

Reflections on the ‘Islamic’ Dimension of Conflicts in the East and in France: Putting An End to Culturalist Approaches and Reviving the Religious Explanation



By Haoues Seniguer

Report n. 24, November 2021

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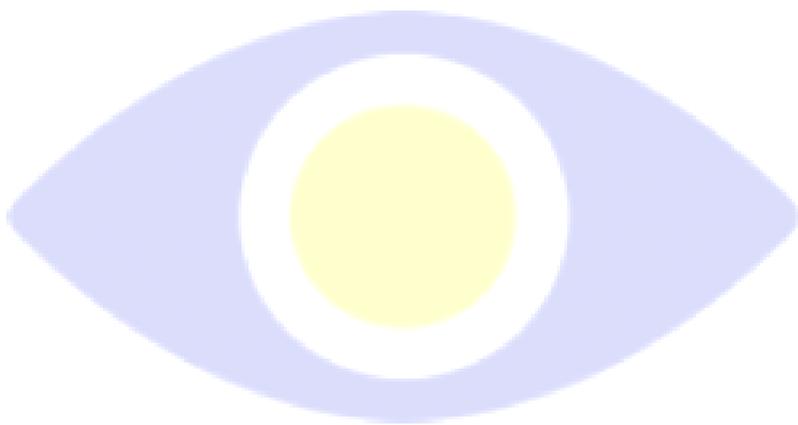
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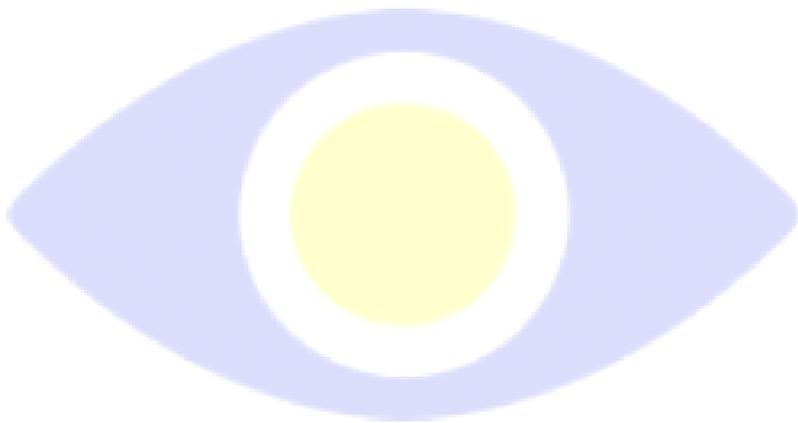
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Introduction

To consider in a short format the relationship between religion and violence in general and Islam and violence in particular is in many ways a perilous exercise, as we shall quickly see below. In this sense, it is necessary to remain cautious and, in order to do so, to choose specific sequences and precise actors, without going into excessive generality. This is why, in order to nourish the present reflection, we will favour a comprehensive approach, basing ourselves, with the help of a few germane examples, on the way in which the actors we are interested in see and interpret the social world, notably on religious grounds, and how, in this respect, they are sometimes led to justify the use of violence in the name of Islam. From this point of view, we obviously reject any mechanistic or genetic approach to this violence. Our reflection articulates and links the national and international dimensions.



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Dealing with the Religious Fact in Contemporary Socio-Political Phenomena

First and foremost, it must be noted that there is a scarcity of systematic studies on religion (particularly in political science), either as a specific object or as an object linked to other subjects, such as gender, violence, political conflicts, etc. From this point of view, religion is a sort of odd-one-out of the social sciences, in terms of clarifying social action and shedding new light on it. This observation, made by a few French sociologists who are very interested in religious issues and who take them very seriously,¹ could be extrapolated to political science in general and to French political science in particular, with some exceptions.

