

# Introduction

## Purpose and Focus of the Book

What alternatives are there to the current global order, competing nation-states within a dominant economic and political order in which powerful nations thrive on the remnants of weaker ones? Sovereign nation-states tightly secure their borders against the “alien other.” Diversity, whether racial, ethnic, or religious, is deemed a threat against a peaceful order governed by a central power. Tolerance and pluralism are celebrated as long as they don’t intervene with the integrity and power of the state. Controlled inclusion of diversity within nation-states creates “politics of the visual,” constructing images of pluralism rather than a serious engagement with diverse political actors.

This book attempts to explore an alternative sociopolitical unit to the nation-state—namely, the *ummah*, based on the Qur’ān and prophetic Sunnah. Inspired by the Qur’ān, the foundational source for Islamic thought, it first pursues a meticulous analysis of the word *ummah* in the Qur’ān. Historically before the rise of the modern nation-state, the *ummah* signified a pluralistic society that stretched over large areas and had a political leadership. In the modern period, *ummah* was reduced to signifying a Muslim community on a national level or an imagined community on a transnational level. Qur’ānic interpretation is always affected by the historical context of the exegete’s time. The Qur’ānic hermeneutical reinterpretation in this research operates in two parallel trajectories. First, considering the importance of historical context, this book consults both selected premodern and modern scholars and compares their discussion of “single” Qur’ānic verses about the *ummah* before and after the rise of the nation-state. This takes into account how the historical context

might have affected Muslims' understanding and conceptualization of the *ummah*. The comparison reveals the merits and shortcomings of potential conceptualizations of *ummah*. However, this is not a historiography of the *ummah* and how the concept evolved over time; hence medieval scholars are not consistently consulted. The latter would constitute a book by itself and is beyond the scope of this research. The focus of this book is developing a workable definition of the *ummah* that could be compared with the nation-state, hence engaging in modern constructive Muslim political theology. The aim of focusing on the primary sources, the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, as the main sources to decipher the meaning of *ummah* is to avoid much of the historical nuance associated with the classical legal tradition (though it is not neglected). As Fazlur Rahman suggested, for Muslims to engage with the modern world, they need to move beyond what he calls "historical Islam," constructed historically by jurists, and focus on "normative Islam" based on Qur'ān and Sunnah.

Second, which is the unique part of this work, is assembling "all the verses," including *ummah* in the Qur'ān and exploring the Qur'ānic own reasoning of *ummah* as a concept, an attempt similar to Danial Madigan's work "The Quran's Self Image." This part targets the process of the Qur'ān's own revelation, starting chronologically with the Meccan verses followed by the Medinan verses. The aim of this part is exploring the possibility of a hermeneutical reinterpretation that addresses the Qur'ānic internal discourse about its terms and how it tackles them conceptually at a specific period of revelation as well as chronologically. While exegetes have been interpreting individual verses, with occasional references to other verses tackling the same term, this research attempts to combine all the related verses in a thematic study to check the possibility of a novel interpretation of the Qur'ānic term *ummah*.

After researching the different aspects of the term *ummah* in the Qur'ān and proposing a more inclusive understanding of the concept, the following part of the book explores the possibility of activating and implementing the concept within a political setting. First, the earliest historical polity where the concept *ummah* was initially activated and practically manifested during the Prophet's time is analyzed. This is carried out by analyzing the historical document "Medina Constitution" in light of the Qur'ānic reinterpretation of *ummah* proposed in the first section of this book. Last, the book enters into an analogical as well as dialectical reasoning with Western thought, exemplified by Aristotle as well as liberals

and their critics in modern time. The *ummah* is compared with the Aristotelian polis that emphasized the active participation of citizens in the administration of justice. Such a comparative discussion contributes to the modern debate between advocates of individual rights (liberals) and advocates of community rights (communitarians). Communitarians focus on encouraging an ethic of responsibility toward society and political power, in contrast with liberals, who emphasize individual rights, sometimes at the expense of one's duty toward the community. While not neglecting individual rights, an ideal communitarian society strikes a balance between individual rights and social responsibilities.<sup>1</sup> Exploring a new understanding of the *ummah* situates it within contemporary discourses on liberal politics and community and creates the space for an alternative vision to the nation-state.

The research conducted in this book is an interdisciplinary study between the fields of theology, history, philosophy, and political science. It tackles the concept *ummah* through multiple perspectives. First it analyzes the concept *hermeneutically* in the Qur'ān, then checks its validity *historically* through the prophetic practice in order to carry out a *philosophical* inquiry that explores possible political implications of the *ummah* in the modern period.

### Theoretical Background and Current Need for This Study

Secularism, the basic forming ideology of modern nation-states, marginalized political opposition inspired by religious ideologies. Modern liberal theories automatically assume the common public sphere to be the dominion of the secular, hence separate from the private religious, which is considered subjective and irrelevant to the common good of all. In most Western societies, religion has been marginalized or secularized. Thus, it no longer can withstand the monopolizing power of the nation-state. In Fukuyama's terms, modern liberal societies have reached "the end of history" as liberalism has established itself firmly with no rival power or ideology. In Muslim-majority societies, this process is not fait accompli. Despite the establishment of secular nation-states after the colonial period,

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1. Amitai Etzioni, "Communitarianism," in *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2001), 356–57.

