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## The Islamic State

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# 10. The Islamic state

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter is based on a three-decade study of what is generally known as ‘political Islam’ and ‘sharia’ in the modern period. My academic goals were always in the domain of the practical: what is it that people aspire to in terms of state and law, how do they construe it, how do they propagate it? But during my research I grew aware that these aspirations and actions of Muslims had an undercurrent of hope and wishful thinking: they were hoping, thinking, writing, and sometimes even actively pursuing a society that was a better place than where they were living now. This desire was encapsulated by the notion of ‘Islamic state’. Can these Islamic state projects then perhaps be considered utopian? On the one hand we are looking at a twentieth-century phenomenon of pragmatic state-building that, although set in a framework of Islamic thought, is indebted to modern notions and ideologies of governance. On the other hand, these pragmatic and modern projects are also infused with what we may call utopian thinking.

To come to a clearer understanding of this I will explore the developments of the notion of ‘Islamic state’ from its first inception in the 1940s until the rise of ISIL in 2014. But rather than applying theories of utopia on these Islamic state projects, I prefer to see what kind of utopian notion emerges from those projects. In order to do so, however, we must of course first establish whether it is justified to speak of ‘utopia’ in the first place with regard to these projects. Here, Ruth Levitas’s notion of utopia as the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society comes in useful (Levitas, 2013). She defines utopia as essentially ‘the desire for being otherwise’ (Levitas, 2013, p. xi) and then develops a methodological approach based on three modes: the image of a good society (the ‘archaeological mode’), the image of good people (the ‘ontological mode’) and the image of scenarios for a good future (the ‘architectural mode’) (Levitas, 2013, p. 153). We will see that all three modes are reflected in the Islamic state projects. But we will also see that there are some peculiarities that are quite specific to the Islamic approach in these utopian projects. To reach that point

I suggest we first let the various Muslim thinkers explain their visions in their own words, and then come to an analysis of the utopian nature of these visions.

## 2. THE THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL VISIONS OF A BETTER PLACE IN ISLAM

The notion that we in this chapter refer to as ‘utopia’, and which we have defined as the ‘desire for being otherwise’, either as a people or society or future, has little resonance in Islamic theological or philosophical thought.<sup>1</sup> In theology we find of course the notion of the Afterlife (*al-Akhira*), which in Islam has acquired tangible proportions in its descriptions of Paradise (*al-Jannah*, literally ‘the garden’). This paradise is much more than a garden: from the various scriptural and human descriptions we learn about large rivers, walls and buildings made of precious stones, and tall dunes of musk, but also fabulous tents, pavilions, and palaces, not to mention the extravagant luxury enjoyed by its inhabitants, including embroidered couches and cushions, multicoloured brocaded garments, translucent cups of silver and gold (Lange, 2016, p. 16). In all this abundance men appear to be more richly bestowed with pleasures than women (Smith & Haddad, 1975).

Two observations are important for our discussion. First, this Paradise is located in a place that is not on earth and that can only be reached through death. So, while it may have a utopian attraction for people in that it is a beacon of hope and salvation during their earthly life and may even prompt some of them to hasten the ending of that earthly life so that they arrive sooner in this blissful place, this is not the kind of utopia we mean to explore in this chapter. Second, the descriptions of this place almost exclusively relate to the pleasing of human senses. We will see later that such ideas and concepts of earthly utopias are described in an entirely different manner, as they clearly serve different purposes.<sup>2</sup>

While Islamic theology contains little that may be called utopia, Islamic philosophy has at times entertained this concept. Three thinkers are known for ideas that are close to our notion of utopia. Two of them are Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185 AD) and Ibn Nafis (d. 1288 AD). Both have written a short treatise with a similar plot: the growing up and development of a human being who was born on an uninhabited island (Ibn Nafis, 1968; Ibn Tufayl, 2009). The utopian character of these two stories is not the living conditions of this island, but the

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<sup>1</sup> Not surprising, then, that the notion of utopia in Islam has received little academic attention, see e.g.: Simon (1963) and Sargent (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Just like utopian views inspired by Christianity oftentimes lead to completely different viewpoints than those espoused by Islamic thinkers – see for examples of such Christian views the contributions in this volume by Van den Broecke and Harinck.

intellectual and spiritual development of the main character: the authors want to demonstrate how mankind through the superiority of his capacity of reasoning can attain intellectual and spiritual growth and reach ultimate wellbeing.<sup>3</sup>

Long before these two authors, one of the grand philosophers of Islamic times, Ibn al-Farabi (d. 950 AD) wrote his *The Virtuous City* (Farabi, 1985). This treatise is one of its kind in Islamic thought and more relevant to our discussion than the previous two. Farabi starts off with man's ultimate goal in life, namely *sa'ada*, which can be translated as happiness or felicity. This is a state which Farabi claims to be the prerequisite for a successful access to the afterlife. But rather than dwelling on a description of this afterlife, as so many theologians did at the time, Farabi focuses on the conditions required to reach this afterlife. To do so, man needs to be in a state of felicity, Farabi claims, but man cannot do this on his own, as the human being is a social and political being who cannot live in isolation. Therefore, cooperation with other people is necessary, as only through collective effort can everyone acquire the needs to rid oneself of vice and to perfect the virtues. This collective activity can only successfully take place in a 'virtuous city', which is the place on earth that fulfils all the conditions to attain everyone's state of ultimate felicity.

