

# An Epistemic Shift from Islamism to Post–Islamism: Abul A’la Mawdudi versus Abdolkarim Soroush

## *İslamcılıktan Post–İslamcılığa Epistemik Bir Kayma: Abul A’la Mawdudi’ye Karşı Abdolkarim Soroush*

 İbrahim Akkuç\*

SOAS University of London, UK  
655857@soas.ac.uk

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**Abstract:** Islamic countries began to feel the intellectual impact of the West severely in 20th century due to their military and economic loss against the West in the 19th century. As a result, a phenomenon called Modern Islam Political thought having its theory and practice emerged in discrepant Muslim countries as a reaction among the Muslim thinkers. One of them was Abu A’la Mawdudi, who was born in the first quarter of the 20th century of Western colonialism. The another was Abolkarim Soroush, who was among the preparers of the Revolution of 1979 in Iran and was born in different historical setting, where the West do not exist physically. Consequently, this produced different political horizons. As both thinkers thought about how Islam should be linked to politics, they were naturally deeply influenced by the conditions in which they lived. On the one hand, the essay will try to deepen into Mawdudi’s concept of Islam, secular man–made law, and his Islamic state, it will focus on Soroush’s renewal of Islamic knowledge, democracy and on a new rapprochement with the West, on the other hand.

**Keywords:** Modern Islamic Political Thought, Abu A’la Mawdudi, Abolkarim Soroush, Islam, Democracy and the West

**Öz:** 19. yy. da Batı’ya karşı askeri ve ekonomi kayıplar yaşayan İslam devletleri, 20. yy. da sert bir şekilde Batı’nın fikri etkisini hissetmeye başlamışlardır. Tüm bu gelişmelerle birlikte, kendi teorisi ve pratiği olan ve modern İslam Siyaset Düşüncesi olarak adlandırılan olgu bir reaksiyon olarak Müslüman düşünürler arasında farklı Müslüman ülkelerde ortaya çıkmıştır. Bunlarından biri Batı sömürgeciliğinin yaşandığı 20. yy. in ilk çeyreğinde doğan Abul Ala Mevdudi’dir. Diğer düşünür ise 1979 yılında İran Devrimi’nin hazırlayıcılarından olan, Batı’nın fiziksel olarak var olmadığı bir tarihsel süreçte yaşayan Abdülkerim Suruş’tur. Bu iki düşünür de İslam’ın nasıl siyaset ile ilişkilendirileceğini düşünürken, doğal ve derin bir şekilde yaşadıkları tarihsel koşullardan

*etkilenmişler. Bu da tabii olarak farklı siyasal tahayyüleri ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bir yandan bu makale Mevdudi'nin İslam kavramı, seküler hukuk ve onu İslam devleti kavramları üzerine derinleşirken, diğer taraftan Suruş'un İslam bilgisinin yenilenmesi, demokrasi ve Batı ile yeni bir yakınlaşma kavramları üzerine yoğunlaşacaktır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Modern İslam Düşüncesi, Abu A'la Mawdudi, Abdolkarim Soroush, İslam, Demokrasi ve Batı*

## 1. Introduction

The relation between Islam and politics has transformed from 19th century to 20th century dramatically in terms of its discourse and ideological framework in the context of changing socio-political developments. In this process, particularly there came into existence two different type of thinkers whose peculiar political projects differed from each other in the sense of their existing historical contexts. For instance, after the Muslim world was defeated by the Global powers in 19th century, the Muslim intellectuals started to search for explanations to tackle with the project of nation-state and its ideology, nationalism, that had never existed in the region and that appeared with the arrival of the Western colonialism. In these circumstances, they tried to produce novel political projects based mostly on total or partial adaptation of Islamic principles to tackle with the colonial infiltration, as well as to incapacitate secular national projections aiming to shape both their individual identity and state's political identity. This seemed the main motivation for the thinkers like Abul A'la Mawdudi, who tried to make Islam and its principles the fundamental basis of his political project in offering a new way of thinking about the concept of Islam, the relevance of man-made law and the purpose of his Islamic state.