Muslim societies are still grappling with competing ideologies, specifically secularism and Islamism (different forms of political Islam). This is due to the fact that, contrary to the secularizing process in the West, which was operating in the social, religious, and political spheres, its Muslim counterpart operated only in the political sphere, leaving the social and religious spheres mostly immune to its effects. The difference is attributed to the historical establishment and the nature of political power and religious authority, as well as their relationship, in both societies. While the religious and political institutions were unified in the premodern West, they were separate and acted as parallel actors across most Islamic history. The separation between the aspirations of the masses and their political elite is still a distinctive feature in most Muslim countries in the modern period.

Comparing the Islamic and Western civilizations, Mālik Bin Nabiy argues that the latter is based on technical roots, while the former is founded on the world of the unseen and moral roots. In other words, the Western civilization values time (and life) based on materialistic achievements while the Islamic one values time based on intellectual and moral satisfaction. He thinks the message of Islamic ideology is that “you were the best *ummah* raised to people as you enjoin goodness and forbid evil and believe in Allah . . .” (*Qur’ān* 3:110). Thus, he claims that Islamic law is complemented by a pure spiritual character that cannot be envisioned in a secular legal order.<sup>2</sup>

Bin Nabiy says that an original idea has a sacred character that represents a truth independent of history. He differentiates between an original idea (*al-fikra al-aṣliya*) and an effective one (*al-fikra al-fa‘āla*). He thinks that original Islamic ideas entered their effective period after the early political conquests, which allowed for Islamic civilization to flourish

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2. To clarify his point, Bin Nabiy gives a practical example from shari'a. When discussing inheritance laws in the *Qur’ān*, God adds, “and if the relatives, orphans and poor people were present at the time of distributing the inherited wealth then provide them some of the wealth, and speak to them words of kindness and justice” (*Qur’ān* 4:8). Bin Nabiy alludes to an interesting point here where he says that inheritance laws could be legislated by any secular civil law, however adding the concept of “doing good” to the law, in this case giving charity to the impoverished people who are not legal recipients of the inherited wealth and speaking kindly to them, makes Islamic shari'a distinctive. In Mālik Bin Nabiy, *Mushkilat Al-Afsār fī Al-‘Ālam al-Islāmī* (Damascus: Dār Al-Fikr, 2002), 17–25.

and materialize. Only then did Muslims and people of other faith traditions alike believe in the efficacy of Islamic ideas because they witnessed their practical potential in the world. Bin Nabiy claims that European civilization, on the other hand, controlled the world through its effective ideas and not through original ones.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Fukuyama argues that the large wealth produced by liberal economies is the key point for stabilizing the liberal sociopolitical order. He also thinks that this order has reduced all human interaction to economic activity. He concludes that humanity has reached the end of history because no other ideology could compete with the capitalist liberal order in its efficacy.<sup>4</sup>

The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history.<sup>5</sup>

Bin Nabiy would agree with Fukuyama that the modern liberal order is thriving based on its efficacy rather than its originality but would disagree with him that we have reached the end of history. He rather thinks that the Islamic original ideas can reenter history if they retain their efficacy, that is, renew their place among the ideas that create history. The problem is not related to means, but rather to ideologies and systems that activate these ideologies.<sup>6</sup>

In this spirit, *ummah* presents itself as an original idea whose potential has not been fully activated. Several scholars have defined the *ummah* theoretically. For example, Mohammad Shahrūr looks for a common root to interpret *ummah* after surveying its various meanings in the Qur'ān.

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3. Ibid., 102–6.

4. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", *The National Interest*, Summer 1989.

5. Ibid., last page.

6. Mālik Bin Nabiy, *Mushkilat Al-Afkār fī Al-Ālam al-Islāmī*, 110–13.

He says that “behavioral conduct” is the basis for defining an *ummah*. Shahrūr defines *ummah* as a group of rational or irrational beings who share a common behavior; non-human beings share an instinctive behavior, while humans share a conscious behavior represented in what we call “culture.” People later have differed in their behavior because of the difference in laws and customs associated with diversity. Difference started with the dialectical relationship between freedom of thought and dominant cultures, as well as the intermixing of different cultures and progressive change within one culture across time.<sup>7</sup> Al-Kawākibī defines the *ummah* as a group of individuals who are brought together under the banner of ethnicity, a nation, a language, or a religion. Through the *ummah*, people can acquire mutual rights and establish a political association in which every individual has the right to publicly voice his opinion.<sup>8</sup>