The basis of this virtuous state, Farabi insists, is justice, which he defines as 'proportionate equality, everybody fulfilling the task which he is able to fulfil thanks to his natural endowment and occupying the rank which he deserves according to his performance' (Farabi, 1985, p. 434). Any lack of justice will create a disturbance of equality which, Farabi believes, will lead to a state of vice. In addition to the necessity of social cooperation and justice, there is a third and perhaps most crucial condition for the virtuous society to be successful, Farabi stipulates: its ruler. And this person should not only be a theoretical philosopher but a lawgiver and a practising politician as well. Here we see the influence of Plato's *Republic*.<sup>4</sup>

Can Farabi's *virtuous city* be considered a utopia in our meaning of the word? One would say so, because as it is an earthly place where people can become better persons. The state of felicity that mankind can reach in that place is not a God-given state of bliss but needs human effort (Lauri, 2013, p. 32). I would argue, however, that Farabi's virtuous city fails to meet our concept of utopia because his city is not an end goal, but merely a passage to the ultimate utopia which is the afterlife.

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<sup>3</sup> One author also pointed at two other utopian themes, although much less clear from the texts of the treatises: the vices and virtues of society; and transcendence, in the particular meaning of the ability to transform man and society to a higher and better plane (Lauri, 2013, pp. 37–38).

<sup>4</sup> Farabi belongs to the group of Muslim philosophers who were much influenced and inspired by Greek philosophy, see, e.g., Adamson (2016) and Fakhry (2004).

### 3. PAKISTAN'S 'HOMELAND'

The mentioned treatises and discussions were the products of philosophers who lived during a period which became known as the 'Golden Age' of Islam or the Islamic 'Age of Enlightenment', between the tenth and thirteenth century AD. After that, there are to my knowledge no thoughts or descriptions of any utopian dream or place on earth. Nor seem these early Islamic philosophers to have been of any influence on modern thought about the Islamic state.

The notion 'Islamic state' was first introduced in the twentieth century. The term itself was coined in 1941 by the Pakistani Muslim thinker Abu Ala Mawdudi (1903–1979). He did so in the context of the movement of Muslims in British India who were intent on creating a separate land for themselves after India's independence. How this new country was going to be shaped was not yet clear, but the motivation for it was: the Muslims wanted to be disengaged from the Hindu majority that they feared was going to impose its will once independence from Great Britain was achieved. The endeavour of these Muslims therefore was to create something of a religious homeland (Jalal, 2014), not unlike the homeland aspired by the European Jews in Palestine during that same period.

With the risk of oversimplification, we might make the generalization that for most of these Muslims in British India during the 1920s and 1930s, religion was an identity more than a religious praxis. In other words, one identified with being Muslim but that was not necessarily the same as being a devout Muslim. This identification process can be partly attributed to divide-and-rule politics of the British, partly to the response to Hindu nationalism, and partly to dynamics of self-identification (Van der Veer, 1994; Robinson, 1998; Metcalf, 2004).

The idea of a homeland gradually evolved into the more concrete project of a separate nation state. As this was a state specially destined for Muslims, it was often referred to as 'Islamic'. And indeed, once Pakistan was officially pronounced in 1949, it was formally named the 'Islamic Republic of Pakistan'. But it must be emphasized that the 'Islamic' in the name referred at the time to its inhabitants and much less so to the character or structure of the state itself. In the first decades of its existence, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan was quite secular, as shows in various rulings by the Constitutional Court in cases regarding religion (Mahmud, 1995).

This, now, was what bothered people like Mawdudi, who had hoped for a state that was not only Islamic in name and population, but also in character. The question, however, was what that character should look like, as Islamic scripture and theology did not provide blueprints of such a state (as will be

discussed in more detail below). Mawdudi was the first to undertake the endeavour of drafting such a blueprint.

#### 4. MAWDUDI'S 'ISLAMIC STATE'

The history of Islam is rife with movements, rulers, warriors and thinkers who aspired to a more 'Islamic' way of life. Mawdudi was a product of this thinking, but he took it one step further: he envisaged a more all-encompassing concept of a state form suitable specifically for Muslim society. For this he introduced the term 'Islamic state'. This was not a concept from Islamic theology or law – which is not surprising, as the notion of 'state' evolved only long after Islamic doctrine had been formed<sup>5</sup> – but a product of Mawdudi's own thinking that was more telling of the times he lived in than of his knowledge of Islamic theology.

