



# MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

---

## THE END OF “ISLAMIC HISTORY”?

BY PETER SLUGLETT

Even before the cataclysm of the First World War, it was no longer possible to map historical events in Asia and Africa in terms of “Islamic history.” In addition, by 1914, a substantial part of the Islamic world had been in European hands for a century or more. The period after the First World War saw the disintegration of the land empires of Austria-Hungary, Germany, the Ottomans, the Qajars, and Russia, followed by the emergence of new national states formed mostly on the basis of language and/or ethnicity. In addition, as the twentieth century progressed, control of most of the previously or newly acquired colonial world in Asia and Africa gradually passed out of the hands of the European imperial powers, to the extent that full-blown colonialism had largely disappeared by about 1970. In the course of both processes, many new states came into being with majority Muslim populations.

Thus in the inter-war period most of the Arab states of the Mashriq were created as semi-colonial entities out of the former Ottoman Arab provinces under the tutelage of Britain or France; Republican Turkey emerged after the Treaty of Lausanne in July 1923, and its first president proceeded to abolish the caliphate in March 1924. During the 1920s, following the establishment of the Soviet Union, a series of semi-independent Muslim states came into being in the Caucasus and Central Asia, almost all of which became fully independent after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

After the Second World War the pace of decolonization began to accelerate. Thus India (and Pakistan, which was carved out of it) became independent in 1947; the Dutch withdrew from Indonesia in 1949; the British left Egypt, Iraq, and Palestine at various points in the 1940s and 1950s, Nigeria in 1960, and even Malaya in 1963. France left Lebanon in 1943, Syria in 1946, Morocco and Tunisia in 1956, what are now Mali, Mauritania, the Ivory Coast, and other West African states in 1960, and its settler state of Algeria after eight years of civil war in 1962.

These and other former colonies are now majority Muslim states, and many are members of various international Islamic organizations, such as the Muslim World League or the Organization of the Islamic Conference, founded in 1962 and 1969, respectively. But the modern histories of these states are local and national histories, just as the histories of modern Argentina or Slovenia relate primarily to the history of Latin America and Europe, rather than to the history of some eponymous “Christian world.” In general the notion of a monolithic “Islamic world” has largely disappeared except in the minds of those Western political scientists intent on regarding the contemporary “Islamic” and “Christian” worlds as forever locked in a “clash of civilizations.”

It may be useful to make some mention of the term “Islamic state.” While Medina at the time of the Prophet can be described as an “Islamic polity,” based upon the Constitutions of Medina, scholars generally agree that the concept did not exist in the classical period and that its modern form does not antedate the early twentieth century. Thus the Ottoman state regarded it as its duty to defend its own borders, and generally to provide the backdrop against which the good Islamic life might be lived, but it did not intrude into the lives

of its subjects on matters of religion in any way comparable to, say, the religious policing of Tudor England, let alone the Spanish Inquisition.

In addition, there is no agreement among Muslim theologians either as to how such a state might or should be set up, or indeed whether its existence would be “lawful” at all. The modern notion of the Islamic state is usually attributed to the Pakistani theologian Abu’l-‘Ala Mawdudi (1903–79). He took part in anti-British colonial agitation as a young man, especially after the abolition of the caliphate in 1924, and later founded a political party, Jamaat-i Islami, whose objective was the establishment of an Islamic state based on the principles of shari‘a law. In contrast, the distinguished Indonesian scholar Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005) believed that any use of Islam for political ends violates its basic monotheism (*tawhid*) by mixing the notion of the unity of God with worldly politics.

The fact is that in the modern world, “Islam” is only *a part* of the lives of a billion Muslims and “Islamic tradition” varies widely from place to place. Just as it is not especially useful to think of a one-size-fits-all entity called “Christian civilization” as providing some sort of explanatory background for the modern histories of Argentina or Slovenia, it is equally misleading to assume the continuing existence of an unchanging entity called the *Dar al-Islam* to explicate the histories of Afghanistan or Mali. In both cases, a myriad other factors—economic, ethnic, geopolitical, international, political, and social, to name only the most obvious—need to be taken into account.

***Peter Sluglett, Visiting Research Professor at MEI, has been Professor of Middle Eastern History at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City since 1994. He has published widely on Iraq, including Iraq since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship, 3rd edn. (2001, with Marion Farouk-Sluglett)***

***and Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country (2007). He has also edited and contributed to The Urban Social History of the Middle East 1750-1950 (2008), Syria and Bilad al-Sham under Ottoman Rule: Essays in Honour of Abdul-Karim Rafeq (2010, with Stefan Weber), and Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges (2012).***