As it is the case for the beginning of and during 20th century, once one ponders on the last quarter of 20th century, one realizes there is an entire discrepant socio-political depiction where the Western colonialism seemed to disappear, the society has more democratic demands like human rights, protected legal citizenship, transparent and accountable political administration, gender equality, etc like in the example of Arab Spring. As Arshin assets, "this moment signals the onset of postmodernity in the Arab and Islamic worlds: a radical, refreshing and emancipatory moment in human history" (Arshin, 2012: 23). This is also the ground, on which the Muslim thinkers, like Abdulkarim Soroush, attempted offer a different Islamic ideological configuration that moves away from the previous total Islamic ideological approach exemplified by Mawdudi to political imagination trying to find solutions to the predicaments the modern Muslim communities face today.

To find out how these two different interpretations of Islam were deployed in politics in these innovative Muslim thinkers, in this essay, initially, I will commence with mentioning about Mawdudi and his ideological vision by focusing on the concept of Islam, the relation between Islam and man-made law, and on the purpose of his Islamic state. Secondly, Soroush's understanding of Islam, of Islam and political ideology and of the new approach towards the West will be the subject matter of this essay's investigation.

## 2. Problematizing the Definitions

When the relation between Islam and politics is considered in the context of 20th century, it appears a huge effort shown by journalists, academics, and politicians to understand that kin from different angles, and appears a body of knowledge produced to draw a clear picture for those who would like to grasp how Islam was linked to politics and how it was considered to find solutions to the challenges of the West and to the crumbling Muslims counties in this confrontation with the West. However, this is not only outcome of this understanding process of Islam, there are also fabricated concepts such as fundamentalist, political Islamist, and extremist to define this relation and the actors who would like to use Islam in their political projects. Nevertheless, as Shepard explains, these labels that have been used to write about Islam and politics have undoubtedly functioned as obstacles to understanding the core message of this relation (Shepard, 1987: 307). Therefore, it is necessary for use to use new or at least more appropriate definitions and notions to figure out this rapprochement in order not to fall into the similar biased traps. In an effort of understanding Islam's place in politics, besides that, it must be noticed that as Enayat claims, "Muslims do not have unified and monolithic perception of their faith, any more than the followers of other great religions" (Enayat, 1982: 1). Particularly, they differ in their political interpretations of Islam because each of perception takes shape according to its historical background. For this end, there is need for more moderate and unbiased concepts that can depict the thinker's ideas and the condition where they emerged in.

Bannerman propounds two notions: the Orthodox Conservatives and the modernizing reformers (Bannerman, 1988: 121) that seem fitting into our aim to conduct an inquiry about Mawdudi and Soroush's political projects in more analytical way. To Bannerman, the orthodox conservatives are those who argue Islam is a comprehensive, complete, and perfect system, including all aspects of life, the proper application of which is enough to deal with the difficulties and problems facing humankind. And they are also dedicated to taqlid (imitation) and to acceptance of established schools and authorities of Islam. Ultimately, because of the conditions, where they lived, not only do they feel

under the pressure of intellectual and material influence of the West, but they also have reservations to the Western ideas and intellectualism, which alienated them from the West. Whereas the modernizing reformers seek to reinterpret the bases of Islam in the light of existing and continuously altering circumstances, as well as to reject taqlid as opposed branch and root, instead they are keen on implying ijihad (interpretation) that is not only seen permissible but also as obligatory for them. And they also favor a synthesis between the essentials of Islam and the West. In this context, I consider Mawdudi as an orthodox conservative while accepting Soroush as a modernizing reformer and will depend my analysis on this premise.

### **3. An Orthodox Conservative: Abul A'la Mawdudi**

As an orthodox conservative, Sayyid Abu'l Ala Mawdudi is thought to be the person, who founded the modern Sunni Political thought in the Indian subcontinent. Donohue and Esposito articulate that no person has influenced the political vocabulary of the contemporary Sunni Islamism more than Mawdudi (J. Donohue and L. Esposito, 2007: 74). He was born in 1903 in southern India, Deccan, and his early years were spent in Hyderabad, as well as his family was a family of sayyids (descendants of the Prophet) (Reza Nasr, 1996: 9). His early education started with the study of Urdu, Persian, Arabic, mantiq (logic), fiqh (jurisprudence), and hadith (sayings of the Prophet). When Mawdudi was eleven, he was enrolled to the Madrasah-i Fauqaniyah, where both traditional and modern subjects were thought (Reza Nasr, 1996: 13). Later, his family moved to Hyderabad, where he was enrolled at the local daru'l -ulum; nevertheless, due to his father longed illness and family's worsening financial situation compelled him to abandon his studies and became a journalist in the age of fifteen (Reza Nasr, 1996: 14).