From Mawdudi's writings, in particular his *The Islamic Law and Constitution* (1941) and *Islamic Way of Life* (1948), emerges the image of someone who is taking part in the Western debates of the time on what is the best form of government. His early writings show that Mawdudi was aware of the state models proposed by democrats, socialists and fascists. Later, he insists that Muslims want to 'carve out their own path in a world that is torn between secularism, nationalism and communism' (Mawdudi, 1941, p. 10). The result is a new state form that Mawdudi claims is more authentic to Muslims. But closer reading of Mawdudi's outline of that state shows that his model for an Islamic state contains elements of democratic, fascist and socialist models of governance, poured over by a gravy of Islamic ingredients. The result is not entirely coherent, as critics have repeatedly indicated (Nasr, 1996; Jackson, 2011), but the message was powerful, and the tone was set for the coming decades.

The aim of the Islamic state, Mawdudi says, is justice (Mawdudi, 1941, p. 4; 1947, p. 12; 1948, pp. 86ff). This is reminiscent of Farabi's aim of his 'virtuous city', which was also justice, but in Farabi's city justice was a means to an end (namely that through a just society man could reach the 'ultimate felicity' which was needed for a successful passage to the afterlife), while for Mawdudi justice was a goal in itself. He was not always entirely clear in what he meant by justice, as he explained it with equally broad terms like virtue, honesty, equity, and the absence of oppression and tyranny. But the overall image that arises is that he envisages a state form that serves as a better alternative to existing state forms.

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<sup>5</sup> 'There never was an Islamic state' (Hallaq, 2013, p. 48).

The question then arises if we are dealing with a utopia. I think not. Mawdudi's discussions and descriptions of his Islamic state regard the political and legal aspects thereof. It is a state that wants to be better than other state forms, but it is not more than that: a political project of state-building. Still, the setting in which Mawdudi's visions are situated, namely in the country of Pakistan, which had been designated as a religious homeland for Muslims from British India, may give the impression of a more utopian character of this state. So does his use of Islamic terminology and reference to Islamic scripture. In order to comprehend the status of this Islamic terminology, we need to briefly address two concepts that play a key role in the thinking of Mawdudi and of those coming after him: the Islamic concepts of state, and of justice.

## 5. ISLAMIC CONCEPTS OF STATE

Before we discuss these concepts, we first need to take a look at the larger context of Islamic theology. The centre of any Islamic theological discussion is the Quran, which, unlike the stories of the Bible or the Veda, reads as a text delivered by an entity who addresses the audience. According to Islam, this entity is God Himself, who in the relative short time span of 22 years conveyed His Revelation, or His cosmological vision of mankind. This vision was not so much descriptive but prescriptive: in order for mankind to reach fulfilment, and to reach Heaven as a reward, certain rules and rituals had to be followed.

However, while the Quran might set certain conditions for living the earthly life to reach the afterlife, it does not provide a full blueprint for the life on earth. God had left very few instructions how Muslims could or should rule one another, except in general terms, like: 'Rule the people according to the precepts of God and not according to their idle desires' (Quran 5:49) or 'Obey the prophet' (Quran 4:59). In the light of this absence of clear rules, it became theological doctrine that it was up to the people to find their own ways of government (Tamaddonfar, 1989, p. 40; Hallaq, 2013, pp. 50–51). In practice this meant that Muslims had the freedom to form their own systems of government, and so they did: in the first centuries of Islam these were the 'caliphates', which were not unlike other kingdoms and empires of those days, followed from the late nineteenth century onwards by modern state forms like a republic.<sup>6</sup> While the choice of government was free, the rules of the state had to be those as ordained by God (known as the *sharia*). But since these rules only covered a small part of the rules needed to govern a state, the worldly power (the *sultan*) had the freedom to promulgate all additional rules, provided that they were in the spirit of the *sharia*. This latter practice was called *siyasa* and

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<sup>6</sup> Most Muslim-majority states today call themselves 'republic'.

these rules effectively constituted the overall majority of state rules (Vikør, 2005, pp. 69–70).

But then, with the arrival of the twentieth century, there was a growing discontent among Muslims worldwide about the deplorable situation of their societies and about the nature of their governments and laws. Some of this discontent had to do with the fact that most of these Muslim-majority societies were under colonial rule. Some discontent also had to do with the confrontation with modernism. Whatever the exact reason, the result was an increasing call for a return to Islam as an authentic source for constructing a society by and for Muslims. The main problem of this endeavour, however, is that Islam provides very few rules and indications for how this society should look like. Only the starting point was clear: it was up to the people to find their own ways of government, but the rules they were to apply were those as ordained by God. This explains why Mawdudi and later thinkers took liberties with the structuring of that state, and put great emphasis on the adherence to *sharia* as a rule of law.<sup>7</sup> In their discussion on the legal structure, they sufficed with merely referring to the '*sharia*', which they usually neglected to define.