I think these definitions are quite simplified and reductive; they do not tackle the complexity of the concept to address all its different layers described in the Qur’ān. Collectively, they offer a general overview of a common denominator for the word, a trial that has been conducted by several scholars, but thus far this collective does not provide a comprehensive study that can bring to light the hidden meanings and activate them to be implemented in a sociopolitical context, which is the main objective of this book. This lack of sociopolitical implementation is precisely what Olivier Roy, a French political scientist, argues to be merely a reflection of Western secularization and its focus on individualism: “The definition of a religious community as a voluntary gathering of believers who intend to live according to the definite patterns of their faith—either in harmony with the external society or in opposition to it, but with no possibility of translating it into organizational political terms—is a Western (or more precisely US) view of religion in society.”<sup>9</sup>

Mohammad ‘Imāra asks a yet unresolved question: what is the nature of political authority in Muslim societies? Is it civic (*madaniyyah*) or reli-

7. Mohammad Shahrūr, *Dirāsāt Islāmiyya Mu‘āṣira fi al-Dawla wal-Mujtama‘* (Damascus: Al-Ahālī lil-Ṭibā‘a wal-Nashr wal-Tawzī‘, 1994), 67–72.

8. Mohammad Jamāl Ṭahhān, *al-Rū‘a al-Islāhiyya lil-Mufakkir al-Nahḍawī Abd al-Rahmān al-Kawākibī* (Damascus: Ittiḥād al-Kutṭāb al-‘Arab, 2007), 245.

9. Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 39.

gious (*dīniyyah*)? Some scholars regard the *khilāfa* as a religious state based on early tradition, and others regard it as purely political. ‘Imāra then poses a question that is basically the core of my research: can the *ummah* in Islam be the source of these authorities, or it is not related at all to them?<sup>10</sup> ‘Imāra asserts that political authority is civic (*madaniyyah*) through *shūra* and elections. At the same time, he does not support the secular idea of separating religion and state (*fāṣl ad-dīn ‘3an ad-dawlāh*) nor the idea of uniting them as in a theocracy. ‘Imāra thinks the uniqueness of Islamic thought is attributed to its *wasaṭiyah* (“middle status”), which refuses to be biased to the latter extreme positions or reject them totally. It is instead the median of justice between two injustices, the truth between two falsehoods and moderation between two extremes. This middle ground balances between the religious message and politics, as well the religion and state.<sup>11</sup> He adds that Islamic government should be committed to Qur’ānic laws (i.e., it has a religious framework). Yet the state has two components: a fixed religious component and a civic variable one, which portrays a unique relationship between religion and state.<sup>12</sup> ‘Imāra then clarifies that the *ummah* should be in charge of electing its leader or representative. He discusses that social life is subject to general laws represented in “*maqāsid al-sharī‘ah*” (“aims of Islamic law”), which put forth a general framework within which people can legislate and advance their lives. He considers the latter as general ethics and values determined by God so that people can find the means to approach these values and not stray away from them.<sup>13</sup> He supports the idea that the *ummah* should be the source of delegating powers (*al-ummah maṣdar as-Suluṭāt*),<sup>14</sup> yet he does not explain how he comes to this conclusion.

In this book, I derive a conceptual meaning of the *ummah* in the Qur’ān and *Sunnah* in order to understand the *ummah*’s role in the socio-political sphere, both religiously and cievically. Thereby, the term *wasaṭ*

10. Mohammad ‘Imāra, *Nathariyat al-khilāfa* (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqā al-jadida), 9–11.

11. Mohammad ‘Imāra, *Ad-Dīn wal-Dawla* (Cairo: Maṭābi‘ al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma lil-Kitāb, 1986), 31.

12. Ibid., 50.

13. Mohammad ‘Imāra, *ad-Dawla al-Islāmiyya bayna al-3ilmāniyya wal-Sulta ad-Dīniyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2007), 73.

14. Ibid., 65.

is not only interpreted theologically but also activated as a system and practice politically.

What is unique to the modern period and a product of the modern nation-state is so-called “political Islam.” A central nation-state that doesn’t tolerate opposition, yet is not responsive to the needs and aspirations of its masses and quite separate from them, created sore points of contention. Thereby, the many forms of modern political Islam usually assume a reactionary, violent, and exclusive character quite similar to the nation-state that paved the way for their creation. Even among Islamic thinkers, there is an obsession with the concept of the “Islamic state,” which appears to be a modern nation-state with an Islamic title. For example, Ḥasan Ḥanafi asks: what is the political system that Muslims would accept? He then lists and criticizes many forms that Muslims have endorsed across history, starting with the rightly guided caliphate, the Umayyad and Abbasids, to the nation-state that was established with the help of British or world powers. He also considers the religious state oppressive under the guise of religion, where any criticism is rejected because obeying the ruler is considered equivalent to obeying God. At the end, he proposes the free nation-state as the only alternative because it is pluralistic and endorses equal rights for all, while proposing that the European Union would be a good model for Muslims to follow. He also thinks that while some countries such as Indonesia succeeded in promoting the idea of implementing Islamic *shari‘ah*, the latter still remains a symbol that provides temporary relief to people rather than seriously raising their socioeconomic status.<sup>15</sup> Another problem he discusses is the fierce opposition between Islamists and secularists, where each accuses the other for creating all the ills facing society without leaving any possibility for dialogue. He suggests that criticism should be constructive and both groups should work together for the betterment of society rather than focusing on attaining political status.<sup>16</sup> While Ḥanafi analyzes and criticizes the current situation in the Muslim world, he does not offer an original answer to the question he poses.