So, what is the reason for this exclusion of religion, that is to say this lack of interest, or even the avoidance of it, by all or part of the field of French sociology and political science, which tend, in the end, to see religion only as a secondary aspect of sociological explanation?² In other words, the religious motive is a priori denied its own active power as “an autonomous authority”.³

After attempting to clarify the objective reasons for all the reticence observed in recent years regarding the treatment or, more precisely, the non-treatment of the religious fact as a potentially explanatory variable of social and public behaviour of actors who openly claim to belong to a religion, this report will try to show, in the second stage, how it is possible to integrate the religious dimension into the explanatory economy of contemporary phenomena involving Islam and Muslims, whether or not in violent configurations.

Céline Béraud puts forward at least three reasons that we can recall here.⁴

First, the religious are bearing the brunt of “the enterprise of rational deconstruction”, a characteristic undertaking of the nascent social sciences”; this, in fact, “could have led to its reduction or even its dissolution”, insofar as the sociology of religion had, in the past, to integrate “the theories of secularisation”, which, in return, have in a way rubbed off on the said sociology to the point, precisely, that they have led it, if not to divest itself of the religious object, at least to strip itself somewhat.

Second, as a direct consequence, there has been a growing “academic secular embarrassment”, leading “the sociologists of religion themselves to avoid certain objects

¹ Béraud C, Duriez B and De Gasquet B (2018) *Sociologues en quête de religion*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

² Cf. Burgat F (2016) *Comprendre l'islam politique. Une trajectoire de recherche sur l'altérité islamiste, 1973-2016*. Paris : La découverte.

³ Kolakowski L (1985) *Philosophie de la religion*. Paris : Fayard

⁴ Béraud C (2018) Introduction. In : Béraud C, Duriez B and De Gasquet B (eds) *Sociologues en quête de religion*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, pp. 07-12

(certain beliefs, theology, mystical practices) or certain dimensions of the facts studied (the experiential, sensitive dimension of religious practice in particular⁵)”.

Third, for the sociologists concerned, to “evoke [their] religious beliefs or [their] denominational affiliation”,⁶ is almost “taboo”.

If the religious dimension is not always—if ever, and even then only peripherally—relevant in the eyes of certain social scientists specialising in religion in general and in Islam in particular, this state of affairs is even more obvious in sociology, or in the theory of international relations,⁷ for reasons more or less similar to those highlighted by Céline Béraud, namely the extension of the domains of rationality to all modern social spheres, with an increasing focus on the differentiation of each of them, and an individualisation or privatisation of belief.

As Philippe Portier and Frédéric Ramel point out, bibliometrics provides indications that clearly show the marginality of taking the religious variable into account in the study of international relations since, for example, over a period from 1980 to 1999, the three central American journals in international relations offer barely six articles devoted to the place of religion out of nearly 1,600 pieces published over the period. There are, however, some notable exceptions. For example, Jonathan Fox, a scholar from Bar Ilan (Israel), has tried to break a bias in the “Western social sciences”, which consists of excluding religion as one of the possible parameters for the explanation of social phenomena according to a given or yet to be determined scale.⁸

In addition to all this, with which this report agrees, there are other explanations for the reluctance of a significant part of the French academic field to take into consideration the religious explanation of contemporary violent phenomena, even if only in a narrow way, particularly in the light of the Islamic fact. This report will argue there are two main reasons for this.

One is Samuel Huntington’s culturalist accents.⁹ He has for years argued that religion is one of the main driving forces behind the clash of civilisations, considering it as a homogeneous whole that overdetermines the actions of agents, and in this respect making Islam, which is equated without any nuance to Islamism, an almost unique cause of conflicts with others in general and with the ‘West’ in particular. This type of social scientific interpretation has been subscribed to by some of the leaders of the United States government who took the country into wars in majority-Muslim countries, notably

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 09

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Portier P and Ramel F (2015/1) Introduction—Le croyant, le combattant, le savant : Réévaluer la place des religions dans les relations internationales, *Les Champs de Mars*, (26) : 10-19

⁸ Fox J (2006/4) Religion et relations internationales : perceptions et réalités 1936-2006 : 70 ans, *Politique étrangère* : 1059-1071