## 6. JUSTICE AND OPPRESSION

So far, we discussed the practicalities of constructing a state. In our search for any utopian visions, however, an important question is: what goal should that state serve? Mawdudi was the first to introduce the notion 'justice' as the main aim of an Islamic state (Mawdudi, 1948, pp. 86ff). Justice (*adl* or *adala*), or social justice as it is more often called, is a pivotal concept in Islamic theology: not love, as in Christianity, but justice is the cornerstone for a 'good' society on earth (Hasan, 1971; Khadduri, 1984). Mawdudi, possibly influenced by the modern ideologies of his time, rephrased this term into 'social justice'. This was picked up and amplified by the Egyptian thinker Sayyid al-Qutb (1906–1966), in his seminal *Social Justice in Islam* (1949). Qutb described Islamic social justice as social solidarity, equality, and fair division of wealth. His writings would influence thinkers as far as Iran and Indonesia.<sup>8</sup>

Thinkers like Mawdudi and Qutb, and those who would succeed them, started off with a simple premise: justice was enshrined in and guaranteed by the divine law, *sharia*, so the implementation of that law should by itself be

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<sup>7</sup> See the chapter by Bart van Klink in this volume, which argues that the rule of law as such can be construed as a utopia, or at least is not contradictory to utopia.

<sup>8</sup> In particular Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr (1935–1980) in Iran and Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (1908–1981) in Indonesia.



sufficient to implement justice.<sup>9</sup> But in the thinking of Mawdudi and Qutb we may also discern the possible influence of the *Zeitgeist* of their time, in particular the elements of socialism (Calvert, 2009, p. 162). This is not surprising, as socialism enjoyed enormous popularity among the many countries that were in the process of obtaining their independence from colonial rule during the 1940s and 1950s. It was not just an ideological flirtation: there were ample reasons to call for social justice as defined by Qutb given the deplorable state of most inhabitants of Muslim majority countries at the time who were suffering from poverty, famine, feudal systems, inequality and abuse of power.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to this social-economic situation, the political situation also grew worse halfway through the twentieth century. After the initial euphoria of being independent, the national governments of many Muslim-majority countries proved to be quite a disappointment. Most of the new regimes had established autocratic rule based on secular and socialist programmes.<sup>11</sup> The people's discontent with their rule was of varied nature. To some, the new direction their country was taking was too far away from what they considered their authentic Islamic identity. For others, the regimes were too oppressive. But the majority was disgruntled with the economic crisis, unemployment, bad government, and corruption.

For this reason, the Islamic thinkers' call for social justice evolved from the 1950s onwards into a call to fight oppression (Rahemtulla, 2017).<sup>12</sup> Sayyid Qutb would become one of the main voices of this rebellious anger: 12 years after his *Social Justice* he wrote *Milestones* (1961), which was a manifest for revolt against the oppressive state, phrased in its own logic of Islamic terminology. Sayyid Qutb never spoke of an 'Islamic state', however: he framed the situation of his contemporaries in terms of the life of the prophet. Mohammed who also had lived in a situation of persecution and oppression, Qutb pointed out, and he had then taken his followers to Medina to establish their own society of Muslim believers, and from there had waged battle with the unbelievers in Mecca (Qutb, 1966, pp. 19–21). This comparison was not made with the intention to return to that situation of pristine Islam, but to use it

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<sup>9</sup> Carinne Elion-Valter discusses in this volume how legislation is inspired by, among others, the ideal of justice, and how legislation and law therefore are a source of hope.

<sup>10</sup> This image arises from the many country studies of various Muslim countries, and is summarized by Marshall Hodgson (1974, pp. 281–84).

<sup>11</sup> Nazih Ayubi prefers to call these regimes 'populist-corporatist' (1999, pp. 196ff).

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that 'oppression' did not feature as a battle cry during colonial times.

as a guiding principle in devising a strategy to address the situation in present times.<sup>13</sup>

Where Mawdudi had been struggling with a state (Pakistan) that had declared itself Islamic but, according to Mawdudi, was not Islamic enough, Sayyid Qutb was fighting a state (Egypt) that had declared itself socialist and secular, but according to Qutb was not Islamic at all. For his criticism Qutb ended up in jail, where he and the other Islamist inmates suffered torture and other mistreatments (Calvert, 2009, pp. 202, 206). It was in jail that he wrote his *Milestones*, which was not so much about building an ideal Islamic state, but about dismantling the non-Islamic state he was living in. In his writing, Qutb used a term that resonated with the discontent of many of his contemporaries, and in Islamic parlance was an immediate second after the term 'justice': oppression (*zulm*). Islamic theology is rife with discussion on whether it is permitted for Muslims to rise against their ruler when he is oppressive. In early Islam, the majority of theologians argued that obedience to the dictator was mandatory to every Muslim. That doctrine was the result of ten years of civil strife (*fitna*) among Muslims following the death of the prophet. This traumatic experience led the theologians to adhere to the saying: 'better sixty days of oppression (*zulm*) than one day of civil strife (*fitna*)' (Ibn Taymiyya, 2000).

