

The Islamic State from Socio-Modernist Perspectives: Between Impossibility and Correction

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Abstract: This paper explores the concept of the "Islamic State" through a socio-modernist lens, drawing on Wael Hallaq's (2013) critical perspectives on the feasibility of such a state in the modern era. It examines how historical, political, and ideological factors have shaped contemporary interpretations of Islamic governance, particularly in relation to secularism, democracy, and globalization. The study also addresses the tensions between traditional Islamic legal frameworks and the structural demands of the modern state, highlighting the role of colonialism and Orientalist narratives in shaping these debates. By analyzing the intersections of political authority, religious identity, and modern governance, this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges facing Islamic political projects today. Ultimately, the study argues that the Islamic State, as traditionally conceived, is a historically contingent notion rather than a fixed political model, necessitating a rethinking of its role within contemporary socio-political realities.

Keywords: Islamic State; Socio-modernist perspective; Political Islam; Modern governance; Secularism; Colonialism.

Introduction

In contemporary discussions on the relationship between religion and politics in the Islamic world, the concept of the "Impossible Islamic State," as articulated by Wael Hallaq, highlights the structural tensions between Islam and modernity. Hallaq contends that efforts to revive the traditional model of the "Islamic State" in the modern era are not only futile but also represent attempts to resurrect a political and cultural framework that is outdated and

unsuited to contemporary challenges. This perspective aligns with broader intellectual debates on Islam and political authority, including Edward Said's critique of Orientalism and the reflections of Egyptian thinker Ali Abdel Raziq (Hallaq, 2013, p56) on Islamic governance. These discussions illuminate the difficulties inherent in the project of the "Islamic State" in a globalized and modern age. Hallaq's critique of traditional conceptions of the "Islamic State" offers a socio-modernist analysis that reexamines historical ideas about the state in Islamic thought. He argues that these ideas have been influenced by a legacy of colonialism and Orientalist ideologies, which have shaped the concept of Islam as inherently incompatible with modern values such as democracy and human rights.

Orientalist influences are evident in how the West has portrayed the "Islamic State" as a rigid and unchanging archetype, incapable of adapting to modernity (Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*, 2013, p 26). Challenging this view, Hallaq asserts that the "Islamic State" was never a fixed model but rather an evolving idea, capable of transformation and renewal within contemporary social and political contexts. In this context, Ali Abdel Raziq's critique of Islamic governance marks a pivotal moment. In his book *Islam and the Foundations of Governance*, Abdel Raziq argued that Islam does not prescribe a specific model of political authority but instead offers general principles that can be interpreted and applied based on the conditions of time and place.

This critique aligns with Wael Hallaq's views, as both suggest that it is impractical to impose a political framework rooted in a specific historical period onto a rapidly changing world (Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*, 2018). According to Hallaq, efforts to implement the Islamic State as a fixed political structure within the context of globalization, human rights, and modern democratic demands conflict with the realities of contemporary societies, which are defined by diversity and complex interactions between religion and politics. The greatest challenge to the "Islamic State" project in the contemporary Arab and Islamic world remains the ideological polarization between secular and Islamic forces. In many Arab countries, societies are deeply divided between those advocating secular ideas influenced by Western

modernity and others promoting Islamic models rooted in traditional understandings of political and religious authority. This conflict reflects not only a clash of political visions but also an intricate identity crisis, where societies struggle to develop an intellectual and political framework that adapts to modern realities while preserving cultural and religious identities. Hallaq argues that such ideological polarization deepens divisions and obstructs serious efforts to create a viable Islamic political model capable of addressing the global challenges facing the Arab world today.

Hallaq's vision of the Islamic project is not a pre-defined political model to be transplanted into the modern era. Instead, he sees it as an intellectual endeavor that requires a comprehensive reevaluation of the relationship between religion and politics, one that aligns with modern demands while safeguarding cultural and religious distinctiveness (Esposito, 1998, p85). For Hallaq, the Islamic project is neither static nor nostalgic but a dynamic space for dialogue and negotiation between Islamic principles and contemporary realities.

This perspective positions the project as a living, evolving initiative that demands critical thinking and innovation in its application. Hallaq's approach stands in stark contrast to prevailing ideological attitudes that attempt to impose a rigid and transcendent model of the Islamic State. He calls for a reconsideration of the feasibility of such a project within the complex cultural and political landscape of the modern world.

- *How does Wael Hallaq conceptualize the incompatibility between the Islamic political tradition and the foundations of the modern state?*
- *In what ways can Hallaq's vision contribute to a rethinking of Islamic governance in a globalized, pluralistic, and post-colonial context?*

Wael Hallaq is a Palestinian scholar and prominent thinker in the fields of Islamic law and intellectual history. He earned his PhD from the University of Washington and has taught at various institutions across the East and West, including in Singapore,

Indonesia, and the United States. He has held prestigious academic positions at McGill, Montreal, and Toronto, and currently serves as Professor of Islamic Studies at Columbia University in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies. His works have been translated into several languages, including Italian, Japanese, and Turkish. Among his most influential books are The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament, An Introduction to Islamic Law, and Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations.