Wael Hallaq uncovers the root causes of the failure of some Muslim societies to integrate a holistic system that would uphold Islamic val-

15. Ḥasan Ḥanafi, *Al-Wāqi‘ Al-‘Arabī Al-Rāhin* (Cairo: Dār al-‘ayn lil-Nashr, 2012), 471–77.

16. Ibid., 512–15.

ues successfully within a socioeconomic and political setting. As Hanafi asserts, implementing *shari‘ah* in some aspects of the Indonesian society is merely symbolic and does not resolve the socioeconomic or political problems of society. Speaking of partially implementing *shari‘ah* is more of a sedative temporarily appeasing the masses without treating the root cause of the illness. In that regard, Hallaq’s book is critical for revealing the basis of the problem. He discusses in detail the inherent contradiction in the term “Islamic state,” where he uncovers the foundational ideas and goals for establishing a nation-state in the modern world. He then shows how these foundations contradict basic Islamic ethics and principles related to the purpose of human life and value, political governance and its limits, and the rule of law. Hallaq asserts that the predicament of the nation-state is essentially moral; “whereas the Muslim subject strives for moral improvement, the state’s subject strives to fulfill sovereign will, fictitiously a representation of the subject’s own will but realistically the will of a commanding sovereign.”<sup>17</sup> There is no restriction on the use of violence/force in a state that regards itself sovereign under the rule of law through popular will. On the contrary, Islamic governance derives its legitimacy from a sovereign will, God’s will and law, that is higher and outside of itself. Hence, its actions could be curbed by that higher will. Therefore, assuming that the nation-state could be converted to an Islamic one erroneously overlooks the fundamental nature of the modern state.<sup>18</sup> Along similar lines, Western scholars such as Jacques Maritain, a French Catholic philosopher, argues that “the concept of sovereignty predicates of a created being—individual or collective—a divine attribute, namely total independence and self-sufficiency.”<sup>19</sup> Because God is the only sovereign, Maritain thinks that this concept is “intrinsically wrong.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, others contend that “the idea of the sovereign state is bankrupt and our present conception of national sovereignty is obsolete and pregnant with danger.

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17. Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 160.

18. Ibid., 157–58.

19. Leon Thiry, “Nation, State, Sovereignty and Self-Determination,” *Peace Research* 13, no. 1 (January 1981): 19.

20. Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968), 29.

*The time for declarations of independence is long past; what we need today is a universal declaration of universal interdependence.*<sup>21</sup>

Secular liberals such as Jurgen Habermas also warns that the nation-state in post-modernity is losing its grip on sovereignty internally and externally. Internally, the nation-state is facing the challenge of multiculturalism whereby a national consciousness based on a culturally homogeneous population has lost its integrative potential at the expense of growing diverse complex societies. Constitutional patriotism cannot offer a strong bond to hold multicultural populations together.<sup>22</sup> Externally, “the globalization of commerce and communication, of economic production and finance, of the spread of technology and weapons, and above all of ecological and military risks, poses problems that can no longer be solved within the framework of nation-states or by the traditional method of agreements between sovereign states.”<sup>23</sup> Habermas continues that national sovereignty is undermined by the growth of political institutions on the supranational level, which are replacing the ineffective United Nations.<sup>24</sup>

From the Muslim perspective, the nation-states in the Middle East are also facing serious challenges that are disrupting the regional order as well as the international scene. Rached Ghannouchi, an Islamist theorist and leader of the Tunisian Ennahda party, which formed in the wake of 2011 Arab spring and became part of the government, thinks that the nation-states formed in the Middle East after the Sykes-Picot Agreement were established to serve foreign interests and willpower rather than self-determination of the people.<sup>25</sup> This explains the weakness of popular legitimacy of regimes in the Middle East, where the boundaries forming the states were formed based on colonial interests and practices of divide-and-rule. Colonial powers imposed economic policies that benefited the

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21. Leon Thiry, “Nation, State, Sovereignty and Self-Determination,” 19, emphasis added.

22. Jurgen Habermas, “The European Nation-State: On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship,” trans. Ciaran Cronin, *Public Culture* 10, no. 2 (1998): 408–9.

23. *Ibid.*, 398.

24. *Ibid.*, 399.