This doctrine was being brushed aside in the course of the second half of the twentieth century. Mawdudi already made reference to the notions of oppression and tyranny, as we have seen, but merely as concepts that were anathema to the Islamic state. It was Sayyid al-Qutb, and later Khomeini, who turned these notions into Islamic battle cries in their opposition to the regimes of their countries and in their wish to establish a better society.<sup>14</sup> Justice and oppression became thus two sides of the same coin of the Islamic state: one represented what the state ought to be, the other what it should not be. One is the aspiration, represented by Mawdudi, and the other is the opposition, represented by Qutb. Khomeini was the one who would combine the two.

## 7. KHOMEINI'S 'REIGN OF THE SCHOLAR'

Khomeini (1902–1989) was the first to establish a state constructed on the principles of Islam. He did not do so from the inside out, as was Mawdudi's objective in the case of Pakistan, but by overthrowing the existing state of Iran. The

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<sup>13</sup> In the words of Nazih Ayubi: 'The Islamic militants are not angry because the aeroplane has replaced the camel; they are angry because they could not get on to the aeroplane' (1991, pp. 176–77).

<sup>14</sup> See for a discussion of 'the need for radical hope in a hopeless world' the contribution by Marta Soniewicka in this volume.

regime of the shah, the very secular approach to society, the Western-oriented lifestyle of the ruling elite, and the ever-more repressive secret service – they had created strong opposition among the population. Khomeini gradually emerged as the leader of this opposition, and in his anti-government rhetoric the notion of ‘oppression’ (*zulm*) was one of the keywords. Oppression is also a notion that carries more weight in the Shiite tradition than in the Sunni tradition, which added to the inflammatory nature of Khomeini’s speeches (Sachedina, 1981; Kramer, 2019; Zonis & Brumberg, 2019).

Once the shah was overthrown, an Islamic state was built. Like Mawdudi’s approach, this state was a composite of various modern and Islamic elements (Martin, 2003). For starters, the new Iran was called an ‘Islamic republic’, and there were elaborate election systems for parliament, municipalities, and various other state bodies, even though concepts like ‘republic’ or ‘elections’ are not to be found in Islamic theology or law. On the other hand, primacy was given to Islamic law (*sharia*), and to guarantee that all laws and state policies were in accordance with *sharia*, a council of scholars was established to oversee this. They and their supreme leader constituted the ‘reign of the scholar’ (*vilayet-e-faqih*).

The world was now confronted with the situation that an Islamic state, after four decades of thinking and dreaming, was finally being realized. And more were to follow, as we will see later. Similarities with other revolutions come to mind, like those of America, France, and Russia. There, also, visions of society that one may call utopian were effectuated. While the resulting states themselves are usually not discussed in terms of utopia, they can serve as a measure stick of the utopian dream that had preceded it. In the case of Iran, the aspiration was to establish a state that would guarantee social justice and rule out oppression. But in the logic of Khomeini, such a promise was not to be measured by the wellbeing of the people, but by the implementation of *sharia*. Islam is here comparable with other ideologies that make a similar promise: the mere implementation of a preconceived system should create a society that served the people. But in its implementation, this Islamic state turned out to be no more than yet another political project of state-building.

## 8. ISLAMIC UTOPIA AS STATE OR SOCIETY

Let us pause here for a moment and take stock of the developments that we have sketched in broad brushstrokes so far. The aspirations for an Islamic state concur with the broad definition of utopia as ‘the desire for being otherwise’. On the other hand, the projects as devised by various thinkers are mostly very practical schemes of state-building or, in the case of Qutb, means to undo states that are not considered Islamic. Just as one does not discuss the constructs of liberal, socialist, democratic, or other state forms in terms of utopia,

that notion seems to have little relevance in the case of Islamic state. Unless, of course, we qualify these Islamic state projects as ‘realistic utopias’ (Levitas, 2013, p. 127), that is, visions that do not remain in the sphere of unreachable dreams but can be imagined to be actually realized.

Rather than getting entangled into an intricate discussion on theories of utopia, I want to draw the attention to a specific feature of the Islamic state projects that puts them squarely in the realm of utopia. Not the thinking or realization of Islamic states is decisive in considering it in utopian terms, but the dreaming, hoping, and desiring for it. To explain this, we have to retrace our steps.