I. I The Problematic

The phrase "The Islamic State from a Socio-Modernist Perspective: Wael Hallaq's Vision" introduces a research problematic centered on how the Islamic State is conceptualized within the social and modernist context. It raises critical questions about whether an "Islamic State" can truly exist within the socio-political transformations of modern Arab and Islamic societies. Several key inquiries emerge from this framework, exploring the essence of such a state, its feasibility in political and social realities, and its relationship with secularism, particularly in the Arab and Islamic regions.

First, can the "Islamic State," as traditionally conceived, still be discussed, or is this notion constrained by the challenges imposed by the social and political dynamics of the modern era? This question examines whether a comprehensive Islamic State model is possible amidst the evolving conceptual, cultural, and legislative paradigms brought about by modernity and secularism. Addressing this requires a critical evaluation of the relationship between religion and politics today (Lapidus, 2002, p47), along with an analysis of intellectual perspectives and political practices in states that claim to embody this model.

Second, the ongoing conflict between the Islamic project and secularism in the Arab region must be interrogated. This conflict encompasses political, cultural, and religious dimensions. What do "secularists" and "Islamists" mean when they discuss the state and society? Is it possible for Islamic and modernist principles to coexist within a single framework? What challenges do Arab and Islamic states face in balancing the preservation of Islamic identity with the demands of modernity, democracy, and economic development?.

Lastly, does the "Islamic Project" truly exist, or is it merely a collection of slogans lacking practical applicability in the modern era? This question necessitates an analysis of various initiatives representing contemporary Islamic thought (such as political Islam or the Islamic State project) in light of the challenges posed by globalization, technological advancements, and Western ideologies. Does the Islamic project offer a comprehensive and cohesive vision for the future of the Arab and Islamic world, or does it remain an abstract idea entangled in broader social and political conflicts? Can it provide practical solutions to the region's problems, or will it continue to be subject to experimentation and deconstruction by internal and external forces?.

This research problematic calls for a deep exploration of these questions through a socio-modernist lens. It requires integrating social and historical dynamics with concepts of modernity and secularism, creating a framework to reassess the role of the Islamic State in shaping political identity and legitimacy in the Arab and Islamic regions (Brown, 2014, p256).

Methodology:

The article employs a critical-analytical methodology focused on unpacking the epistemological and ethical underpinnings of Wael Hallaq's thought. Through close reading of *The Impossible State*

and other major works, the author interprets Hallaq's critique of modernity by contrasting it with dominant Western political and legal paradigms.

The analysis emphasizes conceptual structures rather than empirical case studies, and draws on interdisciplinary insights from political theory, Islamic jurisprudence, and philosophy to highlight the moral and intellectual coherence of Hallaq's alternative vision of statehood.

II. II. Much State, Little Human: How Does the State Shape Individuals?

Wael Hallaq, in his critique of the modern state, examines how the state reshapes individuals and redefines the concept of humanity. He argues that the modern state is not a neutral political structure or a simple organizational tool for human needs. Instead, it is a historical and ideological project designed to produce individuals who conform to its priorities. The state molds people through mechanisms such as laws, education, and institutional practices. Social and human relationships, once grounded in traditional ethics and communal solidarity, become conditioned by the legal and political frameworks of the state.

For example, education is not just a means of transferring knowledge but a tool for shaping individual identity. Curricula are crafted not only to educate but also to instill values and norms that align with the state's vision, transforming individuals into citizens who serve its goals.

Hallaq also highlights the state's role as a continuous system of surveillance and control (Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni Usul al-Fiqh*, 1997, p233). Drawing on Michel Foucault's theories, he explains how the state fosters "self-discipline," where individuals internalize monitoring

and conform to state standards even without direct oversight. This influence extends beyond legal boundaries into psychological and cultural spheres, standardizing individuals as functional components of public order. Citizenship, in this context, replaces traditional affiliations—religious, ethical, or cultural—with a political identity that ties individuals solely to the state. This shift reduces other dimensions of humanity, focusing only on the relationship between the individual and the state.

Hallaq critiques the modern state for undermining traditional moral values that once guided individual lives. Ethical principles rooted in spiritual and cultural traditions are replaced by materialistic and utilitarian norms aimed at serving state interests. This shift prioritizes efficiency and organization over higher values such as compassion and justice (Hallaq, *The impossible state: Islam, politics, and modernity's moral predicament*, 2013,p 114). According to Hallaq, the state reshapes individuals to fit its needs, leading to a loss of ethical depth and a sense of alienation from oneself and one's community.