After getting involved in professional life, though Mawdudi got affiliated with the Khilafat Movement that would use an anti-imperialist language and with the Congress that "was overwhelmingly dominated by the Hindus" (J. Donohue and L. Esposito, 2007: 80) under the leadership of Gandhi, he realized that neither a colonial government nor a secular nationalist force would be able to serve "the interests of Indian Muslims" (Reza Nasr, 1996: 21), as well as that only solution for the Indian Muslims to purse life according to their religion, culture and stay away from the infiltration of the Western culture was to establish an independent state, where his ideological project based on the fundamentals of Islam would be the essence. For this end, Mawdudi founded Jama'at-e-Islami in 1941, split into independent Pakistani and Indian (Kashmiri) units in 1947 after the partition of the subcontinent, and its Bangladeshi unit in 1971 (Vali, 2003: 3), to achieve his objectives in a political organization. It is significant to say that the Ja'maat was formed

in similar codifications of a nation–state because of its need of appealing to Muslim Pakistanis, it, therefore, mostly reflects ideological projections of other nation–state projects, but with a religious flavor. Thus, what Mawdudi depicted in his ideological imagination is of great similarities with how O. P. Gauba defines Ideology: it is a set of ideas which are accepted to be true by a group or an ideologue, who will invoke its or his ideology to determine the best form of government... on what principles should a government operate, what institutions should be replaced or maintained for the realization of the objectives (Gauba, 2009: 12). In this regard, Mawdudi envisioned his political ideology, which this essay tries to deal with, under the three scopes: the concept of Islam, man–made law and the aim of his Islamic state.

### 3.1. The Concept of Islam

To understand what Mawdudi means by the concept of Islam, it is necessary to consider ‘his Four Concepts of Qur’an’ composing of the theoretical basis of his political thinking. First concept is ilah that refers to the capacities to fulfil the needs of others, to give them shelter and protection, to relieve their minds of distress and agitation and to the requisite authority and power to do all these things (Mawdudi, undated: 12). Second concept is Rabb, the owner and the master, who has the Supreme Authority. In relation to this, the laws of the universe are subject to His supreme law, Shari’a that is binding for all the created, including human (Mawdudi, undated: 77). The last notion is ibadah that stands for maa ’bud, worshipper, who does not only need to be pious prayer, but he also is required to serve continuously and unremittingly to the Rabb–Lord of the world (Mawdudi, 1976: 15). Hence, Mawdudi portrays, as Bannerman explains, God as the only Authority, Sovereign, and Legislator. Islam also signifies nothing but obedience and submission to Him (Bannerman, 1988: 122). In other words, Mawdudi “...rejects explicitly and wholeheartedly the ‘modernist’ programme of adapting the Shari’a to the modern world through a renewal of ijtihad. Instead, he returned to a literalist–textualist view of revelation: the Shari’a is unchangeable” (Black, 2011: 308). That represents a theological approach of reading and understanding of the Quran and Sunna; likewise, it reminds Muslims that only solution to their all predicaments is implying what the sacred texts put forward for them.

### 3.2. Man–Made Law

This all–encompassing understanding of God brought naturally significant premises to Mawdudi’s political ideology. The first principle of Islamic social and political system, for example, is the Unity and the sovereignty of Allah. In other words, according to him, no one should be allowed to pass orders or make commands in his own right and no one should accept the obligation to carry out such commands and obey such orders.