The situation for most Muslims in the twentieth century was one of destitute lives, autocratic regimes, corruption, and lack of transparency and rule of law. Also, after decades of secularism and socialism, the Muslim world witnessed an increasing religiosity from the 1970s onwards. With this religiosity came an increasing expectation that Islam was to provide a better solution for living conditions on earth. The notion of an ‘Islamic state’, which was a dormant theory for several decades after its conceptualization by Mawdudi, caught on with a larger public after the 1970s. Their enthusiasm was fuelled with the implementation of several such projects, starting with the Iranian revolution in 1979. Similar endeavours never came to a complete overhaul of the state structure as Khomeini imposed in Iran, but the implementation of stricter forms of *sharia* in Pakistan in 1979 and Sudan in 1983 – in both cases enforced after military coups – was enough to change the character of these societies. Egypt made a similar move in 1980, albeit not by imposing a new set of *sharia* laws, but by decreeing that all future laws should be in compliance with *sharia*. These *sharia* projects may have created a new morality that adhered to stricter Islamic values, but apart from that seem to have done little to make people happier or improve their lives. Such life improvement or happiness is of course hard to ascertain, but if we look at the Human Development Index, for years these countries keep ranking low on that list (United Nations Development Programme, 1990).

Hope was then vested not in the implementation of *sharia*, but on the actions of people, as was shown by the popularity of civil organizations with Islamic programmes. In the 1990s, their popularity increased throughout the Muslim world. Some organizations thrived on populism, but many became popular because they ‘delivered’: they were grassroots organizations that actually fulfilled the promise of a better life by improving living conditions of common people. These Islamic organizations set up cheap and good health clinics, food banks, micro finance schemes, charity work, homework assistance (Mandaville, 2020, pp. 123–26). All this was done either as an Islamic duty or, more so, based on models considered typical for Islam. These organizations stepped in where the governments were not functioning (Mandaville, 2020,

p. 126). The leaders of these organizations were not only known for their piety but, more importantly, for their honesty and transparency. The ‘clean hands’ approach was a welcome relief compared with what the governments and their officials had to offer. The credibility of the Islamic message grew by example.

Was this then the fulfilment of the Islamic promise of an ideal life, not top-down by reforming states but bottom-up by reforming societies? For a while that seemed to be the case, but everything grew muddy once these organizations entered politics. The AK Parti in Turkey, Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine are typical examples of organizations that had gained popularity by ‘delivering’ to the social needs of the people in the 1990s and doing so with ‘clean hands’, but once they got in the seat of power they became tainted by it. The same had already happened in Iran, where resentment among the population grew, not so much against Islam as such, but against the leaders who were accused of misusing Islam (Axworthy, 2019, pp. 417–18).

This development is noteworthy for our discussion on utopia. One might expect that all the failures of the various Islamic projects, whether they are related to *sharia* or to the state, and whether they are implemented top-down (Islamic state) or bottom-up (Islamic society), would be sufficient to make people lose faith in the promise and the dream of an Islamic state. The opposite was the case. The belief in Islam as a solution for a better life only seemed to grow stronger, as was shown by various surveys (Esposito & Mogahed, 2008; PEW, 2013). And this brings us to the notion of utopia. The belief in an ‘Islamic state’ as the model for the ultimately just and good society is not related to a concrete project of state reform, so it seems, but to a dreamlike project ‘out there’ that one is expectantly waiting for to happen at some moment in time. That is the utopia of the Islamic state. And this utopia is strongly felt and widely shared by many Muslims.

## 9. STATE OR SOCIETY AS ISLAMIC UTOPIA

This belief in Islam as the source of a better life can also be found in the power of terminology like ‘Islam’, ‘*sharia*’ and ‘Islamic state’. For most pious Muslims these terms have none of the pejorative meanings they may have for so many others. To the contrary, for these Muslims, such terms are inherently positive, as they represent something that is essentially good. The fact that few Muslims can concretely describe what these terms mean does not seem to bother them. To understand this apparent contradiction of strongly believing in something without being able to clarify what it is one believes, I often make the comparison with the term ‘justice’. This is a term that most people will see as positive, and many people will be willing to fight for it and perhaps even die for it, but few people will be able to clearly describe what they mean by it. The fact that justice is considered something good is apparently sufficient. This

mechanism seems to be in play with terms like 'Islam', '*sharia*' and 'Islamic state'.

By consequence, one may also observe an inflation in this terminology. For instance, the mere addition of the adjective 'Islamic' is a way to indicate that the product or process at hand is somehow 'good': lifestyle, food, marriage, culture, politics, economics. Calling it 'Islamic' is as if one has branded it with a quality mark. The case of economics is an interesting example. The notions of 'Islamic finance' and 'Islamic economics' were developed in the 1970s and then soared in popularity in the financial markets of the Gulf and Western countries. They arguably represent an Islamic way of doing business, running a corporate firm, and playing the financial market, but critics have repeatedly asked how this 'Islamic' finance is any different from regular finance (e.g., Kuran, 2004). According to these critics, the product has never changed but is merely cosmetically adapted and relabelled with the name 'Islam'. The same can be said about the slogan 'Islam is the solution!' that was used by so many Islamic organizations. It may have been a powerful rally cry to mobilize people but remained empty when no solutions were provided.