25. Rached Ghannouchi, *The Islamic Conception of the State*, Conference of the Young Muslims in London, April 1992.

European settlers initially and an elite political group later after independence. The needs of masses in terms of economic development, education, and other needs were neglected. This led to the rise of dictatorships that secured their power through centralized state bureaucracy and military, leading to the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions.<sup>26</sup>

The Islamist response to these imposed malfunctioning nation-states was calling to restore the Caliphate and erase the artificial borders that divided and disintegrated the Islamic *ummah*. This response, however, took two directions. One direction, espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood, integrated their ideology with the Westphalian paradigm by encouraging political activism within the nation-state. A good example would be Ennahda party in Tunisia, which adopts a state-centric logic aiming at forming strong states based on Islamic identity within its borders instead of the pan-Islamic transnational vision of reestablishing the caliphate.<sup>27</sup> The other direction is undertaken by armed violent transnational groups, such as al-Qaeda and Da'esh, who seek to overthrow all regimes and reestablish the caliphate.<sup>28</sup>

A third novel and unexpected path was initially espoused by neither Islamist groups nor violent ones, but rather by people of different affiliations and religions in a recent phenomenon called “the Arab spring,” “the Arab uprisings,” or, a better term used by Sadiki, “peoplehood.” It represented popular yearning for freedom, dignity, and a moral outcry against authoritarian tyranny and the deteriorating socioeconomic and political order. Larbi Sadiki proposes an analysis of the concept “peoplehood” as a bottom-up mobilization of non-state actors who embody the ideal “for the people” and whose goal is to alter the state hegemony. He adds that this practical concept has both local and global manifestations where connections are formed internally as well as transnationally.<sup>29</sup>

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26. Raffaella A. Del Sarto, “Contentious Borders in the Middle East and North Africa: Context and Concepts,” *International Affairs* 93, no. 4 (July 2017): 770–71.

27. Mohamed Ali Adraoui, “Borders and Sovereignty in the Islamist and Jihadist Thought: Past and Present,” *International Affairs* 93, no. 4 (July 2017): 925–29.

28. Ibid., 932–33.

29. Larbi Sadiki, “The Arab Spring: The ‘People’ in International Relations,” in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 326–27.

Tunis was the trigger; Cairo built the momentum; Tripoli and Benghazi signaled a kind of “domino effect.” From then on, the travel of the Arab Spring took a life of its own. From this perspective, the Arab Spring is just another manifestation of the human desire for freedom, dignity and justice. From an International Relations perspective, we have three ideas from the foregoing. First, there is a dynamic of “deterritorialization” of activism whereby *new* political imaginaries, solidarities, language and protest strategies render nationalist borders meaningless. Second, the resulting trans-border newly reconstituted identities, moral protests, and networks hint at the idea of social “movement spillover” . . . captured by the notion of *al-harāk* or “peoplehood.”<sup>30</sup>

While Sadiki finds global parallels with the Arab Spring such as the 1979 Khomeini Revolution in Iran, the 1986 People’s Power revolution in Philippines, or the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, he still thinks that the Arab Spring is unique: “This is where the Arab Spring impresses: the Arab region remains a cohesive cultural sub-system.”<sup>31</sup> It is quite surprising how Sadiki, while still acknowledging the cultural cohesiveness of the Arab region, missed associating his concept of peoplehood with the concept of the *ummah*, which is widely prevalent in the Arab-Muslim world. Possibly the lack of an English term that would accurately describe the *ummah* made him choose peoplehood as an approximate translation. However, while he still acknowledged that global parallels were all national whereas the Arab spring was transnational, he regarded that phenomenon as a movement spillover that forged *new* political imaginaries and solidarities. I think his latter assumption glossed over the fact that the *ummah* as a political imaginary and solidarity is deeply engrained in the Arab-Muslim conscience since the beginning of Islamic history. I would rather argue that it became dormant in the modern period, and the Arab spring is nothing but a historical moment of revival in which *old existing* political imaginaries and solidarities were activated. That would better explain the

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30. Ibid., 328. Emphasis added.

31. Ibid., 331.

fast domino effect that is unique to the Arab region; the cohesive cultural sub-system that Sadiki describes is evidently a practical manifestation of the underlying structure of the *ummah*.

However, that the Arab spring unleashed the political power of the *ummah* and the astonishing power of human agency against oppressive structures is precisely what makes this book timely. The recent events trigger questions about the political role of the *ummah* and confirm the speculations of intellectuals such as Naṣif Naṣṣār, who argues that the *ummah* as a sociopolitical realization has not been revealed yet in the social history of humankind.<sup>32</sup> The rapid transnational spread of these uprisings speaks of an underlying phenomenon that merits research. While the Arab spring uncovered the political potential of the *ummah*, its aftermath shows that the *ummah* is still grappling with many variables that are critical for the *ummah* to successfully manifest itself politically. Unless these requirements are met, the *ummah* can achieve temporary victories that nonetheless are not sustainable. Therefore, exploring the different facets of the concept would identify how the *ummah* functions, what sustains it, and how it can undertake a successful political role.

In summary, the nation-state system imported through colonialism neither accommodated the needs of the people nor ethnic, religious, and tribal identities characteristic of the Middle East. Moreover, it did not resolve the tension between the Westphalian state and the promotion of pan-Arabism or pan-Islamism.<sup>33</sup> On the contrary, it led to internal unrest as well as the rise of violent extremism, which is not only causing much distress in the region but also affecting the regional as well as the international order. Therefore, whether the problem is cultural or political as in the West or socioeconomic and conflicting with native aspirations as in the Middle East, the nation-state system is in danger as it faces the challenges of globalization by the consensus of both Western and Islamic intellectuals. Different intellectuals call for proposing alternative visions to the nation-state; Habermas ends his article on the European nation-state with

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32. Naṣif Naṣṣār, *Maqbūm al-Ummah bayna ad-Dīn wal-Tārikh* (Beirut: Dār at-Talī'a, 1978), 5.