Therefore, He, God, alone is the law-giver. No man, even the Prophet has no right to order others in his own right to do or not to do certain things, which is the first principle of his Islamic political theory (Mawdudi, 1976: 158). Moreover, Mawdudi declares that communities based their political, economic and legislative institutions on man-made laws that are seizure of the right of God, who is the only one to make them, are places where the human soul is deprived of its natural freedom, and where man mind, heart, and inborn faculties are also restricted. The only remedy for this dreadful malady is the repudiation and renunciation of God Almighty as the mere master and lord (Mawdudi, 1976: 156). This is the very antithesis of secular Western political understanding relied on man's will and consent, as well as this brings along a big question of how it would be possible for almost all the Muslim people who think sovereignty are imbedded in them to make them think that God is the only law-maker and all the necessary laws would be codified and implied according the Quran and Sunna. The same argument looks like also the reason why Mawdudi considers the state as a must for his project to implement these objectives.

### **3.3. The Islamic State**

As it is indicated and Black advocates, to imply an Islamic society formed on what God revealed in the Quran, which is the basis of political and judicial systems one must get hold of political power, the government (Black, 2011: 308). Therefore, in Mawdudi's thinking, the purpose of the Islamic state is not merely to prevent people from exploiting each other, to safeguard their liberty and to protect its subject from foreign invasions. Moreover, it aims at creating a well-balanced system of social justice based on God's Holy Book, as well as at making an ideological state possible that rests on a careful consideration of Quran and Sunnah, both of which are the basis of it (Mawdudi, 1976: 165). As for how this Islamic state would be run, he says that those who believe in the ideology of Islamic state inscribed in the Divine Law are assigned to rule it. The administrators of this state must be those who devoted to the observance and enforcement of the holy Law (Mawdudi; 1976, 166). Hence, Black asserts that Mawdudi "looked to a moral and intellectual elite, not a mass organization ('there must exist a righteous community ... devoted to the sole purpose of ...realizing the system of truth') (Black, 2011: 308).

However, what Mawdudi articulates refutes Black's thesis of giving authority to 'a selected few,' by pointing out that Islam uses the term "vicegerency" (Khilafah) instead of sovereignty, the whole community of believers is in charge, not a class, family or an individual. Indeed, everyone in the community is also a ruler and everyone has a responsibility of having just order. Thus, all men enjoy equal status and position in a

society (Mawdudi, 1976: 168). On the other hand, as it is indicated in above lines, he claims that those who are devoted followers of Islam can be administrators of the Islamic state due to their commitment to Islamic knowledge. Thus, there is no clear explanation regarding whether potential of being a khalif, leader, a group people, or whole community is relied on personal character and ability or on personal devotion to Islamic knowledge.

Last point regarding Mawdudi's Islamic state is the case of Individual liberty. He supports that individual liberty cannot be suppressed under the Islamic state, nor is there any trace of dictatorship in it (Mawdudi, 1976: 166). But after a few lines, he advocates that in such a state no one can regard any field of his affairs as personal and private. Hence, there is great ambiguity again about how individual rights would be protected, and what sort of legal procedures his Islamic state would imply to. As a result, it can be said that even though Mawdudi explains overtly what the aim of his Islamic state is, he could not put it in a convincing and applicable theoretical framework, where the way of how the state would be run, who would take on this task, and how a balance between rights and duties would be created among people are quite blurred.

#### **4. A Modernizing Reformist: Abdolkarim Soroush**

Soroush, as modernizing reformer, is described as Iranian Martin Luther for calling question a priestly monopoly on religious and political authority (Vakil, 1997: 1). He was born in Tehran in 1945 into a lower-middle class family. Although he completed a master's degree in chemistry, soon later he focused his study on the philosophy of science (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2013: 246). As one of the most prominent contemporary Iranian religious intellectuals, he studied at the 'Alavi secondary school' in Tehran thought a mixture of the modern science and religious studies together. In this lycée, his teachers were in an endeavor to reconcile religion and science and they grasped modern sciences as much as religious sciences like fiqh (jurisprudence) and *usul* (method) (Bezine, 2008: 58). At the post-graduate level, Soroush studied pharmacology in Iran, and later history and philosophy in England, from where he turned to Iran during the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79. Right after the Revolution in 1979, the Committee of the Cultural Revolution was the position with which he was charged to shape Iran's higher education in accordance with Islamic lines (Vakil, 1997: 4). Although having served 3 years in this committee, says Azimi, Soroush resigned from there in 1983 (Azimi, 2014: 20). During the 90s, Soroush became gradually critical of the political role of the Iranian clergy, which paved the way of his exile from Iran. After this brief introduction to his life, the subject matter of the rest of the following pages will his

political ideology being discussed under three themes: his method and the concept of Islam, the relation between Islam and political ideology, and a new reconciliatory approach to the West.

