-colonial,” which obscure rather than clarify the discursive specificity of Islamist projects. What defines each configuration is not its surface content, but its internal architecture—the epistemological frameworks it deploys, the regime of reference it constructs, and the manner in which it locates Islam in relation to modernity, the state, secularism, authority and other Islamic traditions. A single movement may shift across multiple configurations without forfeiting its referential coherence—moving from revolutionary rhetoric to institutional pragmatism, or from moral protest to legal reform—precisely because it draws from the flexible, contested, and generative space of the discursive reservoir. It is only through tracing family resemblances—partial, overlapping, and historically emergent affinities between configurations—that the broader contours of political Islam can be meaningfully apprehended (Ahmed, 2016). Therefore, understanding political Islam requires a methodology that is not typological or essentialist but comparative and genealogical, tracing how discursive formations evolve through both internal rearticulation and external differentiation. In doing so, it becomes possible to analyze Political Islam not as a monolith but as a dynamic and plural tradition—rooted in Islamic

history, yet continually reconstituted in the face of new predicaments, interlocutors, and possibilities.

Conclusion

Political Islam, when approached through the lens of discursive tradition and social configuration, reveals itself not as a singular ideology or unified movement, but as a plural and historically contingent field of political articulation. It operates across divergent terrains—national, transnational, institutional, insurgent and so on—where Islamic categories are strategically prioritized, resignified, and reassembled within distinct configurations. These configurations are not byproducts of theological fixity or scriptural determinism, but performative responses to particular conditions of possibility—ranging from colonial disruption and postcolonial state formation to epistemic crisis and ideological contestation, among others. As such, Political Islam must be understood as a dynamic grammar of Islamic reasoning, through which actors mobilize tradition to construct new political imaginaries, institutional orders, and claims to authority.

The diversity of this tradition is evident in the wide spectrum of its enactments. Thinkers such as Ali Shariati foreground Islam as a revolutionary and liberatory discourse, embedding concepts like *tawhīd* and *shahādah* within a theology of emancipation and social justice. Conversely, Islamist actors like Osama bin Laden or ISIS reconfigure the same Islamic lexicon—*jihād*, *ḥākimiyyah*, *khilāfah*—into a totalizing apocalyptic vision that collapses religious meaning into violent rupture. The Taliban's authoritarian reconstruction of the Emirate, and the Islamic Republic of Iran's complex integration of Shi'i jurisprudence with modern state institutions, likewise illustrate how Political Islam materializes through structurally distinct social configurations, each activating specific archives of tradition to legitimate divergent regimes of power. These cases underscore that the core categories of political Islam—Shariah, *ummah*, *velāyat*, *jihād* and so on—do not possess intrinsic political meaning, but acquire force and intelligibility only within historically situated discursive formations.

Thus, the essence of Political Islam lies not in its doctrinal core, but in the strategic work of configuration: the selective retrieval of tradition, the ordering of Islamic categories, and the construction of regimes of reference that authorize particular claims to Islamicity. This article has emphasized the need to move beyond essentialist, singularist, or nominalist approaches, and instead foreground the epistemological conditions, genealogical ruptures, and political stakes through which Islamist discourses emerge. Only by attending to the layered operations of discursive labor, and by tracing how Islamic concepts are resignified within shifting institutional and ideological terrains, can we grasp the profound multiplicity and internal contradictions that constitute the field of Political Islam today.

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