33. Raffaella A. Del Sarto, "Contentious Borders in the Middle East and North Africa: Context and Concepts," 781.

the question: “overcoming the nation-state: abolition or transformation?”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Del Sarto asserts: “it may be worthwhile to explore alternative conceptualizations of the state and its borders.”<sup>35</sup> Adraoui also asks: “what would a new Islamist conception of borders look like and is it possible?”<sup>36</sup>

Hallaq urges Muslim intellectuals to engage in nontraditional and creative thinking to propose an alternative social unit that forms the larger sociopolitical order, one in which morality is a central domain. To construct nascent forms of Islamic governance, Muslims need to reinterpret the concept of political community and how *shari‘ah* is activated within that community. Simultaneously, Hallaq suggests that this process should be dialectical, in which Muslims should also engage with their Western counterparts who are dealing with the same ethical dilemma of the modern world.<sup>37</sup> Hallaq’s call resonates with Western scholars who are also advocating for Muslims to explore their Islamic heritage to answer the problems of the modern age. For instance, the Western historian Marshall Hodgson concluded his massive work on Islamic history with this question: What does Islam or the Muslim conscience have to say about the problems of the modern age on both local and global scales?<sup>38</sup> In addition, Amitai Etzioni, the founder of new communitarianism, is open to the contribution of Islamic thought on modern political issues when he says, “the communitarian good society combines ‘Asian’ values (also reflecting tenets of Islam and Judaism that stress social responsibilities) with a Western concern with political liberty and individual rights.”<sup>39</sup>

Hodgson emphasizes this need for cross-cultural dialogue, which he thinks is lacking in contemporary Islamic thought. Hodgson says that in the modern period and the age of globalization, the world is connected, and no community can live in isolation without affecting other communities.

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34. Jurgen Habermas, “The European Nation-State: On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship,” 413.

35. Raffaella A. Del Sarto, “Contentious Borders in the Middle East and North Africa: Context and Concepts,” 783.

36. Mohamed Ali Adraoui, “Borders and Sovereignty in the Islamist and Jihadist Thought: Past and Present,” 935.

37. Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 168–70.

38. Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 433–35.

39. Ibid., 357.

Also, the religious traditions have lost their assured independence. Hodgson suggests that the meanings of *ummah* and *shari‘ah* need to be reassessed in order to confront creatively the presence of contrasting spiritual traditions of equal status in a single, worldwide society. This must be achieved along two parallel tracks. First, the Muslim community must overcome its exclusivity without sacrificing its formative discipline, that is, its laws and way of life. Second, Islamic heritage must be in dialogue with contemporary modern culture so that it becomes common knowledge of all communities without sacrificing its integrity. This is the only way, Hodgson believes, to resolve the tension between universalism and communalism in Islamic communities, or any other community, if they are to play a creative role and contribute effectively to the world. The community’s heritage should be brought into living interaction with worldwide cultural elements.<sup>40</sup>

This book answers the questions posed by the scholars mentioned above. This book engages in a novel reinterpretation of key concepts: the *ummah* and how it is activated as a sociopolitical concept. Moreover, it engages with Western thinking in a dialectical process in order to address the common challenges we face today as a global world. While the nation-state, as a concept and an institution, is facing challenges both in the West and the East, this book is timely, as it proposes an alternative option that, while being inspired by Islamic ideology, can still be applied universally.

### Exegetical References

The first two chapters of the book explore the concept of the *ummah* meticulously in the Qur’ān through a thematic analysis of different exegetical works such as At-Ṭabarsī (d. 523/1128), Al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), Mawdūdī (d. 1399/1979), At-Ṭabaṭabā’ī (d. 1401/1981), and Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1385/1966), with a focus on the following five exegetes: At-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and Al-Qummī (d. 307/919) from the third century after the Prophet’s death; Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1322/1905), Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1385/1966), and Muhammad Faḍlallah (d. 1431/2010) from the modern period.

In line with the spirit of this work, which is bridging between East and West, Sunnī and Shī‘ī exegetical works are consulted not only to be

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40. Marshall Hodgson, “*The Venture of Islam*,” vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 433–35.

representative of both traditions, but also to make them talk to each other. This is a much-needed endeavor, especially when sectarianism, identity politics, and religious fanaticism have taken their toll in Muslim societies. I think it is incumbent upon academics to raise the level of knowledge, thereby raising the standards of people above abusive political manipulations under the guise of religion. Nonetheless, from an academic perspective, seeking various exegetes with different sectarian affiliations enriches our understanding of Qur’ānic key concepts.