#### **4.1. Soroush's Method and the notion of Islam**

Unlike Mawdudi, Soroush pronounces that Islam must be reconstructed to meet the needs of modern man and society. Though declaring that Islam is unchangeable and any attempt to do this is futile, he supports that human understanding of it must be changed. Because the world constantly changes, there is no doubt that man's understanding of religion needs to change too. To encounter the challenges of the modernity, Muslims do not need to change their religion, instead they ought to reconcile their understanding of religion with changes in the outside their world (Vakil, 1997: 4). Soroush proceeds, religious knowledge are one of many other branches of human knowledge, and accordingly it is not divine, and it should not be confused by religion itself. This religious knowledge is the product of scholars who studied Islamic text—the Qur'an, the hadith, and the teaching of the Shi'ite Imams. These scholars interpret the texts using different methods by getting influenced by world, historical conditions, in which they live.

Therefore, for Soroush a medieval scholar's worldview differs from that of a modern thinker, which ends up with various interpretation of religion and paves the way to different bodies of religious knowledge. As a result, today's Muslims should re-construct their religious interpretations in compliance with their altering comprehension of the world (Vakil, 1997: 5). In short, to Bahrooz, Soroush combined his Islamic philosophical worldview based on Mulla Sadra's philosophy, 17th century Iranian thinker, with neo-positivist Karl Popper to put hermeneutic approach to the Divine text, the Qur'an, and Sunna, the sayings of the Prophet, to deduct his political thinking (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2013: 247). Consequently, this approach is not only giving ordinary individuals chance to take what they understand from the texts, Quran and other religious recourses, by implementing *ijtihad* (interpretation), but it is also a considerable challenge to the class of clerics who claims dominant authority in the interpretation of Islamic texts.

#### **4.2. Islam as a Political Ideology**

According to Soroush, ideology is a social and political tool benefited to direct and define public behavior. Due to this character, ideology needs of mobilizing people and of disseminating its principles for its survival, which is the ground where the same ideology enters rivalry with other ideologies and where the division comes into being. Then, he asks should religion, Islam, act as a political ideology? Soroush's answer to this question is a stressed no. To him, taking religion as an ideology is the biggest obstacle to the



growth of religious knowledge; instead he advocates a democratic government as the mere compatible one with his notion of Islam. Islamic ideology that became the corner stone of Iran Revolution in Iran in 1979 and that needed a religio-political interpretation of the world and an ideological enemy to sustain itself (Vakil, 1997: 7) was wrong. Because, for an ideology positioning itself in opposition to a certain rival and comprehending the world through this rivalry reduces religious knowledge diversity and fixes it around determined borders. In addition, the same rivalry impedes free thought, rational thinking and brings stagnation and despotism (Vakil, 1997: 18).

Therefore, once one looks at how Soroush incorporate his ideas with democracy, it seems that he supports that the mere form of religious government is a democratic government which is not based on religious ideology and on hindering the growth of knowledge. Since democracy is a form of government, including and allowing multiple political cultures, including Islamic ones (Vakil, 1997: 10), the proposed government, to Soroush, must be both religious and democratic too; in short, it must protect the sanctity of religion and the right of man together. And this is the considerable feature of any government. Nonetheless, if a government designed to be ruled in accordance with one interpretation of Islam, it would demand its citizens to live according to this interpretation and to sacrifice human rights for the sake of its ideological existence. Consequently, the guideline for a government is not protecting its ideology and trying to disseminate it among its citizens, but human rights, including religion (Vakil, 1997; 16). Soroush's attempt is "represents an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty...by emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, the future instead of the past" (Bayat, 2005). It appears that what Soroush supports in the scope of post-Islamic discourse found its voice among resentful Iranians under the platform of the Green Movement. However, this understanding of ideology related with its hermeneutic way of interpretation of Islam does not only brings along a question of Muslims and non-Muslims within a Muslim society, but it also directs challenging questions to Soroush about finding a reasonable explanation rather than saying religion is not the suitable ground for rights, by those who accepts religion as the basis of the social rights.