In Hallaq's view, these processes create not only a crisis of individual identity but also a broader civilizational and ethical crisis, reducing humanity to a functional role within the state's machinery.

III.The Formation of the Modern State and Its Hegemonic Impact: A Sociological Reading in the Arab-Islamic Context

1. The State as a Historically Specific and Localized Experience

Wael Hallaq argues that the modern state is not a universal or timeless entity but the result of a historically specific experience that developed in Europe. It emerged from unique social and political events, such as the Reformation, the rise of capitalism, and the spread of nationalism. This development was shaped by the needs of European societies at the time and was inherently localized. However, the modern state was later exported as a

universal model to other regions of the world, often clashing with the cultural and religious frameworks of non-Western societies. This imposed model has created challenges in reconciling local histories with the structure of the modern state. Hallaq emphasizes that the state is not just a political framework but a historical construct deeply influenced by Western ideology.

2. The Metaphysical Sovereignty of the Modern State

Hallaq describes the modern state as more than a material or political system; it also holds a metaphysical dimension in its claim to absolute authority. This sovereignty is evident in the state's role as the sole source of rights and laws, overshadowing traditional authorities such as religious or social institutions. Sovereignty is not limited to governing land or people but extends to defining ideas of good and evil, legitimacy and illegitimacy, and reshaping human and social relationships. This gives the state a quasi-sacred status, demanding absolute subordination from individuals, similar to the relationship between humanity and divinity in traditional societies.

3. Monopoly Over Legislation and Legitimate Violence

A key characteristic of the modern state is its control over legislation and its use of what Max Weber calls "legitimate violence." This monopoly excludes competing legal systems, such as Islamic law or tribal customs, pushing aside traditional systems that once relied on local community dynamics. The state's control over violence, exercised through institutions like the military and police, gives it the power to impose its will, even against collective opposition. For Hallaq (Zaman, 2002, p65), this monopoly alters the relationship between individuals and society, forcing individuals to follow laws made to serve the state, rather than the community.

4. The Bureaucratic Machinery of the State

Modern bureaucracy is the foundation of the state, allowing it to manage complex societies efficiently. However, Hallaq argues that bureaucracy is not just an administrative tool but a means of enforcing control and hegemony. Bureaucracy

operates through a class of officials loyal to the state, rather than society. Although bureaucracy appears rational, it undermines traditional relationships and marginalizes ethical values in favor of efficiency and organization. It reduces individuals to mere numbers or files in a large administrative system, eroding personal identity and disconnecting people from traditional community bonds.

5. Cultural and Hegemonic Intervention in the Social System

The modern state extends its power beyond material control to cultural dominance, creating a social order aligned with its interests. Hallaq points out how the state influences all aspects of life, including education, media, and moral values. The aim of this intervention is to create the "national self," individuals who identify primarily as citizens of the state. This is not a natural process but the result of cultural engineering that replaces traditional identities with a secular, national identity. Through this cultural intervention, the state becomes a hegemonic force, reshaping values and social practices to maintain its stability and dominance.

Hallaq's analysis of the modern state presents a comprehensive critique of its historical, cultural, and structural aspects. As he shows, the modern state is a project shaped by European historical experiences, which often clash with the sociocultural and religious frameworks of Arab and Islamic societies. Its metaphysical sovereignty, monopoly over legislation and violence, bureaucratic machinery, and cultural hegemony all contribute to its dominance over individuals and communities. These elements pose significant challenges for societies trying to reconcile their historical identities with the demands of modern statehood, particularly in the Arab-Islamic context.

Hallaq's insights encourage critical reflection on how the modern state redefines humanity and reshapes society within its hegemonic framework. In the Arab and Islamic context, this analysis highlights significant challenges arising from the clash between the Western model of the modern state and the cultural and social realities of Islam. The modern Arab state (Hallaq,

The impossible state: Islam, politics, and modernity's moral predicament, 2013, p136), largely shaped under colonialism, adopted the European state model while disregarding local historical and social contexts. This created a tension between the modern state and traditional heritage. The reorganization of Arab societies under the influence of modernity and political centralization led to the replacement of religious and traditional values with a bureaucratic system, deeply affecting cultural and religious identities.

This transformation was not limited to politics but extended to legislative frameworks and religious authority. The modern state sought to monopolize legislative power, sidelining traditional religious institutions. The inevitable conflict between Islamic heritage and the modern state project emerged, as civil legislation became the main framework for governing people's lives, diminishing the role of Islamic law in public life. On the bureaucratic level, the modern state helped establish administrative structures that were efficient in some cases, but corruption and nepotism often exposed flaws in these systems, creating further challenges in building effective institutions to serve the people. Culturally, the state's attempt to impose a national and nationalist identity disrupted traditional cultural and spiritual connections. This caused a sense of alienation for many individuals, who found themselves torn between preserving their heritage and engaging with modern societies.