At-Ṭabarī and al-Qummī’s exegeses are considered classical references by Sunnī and Shī‘ī scholars, respectively. The classical interpretations are crucial, as they provide a massive literature of prophetic sayings and the earliest reports of the Companions or the family of Prophet Muhammad, both of which are indispensable for understanding the Qur’ānic text in the time of its revelation. Moreover, modern exegesis is very helpful for understanding Qur’ānic concepts in light of modern concerns. Both ‘Abduh and Faḍlallah, despite their different sectarian affiliation, stress the need to use reason in interpreting religious texts to keep up with changing times, and both of them were actively involved in politics as well. Thus, they provide a perfect asset for this book, as it endeavors to create a dialogue between Islamic concepts and Western ideas, as well as explore the interplay between religion and politics. A short biography of the five exegetes is provided in the following paragraphs.

Al-Qummī’s exegesis is a major Shī‘ī classical work. Abū l-Hasan ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī was one of the earliest influential *Imāmī* traditionalists (*muhaddith*). It is said that his father, Abraham b. Hāshim, was acquainted with the eighth *imām*, ‘Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā (d. 202/818). In addition, Al-Qummī was a contemporary of the eleventh *imām*, al-Hasan al-‘Askarī (d. 260/873). Al-Qummī has written many books on religious and legal matters, but the only work that remains intact is his *Tafsīr*. The latter work is considered one of the most significant sources for *Imāmī* doctrine because of its early date and its inclusion of several selections from the *Tafsīr* of Abū l-Jārūd. It is said that the *Tafsīr* of Abū l-Jārūd includes long excerpts of an old Qur’ān commentary attributed to the fifth *imām*, Muhammad al-Bāqir (d. 119/737).<sup>41</sup>

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41. *Encyclopedia of Islam*, THREE, ed. Gudrun Krämer et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), s.v. “‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī,” American University of Beirut, [http://www.paulyonline.brill.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=ei3\\_SIM-0323](http://www.paulyonline.brill.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=ei3_SIM-0323).

Abū Ja‘far Muhammad Ibn Jarīr Ibn Yazīd At-Ṭabarī is most famous as the supreme universal historian and Qur’ān commentator of the Islamic medieval ages. His major works that remain intact to this day are his Qur’ānic *Tafsīr*, titled *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*; and the “History.” Al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr* is considered the first main work to develop the *tafsīr* methodology.<sup>42</sup> It is regarded as the *Tafsīr* par excellence and his most outstanding achievement as compared to his works on law and tradition. His methodology emphasizes *ijtihād*, or independent exercise of judgment. In his *Tafsīr*, he usually quotes several exegetical opinions and then states his opinion regarding which constitutes the most acceptable view. The commentary comprises most of the exegetical works before him since the beginning of Qur’ānic exegesis as a discipline. Hence his *Tafsīr* preserved critical exegetical material from the early century of Islam.<sup>43</sup> In addition, he tackles the grammatical and lexicographical aspects of Qur’ānic verses and deduces theological and legal inferences from the Qur’ānic text. At-Tabarī was an orthodox Sunnī originally following the *Shāfi‘ī madhhab*. However, as his ideas developed, he formed an independent corpus of law and constituted a separate *madhhab* called *Jarīriyya* (named after his father). Although his school comprised many leading scholars of the age, it did not develop over time into an independent *madhhab* because its principles were not that distinctive from *Shāfi‘ī ism*.<sup>44</sup>

After the rise of the nation-state, in addition to consulting other scholars, there is a focus on three scholars due to their involvement in politics and their witnessing forms of imperialism that will affect their conceptualization of the *ummah*. Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905) was an Egyptian scholar and reformer. He is famous for being the pioneer of Islamic modernism. He was a journalist, theologian, jurist, and, during the last six years of his life, he served as the grand *muftī* of Egypt. ‘Abduh was greatly influenced by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1839–1897), who was an activist supporting the idea of unity in Islam (Pan-Islam) against

42. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed. John Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), s.v. “Ṭabarī, Abū Ja‘far Muhammad Ibn Jarīr Al-.”

43. Wadād Al-Qādī, “The Term ‘Khalifa’ in Early Exegetical Literature,” *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, Bd. 28. No. ¼ (1988), 395.

44. *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Brill, 2009), s.v. “al-Ṭabarī, Abū Djafar Muhammad b. Djarīr b. Yazīd,” American University of Beirut, [http://www.paulyonline.brill.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam\\_COM-1133](http://www.paulyonline.brill.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-1133).