Still, this inflation in word and deed did not seem to bother too many Muslims. Their faith in these terms is still strong. So is their belief in a utopian ideal of an 'Islamic state' or 'Islamic society'. I personally noted that when interviewing people in the late 1990s and early 2000s about the notion of the Islamic state. I always used three questions. The first was: would you favour an Islamic state? The answer was almost unanimously a resounding yes. The next question was: what exactly is this Islamic state, what does it look like? The answer was usually silence. Some people would refer me to the theologians. My third question, then, was if there was a country at present that would serve them as an example for the Islamic state they would like to have. The answer was yet again unanimous, but then negative: no. Countries with clear Islamic signatures, like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, were all rejected as examples of an Islamic state, just as countries ruled by Islamic political parties such as Turkey or Indonesia. When pressing this matter further and repeating the question, 'But what is then this Islamic state you aspire to?', the answer would be: 'not this'. The dream of an Islamic state was thus defined as a photo negative of the present situation: the Islamic state is 'not this'. This, indeed, meets our definition of a utopia.

But then, in 2014, this utopian aspiration for an 'Islamic state' was challenged by an organization called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which declared the establishment of an Islamic state in the region that straddles eastern Syria and western Iraq.

## 10. ISIL'S WARRIOR STATE

ISIL poses a problem for analysis as it had features that may be called both utopian and dystopian, and some features that have no relation with either. It was first and foremost a militant state, not unlike Nazi Germany, where people, radiant with a newfound pride and vigour and masculinity, set out to shape a totalitarian society on their own terms. I deliberately make the comparison with Nazi Germany to underscore that this was not just a fanatical rebel group roaming the desert between Iraq and Syria, but a well-organized and well-administered society, with ministries, chains of command, bureaucracies. This society, however, also presented itself as an Islamic state. And it did so in three ways: as a promise, a state structure, and as the fulfilment of a prophecy. Each of these elements contains utopian and dystopian elements and therefore need further elaboration.

The announcement in August 2014 by ISIL that it had established an Islamic state, also called caliphate, sent shockwaves through the Muslim world. An important part of that shock was anticipation: was it really going to happen, was this dream of an Islamic state finally going to be fulfilled? ISIL tapped into the longing among Muslims across the world for a long-awaited fulfilment of a perfect society. ISIL fuelled this image with a propaganda campaign showing videos stressing the law and order they had established (as opposed to the Iraqi and Syrian oppressive bureaucracies and intelligence agencies that had controlled the livelihood of the ordinary people for decades), and inviting Muslims from the West to come to this place specially created for Muslims (reminiscent of the 'homeland' for British Indian Muslims), where they would be 'free from humiliation'.<sup>15</sup> This promise of an Islamic home had lingered for nearly seven decades (since Mawdudi) and had gained the potential of a full-fledged utopian dream that now was about to come true. Or so it seemed. It is perhaps the long-lingering anticipation among Muslims for the establishment of an 'Islamic state' that may explain why some Muslims remained in a state of denial for so long about ISIL's ruthless oppression and its atrocities. Excuses were made – the Western press was blamed for painting its usually bad picture of Islam, the violence was justified as collateral damage inherent to any state formation – to postpone the conclusion that something was happening that had little to do with the utopian notion of an 'Islamic state'.

The way this newly established state was structured, however, had little to do with the notion of a utopia. To the contrary, the state's organization was

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<sup>15</sup> This is the recurring song line in the ISIS video 'Greetings from the Land of Khilafa' (2014), which is not available anymore on the Internet, but the author has a downloaded version.

more resemblant of the bureaucratic structures established in the previous decades by the Baath regimes in Syria and Iraq: copies of pages from arrest books by ISIL policemen, smuggled out of ISIL territory and sent to me by a *Al Jazeera* journalist, were not unlike those used by the Iraqi and Syrian secret police.<sup>16</sup> The Islamic nature of ISIL's state was to be found mainly in the application of Islamic law, which, in ISIL's practice, was strict and violent. This application was roundly and unanimously condemned by more than a hundred Muslim theologians<sup>17</sup> – such a large unanimity was unique in the history of Islamic theology – but to no avail: many young Muslims still felt a need to leave their countries and take part in this new project. This appeal of ISIL has puzzled many observers, and much research has been conducted in its possible causes (ICCT, 2016, pp. 53–55). The appeal of ISIL's 'Islamic state' was clearly more than a state-like edifice that is theologically sound or practically suitable to people's needs and desires. To explain this appeal that went beyond the practical and the ideological, the notion of utopia could be helpful: people left everything behind to pursue a vision that was not clearly defined but was of utopian proportions. Not the state itself, but the fulfilment of its promise, was what got people into motion.