These factors show that the transition to the modern state in the Arab context was not just a political change but also an ideological process that caused a rupture with traditional structures, leading to deep social and ethical crises that continue to affect Arab societies today.

Table 01: Comparative Framework between the Ethical Islamic State and the Rational Modern State across Epistemological and Political Axes

Axis	Ethical Islamic State	Rational Modern State
1. Jurisprudence Origins	Based on the principles of Sharia, which derive their legitimacy from divine texts and a comprehensive moral system. The jurist is seen as an interpreter of the law, linked to the local community and spiritual dimensions.	Relies on positive law crafted based on reason and utility, detached from any overarching moral or religious dimension, with centralized legislation monopolized by the state.
2. Techniques of the Self (Michel Foucault)	Based on spiritual purification and self-regulation techniques that come from within, with the individual committing to religious and moral values. The individual is accountable to God and the community.	Utilizes external control mechanisms such as police and laws, with state's dominance through surveillance techniques and social discipline imposed on individuals.

3. Western Modernity Islamic Modernity	Stemming from a unified cosmological view in which spirit and reason are integrated, striving to achieve divine justice through an ethical system connected to doctrine.	Seeks to separate religion from politics and elevate scientific rationality, considering modernity a purely human project for efficiency and material growth.
4. Authorities of Control	Decentralized control relying on the local community, scholars, and shared values, with authority distributed among groups and individuals.	Centralized control exercised through state institutions such as police, military, and judiciary, with the state monopolizing legitimate violence.
5. Arab Nationalism European Nationalism	Islamic nationalism is based on the concept of the universal Ummah, transcending geographical boundaries, founded on religious and moral solidarity.	European nationalism based on ethnic or geographic foundations, focusing on building a nation-state as the basis for identity and belonging.

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6. Central Scope vs. Systemic Model	The Islamic system is inherently decentralize relying on the multiplicity of social and legal systems with the framework of a universal Sharia.	The modern state relies on strict centralization, where laws and systems are enforced from a bureaucratic center seeking total dominance.

Source: prepared by the researcher

The table highlights the key differences between the ethical Islamic state, which is based on a unifying vision that connects ethics, law, and society, and the rational modern state, which separates religion from politics and relies on centralization and control to regulate individuals. According to Wael Hallaq, the Islamic state emphasizes the internal development of the self through spiritual and moral values, while the modern state imposes an artificial self through external control mechanisms, reflecting a fundamental difference in the essence of each.

In the final chapter of his book *The Tyrant: A Philosophical Study of Forms of Political Despotism*, titled "Eastern Despotism," Imam Abdel-Fattah Imam discusses Eastern despotism as a structural phenomenon that emerged in specific natural and economic environments, such as the riverine societies of Egypt, Babylon, and China. The author highlights that Eastern despotism is linked to the absolute power of the ruler, which was often sanctified to justify total control over resources and individuals. This power is characterized by the deification of the ruler, central control, and the destruction of individuality in favor of the tyrant.

When comparing this chapter with Wael Hallaq's ideas, significant similarities emerge in their theories. Hallaq argues that the modern state is based on absolute sovereignty and centralization, similar to Eastern despotism, though with a rational and bureaucratic character. Both Eastern despotism and the modern state rely on strong central systems that weaken individuals' ability to exercise political or social freedom, using cultural domination mechanisms to reshape individuals to serve the needs of power.

While Imam views Eastern despotism as a specific historical phenomenon, Hallaq sees the modern system as a contemporary form of despotism, manifested in the mechanisms of the modern state that reshape the human self to meet the demands of the capitalist and rational system. It can be argued that what Imam described as Eastern despotism is the structural precursor to the modern state analyzed by Hallaq, with differences in the temporal and ideological contexts of each.

Conclusion:

This study has critically examined the concept of the Islamic State through a socio-modernist framework, focusing on Wael Hallaq's arguments regarding its historical evolution and contemporary relevance. The analysis highlights the fundamental tensions between Islamic governance models and modern state structures, emphasizing the challenges posed by secularism, globalization, and ideological polarization within the Arab and Islamic world. Hallaq's critique underscores the role of colonial legacies and Orientalist narratives in shaping perceptions of the Islamic State, demonstrating that it is not a static or predetermined political entity but rather a flexible and evolving concept. Ultimately, the study concludes that the viability of an Islamic State in the modern era depends on a critical reassessment of its foundational principles, ensuring they align with contemporary social, political, and ethical imperatives while preserving cultural and religious integrity.

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