#### **4.3. Relation with the West**

After the Revolution of 1979 in Iran, the relation between Iran and the West was quite strained. The similar vision of clash of civilizations of Huntington was on the ground at that time, and it seems still alive. Vakil calls this 'cultural invasion' (tahajum-i farhangi) of the West that allegedly threatened to degenerate the Iranian Islamic cultural identity.

Nevertheless, for Soroush, this kind of isolation can only bring stagnation and alienation to Iran, rather he argues that the religious sciences can only flourish when there is close relation with other parts of the world. He adds that an advancement is made in different country can merely be transferred by intimate dialog with it at the level scholarly community. Therefore, scholarly engagement with other scholarly strong countries, including Western ones can open the door of betterment and scientific development (Vakil, 1997: 19).

This position was defended by Soroush, when he resigned from the Committee of the Cultural Revolution in Iran after the 1979 Revolution. Soroush thought that purging Western influence from the Iranian higher educational system would jeopardize the growth of knowledge. In addition to, he considered that for the sake of Islamicizing the non-Islamic sciences are a big mistake, instead an interaction should be formed between in these two domains of knowledge to create a suitable learning environment for students (Vakil, 1997: 19). Furthermore, Soroush claims that the West is not a united entity; instead it is a compile of varied peoples with each diverse culture. Therefore, copying the West totally is not possible. Alternatively, there should be a selective adaptation of Western culture, science, and knowledge. Consequently, the only path for Iran's culture to blossom up is to open itself to other cultural fields, to engage with them critically and freely to have a better grasp of the world (Vakil, 1997: 19).

## 5. Conclusion

In the course of the 20th century, in the context of the Western colonialism and imperialism a quantity of orthodox Muslim conservatives put a revolutionary Islamic ideology in use "...to counter the Western discourse of modernity and instill in the Muslim masses a sense of collective agency in order to mobilize them against Western domination" (Saffari, 2017: 109) and to form a society moulded around 'the endorsed Islamic principles' like in the case of Mawdudi. As it is seen in the example of Mawdudi's Islamic state project, this ideological modification was not sound enough to provide a well-organized political organization that takes care of individual rights, supports a well-defined check and balance system, and that has no capacity of challenging the national, secular state configuration. Related to, although Mawdudi based his political thinking on theoretical perspective referring to the Quran, the model he tired to provide did not go beyond of offering masterful, infiltrative and oppressive model of nation-state's parameters that "... never occurred to Muslims and Muslims rulers" (Siddiqui, 1981: 89). Lastly, it is apparently seen that the process of forming an independent

Pakistani nation-state had a great impact on Mawdudi's political thought and deeply shaped his political vision.

As concerns Soroush's political ideology as a modernized spirit in Islam, it seems more promising in terms of bringing along a new way of understanding Islam by taking historical conditions into consideration. However, there is no a systematized way of interpretation of the sacred texts offered by Soroush, which has capacity to make many pious people afraid of losing the change of understanding right way of practicing their religion. As Karaman utters, this approach might produce many prophets among the Muslim people (Karaman, August 2015). Apart from that, what Soroush says about having control on the role clerics in politics in the case of Iran or on any other religious group sounds quite reasonable in the interest of having more accountable and transparent relation between politics and religion. Besides, I would like to say that his conciliatory approach towards the West would be very important to share ideas, to find solutions to the global problems and to form a productive linkage in many different fields on the condition that the West gives up its pejorative and orientalist language and treatment to the Muslim countries. Finally, when these two thinkers are considered, it appears that there is a "post-Islamist trend that represents an epistemic shift towards the formation of pluralistic, harmonious, non-violent and civil political culture" (Mahdavi, 2011: 94) in the Muslim countries. Thus, as it was indicated, the historical conditions in Iran, where young and educated population's demands for more freedom, job, education, and better life conditions, seems to have a tremendous impact on the post-Revolutionary thinkers' political imaginations like in the case of Soroush.

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