⁹ Huntington S (2005) *Le choc des civilisations*. Paris : Odile Jacob

Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. From Huntington's point of view, majority-Muslim societies are driven by a congenitally Islamic determinant,¹⁰ which takes precedence over everything else. The conception of "an exceptionality of Islam",¹¹ subscribed to by the pre-eminent American scholar of Islam Bernard Lewis, emulated by French Arabist Gilles Kepel, and systematically criticized by the political scientist Mohamed-Chérif Ferjani. After Lewis died in 2018, Kepel wrote a dithyrambic portrait of him by way of homage,¹² which did not point out that Lewis had been attacked for alleged essentialist and culturalist errings about Islam and Muslims, said to be particularly noticeable in one of his flagship works, which was translated into French.¹³ Kepel, in trying to unearth a decisive source, or a triggering moment, for jihadism, has, in turn, not only given in to the 'Idol of Origins',¹⁴ but refused even the slightest deference to 'Islamophobia', both the word and the reality it is supposed to describe, claiming that it would be—and has been—all too easily instrumentalized by Islamists.

The second reason, in connection with the above, is that integrating the variable of Islam into socio-political analysis and geopolitical crises means, for some observers, running the risk of establishing a hazardous, dubious, and/or prejudicial continuum between the so-called sacred texts of Islam, violence, and acts under the banner of jihad. To do so, it is feared, would feed Islamophobia, used here to mean the verbal and/or physical discrimination against Muslims solely for their religious beliefs.

All that accepted, it is nonetheless unquestionable that researchers have completely neglected the religious factor—even if for the best of motives, namely avoiding the culturalist and Islamophobic trap. This is the case of François Burgat, who prefers to see behind the mobilisations, claims, and ideological references of the Islamist current an identity and political dimension, which is much less religious than it would appear at first glance. This is why he speaks of a 'lexicon' rather than a 'grammar', which would shape the perceptions and choices of actors who publicly claim to be Islamic.¹⁵

So, can we avoid feeding into bias or misunderstanding, while not avoiding the religious variable in analysis or overstating it? This is the analytical ridge this report will attempt to cross.

¹⁰ Huntington S (1998), *Libération*, https://www.liberation.fr/tribune/1998/01/06/dans-le-choc-des-civilisations-samuel-huntington-annonce-la-montee-en-puissance-des-societes-islamiq_226990, 06 janvier, 1998

¹¹ Ferjani M.-C (2017) *Pour en finir avec l'exception islamique*. Tunis : Nirvana

¹² Kepel G (2018), *Le Monde*, 23 mai,

¹³ Lewis B (1988) *Le langage politique de l'islam*. Paris : Gallimard

¹⁴ Bloch M (2018) *Apologie pour l'histoire ou le métier d'historien*. Paris : Armand Colin

¹⁵ Seniguer H (2019) *Burgat François. Comprendre l'islam politique. Une trajectoire de recherche sur l'altérité islamiste, 1973-2016*. Paris : La découverte

From General Discourse to the Objectification of Specific Cases

Case Study One: The Syrian Civil War

When looking at the civil war in Syria since 2011, the massacre of the staff at *Charlie Hebdo*, the attack on the Hypercacher kosher supermarket on 7 and 9 January 2015, then on the Bataclan and other assaults of 13 November that same year, there are a number of possible interpretations, which are not necessarily antagonistic but rather might be complementary. However that may be, the religious variable cannot be dismissed out of hand as a possible explanation for the phenomena of violence, given a certain context and actors. Let us take certain events in their chronology, with the Syrian war in this chapter and the events in France in the next.

The Syrian conflict is often presented as strictly political, opposing the authoritarian president Bashar al-Assad, who is supported by Russia, Iran, and its Lebanese Hizballah militia, and as the war dragged on Syria became host to radical organisations, both Shiite and Sunni, including the Islamic State (ISIS). The latter claims to act in the name of authentic Islam and all Muslims. The political nature of the internal war that has been raging in Syria for almost a decade cannot be denied. At the same time, without it necessarily being the primary or ultimate cause, Islam has been an amplifying factor in the conflict and in the violence of some groups. This is of key importance in the seduction of Muslims in the region and the world, who would not otherwise have departed from Europe to the Syrian and Iraqi theatres of war.