European domination and the breakup of the Muslim world into nation-states. He placed great emphasis on the idea of the *ummah* united against European colonization. ‘Abduh founded with al-Afghānī the anti-British journal *al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqā*, which lasted only eight months. The journal represented the thinking of a generation of enthusiastic writers, including Rashīd Rīḍa, who would later edit and complete ‘Abduh’s exegetical work *Tafsīr al-Manār*. Initially Rīḍa encouraged ‘Abduh to write a *tafsīr*, but he was not interested. So Rīḍa started writing it based on ‘Abduh’s lectures. The resulting work was approved and corrected by ‘Abduh as needed. After ‘Abduh’s death in 1905, Rīḍa continued the work, and it was published in 1927 in twelve volumes. ‘Abduh believed that revelation and reason do not contradict one another, but rather complement each other. Thus, he believed that Islam is compatible with modernity but that there was a problem with religious education and the ‘*ulamā’* because they relied upon *taqlīd* (“imitation”). Muslim scholarship was heavily based on citing authority (*Isnād*) and passive satisfaction with rigid norms. ‘Abduh advocated emancipation from the *taqlīd* mentality while still retaining Islamic authenticity. Because of his involvement in politics, he was sent to exile twice. After his return to Cairo, he concentrated his efforts on education and renewal of Islamic theology.<sup>45</sup>

Sayyid Qutb Ibrāhīm Husayn Shādhilī (1906–1966) was an Egyptian intellectual who contributed to the modernization of Islamic political thought in the twentieth century. He was also a novelist, poet, literary critic, and an activist, as he was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood during the 1950s and 1960s. Among his several books is the thirty-volume influential commentary of the Qur’ān, “*Fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān*.” Qutb challenged traditional clergy by advocating free engagement with Islamic primary texts.<sup>46</sup> Qutb was an important link between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Free Officers, who toppled the monarchy in 1952. He had a personal relationship with Gamal Abdel Nasser, where he used to attend meetings of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) after their confiscation of power. Because of their different visions about the

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45. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed. John Esposito, s.v. “‘Abduh Muhammad.”

46. *Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press, 2013), s.v. “Qutb, Sayyid,” University of Rhode Island, <http://dx.doi.org.uri.idm.oclc.org/10.4135/9781452234168.n266>.

Egyptian society, the relations between the Free Officers and the brotherhood degenerated after the Free Officers seized power.<sup>47</sup> Qutb criticized contemporary Islamic societies as living in a state of *jāhiliyya* (“ignorance or barbarism). While *jāhiliyya* is a term used to describe pre-Islamic Arabia, Qutb used the term to denote rejecting divine revelation in favor of the individual’s sovereignty.<sup>48</sup> Hence, he criticized Nasser for exploiting the postcolonial Egyptian state as a means to maintain his authoritarian rule. Qutb developed a political theory based on ultimate sovereignty of God (*hakīmīyah lillah*) and Islamic principles of justice based on *shari‘ah*. Initially he postulated that the latter principles would be manifested in an Islamic state after people receive proper Islamic education. Nonetheless, after being imprisoned by the Egyptian government for several years, later in his life he started advocating social and political activism through a dedicated Muslim vanguard. His revolutionary ideas to reestablish a pure Islamic order has inspired several Islamist and revivalist groups.<sup>49</sup>

Muhammad Husayn Faḍlallah (1935–2010) was a Lebanese ‘ālim and political activist. He received his religious education in the city of Najaf in Iraq. Faḍlallah believed that the task of a Muslim intellectual is to “bridge the deep divide that exists between youth and religion” because of the gap that exists between ‘ulamā’ and young people. In contrast to his principal teacher, Abū al-Qāsim Khū’ī, who was against the involvement of the ‘ulamā’ in politics, Faḍlallah was deeply involved in the sociopolitical affairs of his country, Lebanon, particularly within its Shī‘ī community. In 1964, he started his activities in an impoverished area of Beirut by establishing cultural youth clubs and free community centers and clinics. Faḍlallah rejected the idea of separating religion and politics and advocated the need for a disciplined political party to serve Islam. His sermons and teachings inspired young people to resist the Israeli military occupation of Lebanon; hence he is known as the spiritual leader of Hizbullah. In 1984, Khomeini gave him the legitimizing honor of being

47. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), s.v. “Qutb, Sayyid,” University of Rhode Island, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236MIW/e0663>.

48. *Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought*, ed. Gregory Claeys, s.v. “Qutb, Sayyid.”

49. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John Esposito, s.v. “Qutb, Sayyid.”

*marja‘ al-taqlīd* (“source of imitation”). Faḍlallah believed in an economy, social structure, and politics governed by Islamic ethics, but he did not advocate a specific type of political regime. Faḍlallah criticized the political theory of *wilāyat al-faqīh* (“rule of the jurisconsult”) because he thought it results in autocratic personal power. He rather advocated the practice of *marja‘iyat at-taqlīd* (“authority of the source of imitation”), which limits personal power by endorsing pluralism. Faḍlallah advocated substantive dialogue and peaceful coexistence between Muslims, Christians, and other religious groups. He criticized religious sectarianism and called for an open and humanized *fiqh* (“jurisprudence”).<sup>50</sup>

Acknowledging the historical dynamics witnessed by different scholars and thinkers after the rise of the nation-state is critical for this research because the latter political environment affects the exegete’s ideological trajectory. Thereby it aids in clarifying how the pertinent historical context might have impacted the way modern scholars conceptualized the *ummah* and how different their understanding is from premodern scholars.

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50. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed. John Esposito, s.v. “Faḍlallah, Muhammad Husayn.”