This pursuit of a promise ties in with the third, and perhaps most confusing, element of ISIL: in addition to the very worldly matters of building a functioning state and expanding and maintaining it by force, ISIL also propagated apocalyptic visions of a 'final battle' to herald the end of times and the coming of the Last Day (Schmid, 2015, p. 14). This is reminiscent of Farabi's *virtual city* as a preparatory phase to reach the ultimate felicity of the afterlife, although ISIL's preparatory phase is of a more violent nature, with ample references to the apocalyptic eschatology of Islam. ISIL's visions were based partly on Islamic scripture and partly on prophecies and folklore, and struck a chord with believing Muslims as some of these prophecies seemed to be fulfilled by ISIL's actions (like the taking of Dabiq, a small place in northern Syria where, according to the prophecies, the Muslims will defeat 'Rome', i.e., the Christian West<sup>18</sup>). The confusing aspect of these prophecies was that ISIL, on the one hand, was determinedly building the full infrastructure of a state, which indicates the intention to be a state of permanent nature, while at the same time it was disseminating messages that it was preparing for a final battle that was to destroy the world as we know it.

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<sup>16</sup> Copies are in the possession of the author.

<sup>17</sup> See [www.lettertobaghdadi.com](http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com).

<sup>18</sup> Mentioned, among others, in a speech by the self-proclaimed ISIL 'caliph' Al-Baghdadi and on ISIL twitter feed 14 September 2014 – all of these sources were removed shortly after they appeared on the Internet.



ISIL is a typical example of a utopia that turns into a dystopia (Levitas, 2013, p. 112). The question that is still in the open is whether the dystopian nightmare that ISIL turned out to be will erode the naïve utopian dreaming about an Islamic state that has been so prevailing in the Muslim world since the 1970s.

## 11. CONCLUSION

The central question posed in this chapter is whether Islamic state projects that have been developed since the 1940s can be considered examples of utopian thinking. Regarding the projects themselves, I am hesitant to answer in the affirmative, mainly because these projects were quite pragmatic and realistic, and not as dreamy and far-fetched as one might expect from utopian projects (although it could also be argued that these projects could qualify as ‘realistic utopias’). But if we were to consider these Islamic state projects as utopias, they were in reality more of the ‘archaeological’ mode (with a focus on improving the state system) while they themselves propagated to be of the ‘ontological’ mode (where the focus is on improvement of people). In this sense, the Islamic state projects are not unlike communist state projects.

While one might debate the utopian nature of the Islamic state projects, the *appeal* of such projects among the Muslims is definitely utopian. This shows in the fact that the implementation of several of the Islamic state projects have led to disappointment among Muslims but not to dismissal of the idea as such. To the contrary: it seems that the ideal of a ‘better’ (often phrased as ‘Islamic’) state or society is still very popular. This ideal is described either in general terms – justice, equality, benevolent leadership – or as the photo negative of the present world: the Islamic state is defined as the opposite of today’s society in Muslim countries. To many Muslims, the establishment of a ‘true’ Islamic state is a promise that still needs to be fulfilled. Unlike communism in the 1990s, no downfall or dysfunctional Islamic state project has yet caused the demise of the ideal as such.

Another question that arises from these considerations is the nature of the Islamic state projects: is there something typically ‘Islamic’ about these utopian projects? Three distinctive Islamic features can be discerned in the Islamic state projects, all of which receive little attention in utopian theory. First, these projects claim to realize divine providence and in doing so allude to the expectations that any religion raises to a better life. The exceptional situation of the ‘Islamic state’, however, is that it is firmly embedded in the worldly life of the here and now and has little if anything to do with the after-life. But neither should it be conceived as a ‘Heaven on Earth’. Heaven has its own particular dominion within Islamic thought. The Islamic state projects are

attempts to give form to the instructions that God has given for the ways that Muslims should live their lives on earth.

A second feature of this utopia that is typically Islamic is its reference to an ideal past. The assumption made by all modern Muslim thinkers is that the ideal Islamic society had already existed in the early decades of Islam. The Islamic state projects are therefore not only about what should be, but also about a revival of what has been. The idea of 'we have done it once, we can do it again', albeit illusive, is very potent.

The third role of Islam in the utopia of an Islamic state is that it provides several notions – justice, oppression, equity – that are strongly rooted in Islamic theological discourse and therefore give purpose and resonance when used in the project of Islamic state-building. But here, also, there is an exceptional situation: this terminology is used in the context of the twentieth century. This terminology has therefore been permeated by modern concepts like nationalism (homeland), socialism (social justice) and the state.

We may conclude that the notion of an 'Islamic state' can very well be studied through the prism of utopian theory, but at the same time takes a *sui generis* position in today's thinking about utopia.

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