Prestigious religious elites, both individually and collectively, have taken moral responsibility and at the same time involved Islam and the world's Muslims in this regional conflict, which has already claimed more than 400,000 lives, according to some figures, not to mention millions of internally and externally displaced people.¹⁶ Who are these religious elites, who, taking advantage of their international standing, have endorsed and justified the use of jihad?

On 7 February 2012, on the occasion of a rally organised in Cairo, the capital of Egypt, then under the rule of Muslim Brother Mohamed Morsi (1951-2019), 107 Muslim personalities, “ulema and intellectuals from different Islamist and political currents”,¹⁷ denounced all support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad, exhorting, on the contrary, “the Arab and Islamic peoples” to mobilise, strictly warning “the witnesses and those who remain silent” about “the blood” shed by innocent people, of the “shame and infamy” with which God would strike them if they did not get more involved in helping their co-religionists. Here, the religious resource was summoned in a way that exercised a kind of

¹⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/fr/urgence-en-syrie.html> (consulté le 14 décembre 2019)

¹⁷ Seniguer H (2017) *Islam et violence. Questionner les références scripturaires et historiques*. In : Revue académique Les Cahiers de l'Islam. Revue sur le « fait » musulman. Rueil Malmaison : Editions Les Cahiers de l'Islam, pp. 53-85

moral and emotional blackmail on observant or believing Muslims, who were sensitive to the speech made in the name of God, precisely because of their faith.

More significantly, [Yusuf al-Qaradawi](#), imam in a Doha mosque, religious adviser to the Emir, long-time secretary general of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) and former president of the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), enjoys a solidly established reputation among the confessing Sunni population, whether Islamist or not. In the spring of 2013, he decreed that “the jihad in Syria has become an individual obligation and not (just) a collective one”, especially in the face of Shiite interference, i.e. the Iranian Revolution and its Lebanese tributaries. He even added that “the consent of the parents” was no longer mandatory, as long as the parents of volunteers to the jihad were not in a state of dependence on their son. Moreover, Sheikh al-Qaradawi increased the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide and antagonism by reviving a medieval fatwa from the theologian Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328): “The Nusayrites [Alawites] are more disbelieving than the Jews and Nazarenes (Christians)”.¹⁸ He even renamed—in a semantic hijacking that specialists in the language of politics are studying—the secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah (whose name means “help/victory of God”) and his organisation, Hizballah (which means “party of God”), in less than friendly terms: the former has become Nasr al-Shaytan (“victory/rescue of Satan”) and the latter Hizbu al-Shaytan (“party of Satan”). Later, with the same impetus and in a logic of one-upmanship, the sheikh went so far as to accuse Iran and Hizballah of fighting in Syria to “devour the people of the Sunna”.¹⁹

It should be noted that, depending on the context in which it is uttered, particularly in times of war, and with regard to the texts of Tradition that are called upon for the purpose, this type of discourse of exclusion—i.e. excommunication—from the Ummah (Islamic community) is nothing less than a death sentence, to be carried out by any means deemed necessary. No Muslim dignitary in France, close to or organically linked to the transnational organisations led by Al-Qaradawi, has found it relevant, without necessarily being a stakeholder, to denounce or even question these virulent positions.

Sectors of the Shiite communities—Lebanese, Iranian, and Iraqi—have also used religious justifications to challenge those whom they consider to be threats to the moral and physical integrity of Shiism. Thus, part of the stated motives that led Nasrallah and more importantly his followers to intervene in Syria alongside the Assad regime, in 2013, stems from the alleged threat to the tomb of Zaynab, located in the suburbs of Damascus, a place of pilgrimage and Shiite devotion. Zaynab is the granddaughter of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, and the fruit of the marriage between the Prophet’s son-in-law, Ali, and his daughter, Fatima. The “shrine defence” narrative became central to Iran’s campaign to

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Qaradhâwî Y (2013) Les chiites m’ont trahi... Hizballah est un énorme mensonge, <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/syria/2013/06/02/القرضاوي-الشيعية-خدعوني-وحزب-الله-كذبة-كبيرة> (consulté le 14 décembre 2019), *al-'Arabiyya*, 02 Juin, 13

mobilise Shiite fighters on behalf of Assad, with the threat supposedly coming from anti-Assad rebels that were all cast as ISIS-type groups.²⁰

Nasrallah expressed himself on this subject during a speech on 30 April 2013 thus:

“In Damascus, there is an area called Sayyeda Zaynab, given that it houses the tomb of the granddaughter of Prophet Mohammad (S), Sayyeda Zaynab, daughter of Imam Ali (S). At present, some takfiris groups are only a few hundred meters away from the mausoleum. They are threatening to destroy the shrine, and we take their threats seriously. We have already seen their actions in Libya, Mali, Egypt, Somalia. Before seeing how to meet the needs of the people, they start by destroying the tombs and mausoleums of the pious and virtuous. In Iraq, we remember how they destroyed the mausoleum of the two descendants of the Prophet Mohammad (S) [the Askari Shrine in Samarra that houses the bodies of the Tenth and Eleventh Imams]. We Shiites do not blame the Sunnis, who have been protecting these mausoleums for hundreds of years; our problem is with ... the takfiri groups. The destruction of Sayyeda Zaynab’s mausoleum will have very serious repercussions, and everyone will lose control of the situation”.²¹

Instead of explicitly targeting the Sunnis militarily engaged against Assad, thus avoiding excommunicate them as a whole, the Secretary General of Hizballah prefers to speak, in a kind of accusatory reversal, of “takfiris”; in other words, he points the finger at those who excommunicate. Nasrallah knows that he needs the Sunnis, especially in Lebanon, to lead his fight against Israel, and therefore he has no interest in overtly essentializing the Sunnis, even if in practice Hizballah uses anti-Sunni sectarianism to mobilize its forces and engages in anti-Sunni atrocities. Although the doctrinal opposition between Shiism and orthodox Sunnism is old, Shiism represents only 15% of the world’s Muslim population, and Nasrallah knows this perfectly well, giving him a practical reason to avoid a public confrontation with Sunnis as such. By more subtly seeking to disqualify and marginalise from the community of Muslims the forces deemed to be practising ‘takfir’ and sowing death in the name of this religious principle, Nasrallah hoped to isolate and defeat Assad’s opponents, without provoking too widescale a reaction against the Shiite community in Lebanon that Hizballah relies upon. Nasrallah clearly saw, though he did not always name them, Qatar and Saudi Arabia among his enemies in Syria.

These religious considerations are neither anecdotal nor exclusive. It is undeniable that Hizballah supports the Syrian regime for geopolitical reasons and in opposition to Israel,

²⁰ Phillip Smyth, “The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2 February 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shiite-jihad-syria-and-its-regional-effects>

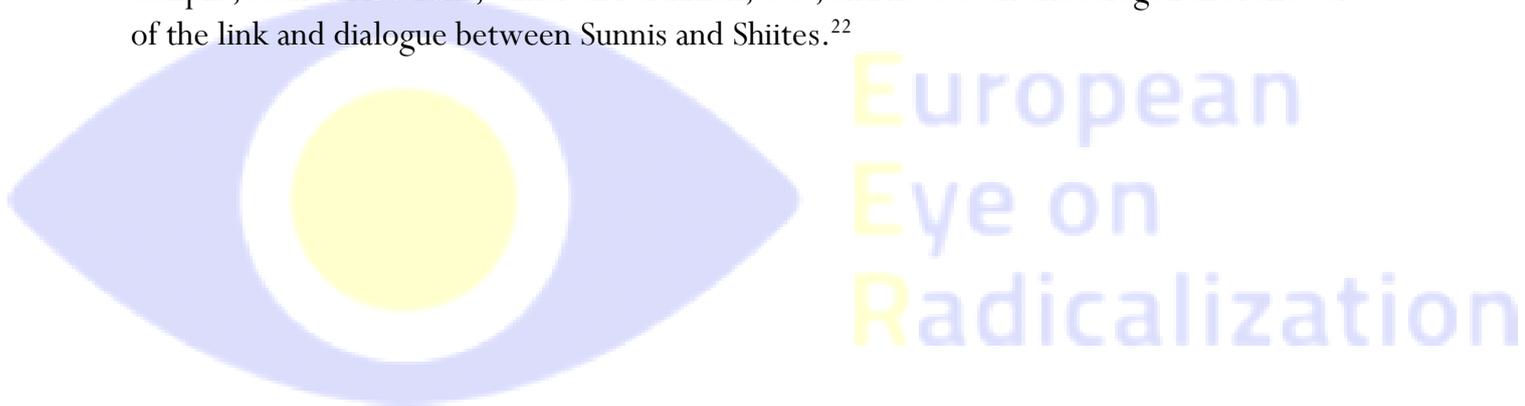
²¹ Nasrallah H (2013) Les vrais amis de la Syrie empêcheront sa chute.

<http://archive.almanar.com.lb/french/article.php?id=109950>, *Almanar TV Website*, 30 avril, 13

which, from one point of view, would have an interest in the fall of the Iran-supported Assad regime and the removal of the support it gives to the Palestinian and Lebanese “resistances”. (In point of fact, Israel has generally taken a better-the-devil-you-known approach to Assad, despite the theoretical benefits to recomposing the regional order without Assad in it.)

Public actors, who are by no means anonymous, caught up in the fever of the conflict, have thus come to sacralise violence and to call, each with a chosen vocabulary and their own watchwords, on Muslims to join the camp of Good against the Evil embodied by the opposite camp!

Obviously, not all the ulema, Shiite or Sunni, participate in this escalation, in the call for systematic violence and the sacralisation of war. Prominent Shiite religious figures, such as the Iraqi Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, have, for example, condemned all insults to the historical figures of Islam respected by Sunnis, such as Aisha, the wife of Muhammad, or the Rashidun Caliphs, such as Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman, etc., and have even encouraged the renewal of the link and dialogue between Sunnis and Shiites.²²



²² <http://www.hajj.com/ar/verdicts> Consulté le 15 décembre 2019

Case Study Two: How to Account for the Religious Variable in Violence in France

When the brothers Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, mandated they stated they believed by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQPA) (the organisation claimed responsibility for the attack on 14 January 2015), entered the *Charlie Hebdo* newsroom on 7 January 2015 to shoot journalists who were present that day with heavy weapons, one of the assailants wrote, once the crime had been committed: “We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad”, in reference to the cartoons that the satirical newspaper had produced and distributed from 2006 onwards, which had caused an outcry among many Muslims in France, regardless of their allegiance.

Let us make it clear again: we never completely exclude the political and geopolitical dimensions in the perpetration of acts of violence committed in the name of Islam. We are concerned with a multifactorial approach. Amédy Coulibaly, a collaborator with the Kouachi brothers and an ISIS agent, explained his action in these terms—at least superficially.

As reported in the press, because his remarks were recorded, Coulibaly said:

“Every time, they try to make you believe that Muslims are terrorists. I was born in France. If they hadn’t attacked elsewhere, I wouldn’t be here. . . . There was the north of Mali and there was Syria, a set-up at the same time. . . . There were no exactions in Mali. . . . They have to stop . . . attacking the Islamic State, they have to stop revealing our women, they have to stop putting our brothers in prison for nothing. . . . At home, it’s the law of Talion [eye for an eye]. You know it very well. . . . Allah said in the Koran: ‘They transgress, transgress equally’. If you touch our children, our women, our fighters, we attack the men who fight us.”

If we stop at these words, the political dimension appears predominant in the justifications for the hostage-taking. However, they remain backed by a rhetorical device of a religious nature. Passages noted by other journalists reveal Amédy Coulibaly’s antisemitic leanings, which he was quick to link, it seems, to his idea of a God who would condemn Jews: “You didn’t understand, did you? What is your origin? ‘Jew’, replies one of them, to which Coulibaly replies: ‘Well, there you go, you know why I’m here then! Allahu Akbar!”

In publication no. 7 of the French-language propaganda organ of the Islamic State organisation, the following is written following the attacks of 13 November 2015:

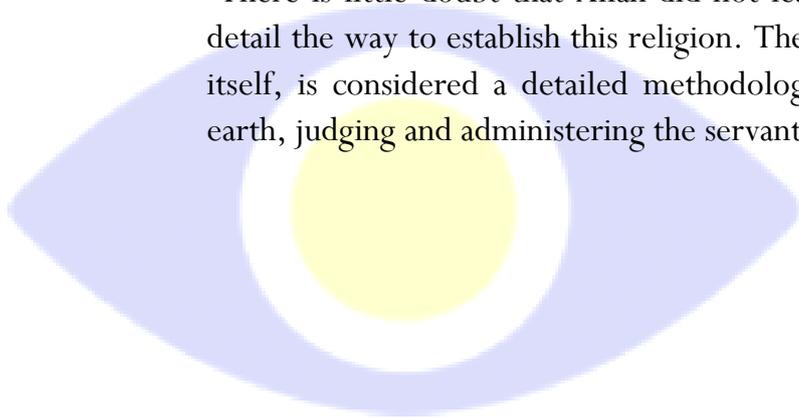
“In a blessed attack whose causes Allah facilitated, a group of believers from the soldiers of the Caliphate—may Allah give them power and victory—targeted

the capital of abominations and perversion, the one that bears the banner of the cross in Europe: Paris ... and those who follow its path must know that they remain the main targets of the Islamic State and that they will continue to smell the stench of death for having taken the lead in the crusade, for having dared to insult our prophet, for having boasted (sic) about fighting Islam in France and for having hit Muslims in the land of the Caliphate with their planes”

This may seem eminently political, when one reads on and the propagandists explain that France’s entry into a coalition that is bombing Islamic State positions began on 19 September 2014, preceding the 2015 attacks. Yet it is also argued that “French Rafales bombed the Islamic State out of hatred for Islam and Sharia”.

To attest to the centrality of an integral conception of the Muslim religion in the EI vulgate, which thus goes beyond the geopolitical space of confrontation with France and “the crusaders”, it suffices to quote a few other excerpts:

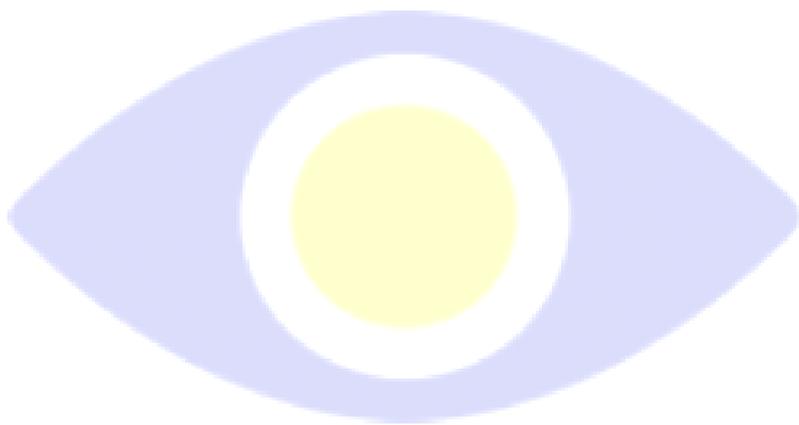
“There is little doubt that Allah did not leave us without explaining to us in detail the way to establish this religion. The sirah of the Prophet Muhammad, itself, is considered a detailed methodology for establishing the religion on earth, judging and administering the servants of Allah by His Law (p. 6)”.



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Conclusion

This report has tried to reconsider, as far as possible, the religious dimension of conflicts, using examples from the Arab and French context. Instead of putting the religious variable, in this case Islam, in parenthesis in the clarification of conflicts and violence, the report has tried to demonstrate why it is more necessary to probe its place in the general economy of explanation than to postulate any primary cause. Indeed, depending on the context of the parties involved in the conflict, religion is more or less important in the explanation or justification of positions taken. In any case, we must not deny the reality of omnipresent interactions between politics and religion among the actors, especially observers, who mobilise in the name of, or with, Muslims in Europe and elsewhere. Religion will therefore never be an explanatory isolate, but on the contrary, it is sometimes embedded in other aspects: political and geopolitical, in particular.



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