

# ROMANTIC ISLAM: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH FOR WOKE MUSLIMS<sup>1</sup>

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## THE CONCEPT OF ROMANTIC ISLAM

Romantic Islam is a contemporary phenomenon in which modern Muslims navigate a nuanced grey area, grappling with the challenge of balancing the demands of modernity with their religious obligations. This often results in a deontological struggle as they endeavour to harmonise the expectations of both realms.

In this context, the term ‘romanticism’ serves as a metaphor, signifying the deep emotional connection that contemporary Muslims have with both modernity and faith. As an emerging phenomenon, Romantic Islam did not exist in ancient times, highlighting its contemporary nature. While there have been historical and modern instances of hypocrites (*munafiqeen*) exploiting Islam for personal gain, these cases differ fundamentally from the concept of Romantic Islam.

## RE-ISLAMISATION AND CHALLENGING INTERPRETATIONS

One example of Romantic Islam is the term ‘constitutional jihad,’ used by Din Syamsuddin, the leader of Muhammadiyah, an Islamic organisation in Indonesia. By invoking the term *jihad*, he attempts to draw upon the Islamic concept of striving or exerting effort to establish a holy struggle in the name of God. Another example is ‘cyber jihad,’ which reflects an attempt to navigate the moral dilemmas faced by Muslims who must believe in *jihad* as a religious duty while also acting according to changing circumstances. *Jihad* is considered a fundamental aspect of Islam, akin to obligatory prayers; however, who in the modern world dares to publicly advocate for it and work towards its realisation?

Moreover, the rise of virtual protests can be interpreted as an indicator of a departure from the true foundations of *jihad*. These protests manifest on social media platforms, serving as a virtual means of engagement aimed at fulfilling the Islamic duty towards issues requiring Muslim participation. This concept allows individuals to express their support for a cause without resorting to physical actions. One such example is the online protest organised in solidarity with Khader Adnan, a prominent figure associated with Islamic *jihad* in the West Bank.

Reinterpreting *jihad* as a voluntary service or social activity, rather than its traditional meaning, or transforming it into a digital phenomenon like cyber *jihad* aimed at combating anti-Islamic websites instead of executing physical actions, only serves to dilute its original essence. Such manipulations of meaning can lead to a complete departure from its legitimate objectives. Muslims living in this ambiguous area do not fully align with modern principles, nor do they completely adhere to Islamic tenets. This duality has given rise to new frameworks for religious expression, such as Islamic diplomacy, Islamic human rights, and Islamic feminism.

Romantic Islam has also been significantly influenced by the concept of *ijtihad*, which relies on personal reasoning to derive rulings and has traditionally been used to address issues not explicitly covered in foundational texts. Thus, romanticism seeks to establish a deeper relationship that transcends traditional ties between the Creator and the created, which may be burdened by obligations that some find overwhelming, hindering their personal aspirations. Romantic Muslims strive to engage with God in a

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<sup>1</sup> This document provides a condensed and revised version of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master’s degree in International Relations at Middlesex University for the academic year 2022-2023. The dissertation, entitled ‘Romantic Islam: The Unorthodox Pathway in Islamic Governance and Global Engagement,’ was supervised by Dr Peter Hough.

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manner that aligns with their spiritual desires, leading to the development of an unbound relationship that goes beyond traditional dynamics between the servant and the worshipped.

A notable example of this shift is Hamza Yusuf, the former First Minister of Scotland, who identifies as a Muslim. His bold stance on homosexuality, asserting that it should not be considered a sin, directly contradicts explicit texts in the Quran. Nevertheless, Hamza insists on maintaining his Islamic identity and actively participating in religious rituals. This challenge to doctrine is considered outright disbelief, as the Quran describes such individuals as those who believe in part of the scripture while disbelieving in others.

Liberal philosophy emphasises the primacy of individual freedoms, allowing individuals to define themselves according to multiple ideologies simultaneously. For instance, one might identify as a liberal, gay, vegan, and feminist all at once. In contrast, Islam restricts the Muslim individual to a single identity, making it challenging to define oneself as a Muslim, vegan, and feminist simultaneously. This highlights the essence of liberal philosophy, which marginalises collective identity, particularly concerning Islamic collective identity.

Terms such as 'Globalised Islam' by Olivier Roy, 'Market Islam' by Patrick Haenni, 'Post-Islamism' by Asef Bayat, and 'Romantic Islam' all emerge from the evolving landscape of Islam in the modern world. While each has its unique characteristics, they all share a common thread: the individual interpretation and practice of Islam, significantly influenced by external forces such as globalisation, market forces, and cultural transformations.

## **THE ROMANTIC ISLAMIC STATE: A TUG-OF-WAR IN STATE-BUILDING**

The structural differences between modern state frameworks and Islamic state hinder the desire to reapply Sharia or aspects of it. The dominance of modern structures over all other concepts of the state exacerbates the religious obligation to establish Sharia, leading to suffering, particularly due to the limited progress made in reapplying an acceptable form of traditional governance. The complete model of an Islamic state may only be achievable outside the context of contemporary history, as efforts made within the existing framework could undermine its original objectives and ultimate purposes.

The prevailing international structure, governed by the interests of major powers in international relations, is a result of the new order that emerged after World War II. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which represented the core of the Islamic world, gave rise to this international system from its ashes. Subsequently, Muslim-majority countries began to achieve independence, but their sovereignty was contingent upon accepting this new order, tied to compliance with its laws, engagement in its international treaties, and adherence to its values. This has reinforced the dominance of Western powers, particularly Europe, over the states that were revived from the remnants of the Ottomans.

The fundamental difference between the concept of an Islamic state and that of a modern state lies in their foundations and sources of authority. An Islamic state relies on Islamic law (Sharia) as its primary reference for governance and a cornerstone of its legal system. In contrast, a modern state is based on principles such as secularism, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

Pakistan faces significant challenges in reconciling Islamic jurisprudence with contemporary democratic models. After gaining sovereignty in 1947, the country aspired to establish an Islamic republic and integrate Sharia into its national legal framework. However, the remnants of British colonialism have led to a divide between modern legal standards and traditional Islamic principles, as evidenced by the political turmoil resulting from the enactment of Hudood laws.

On the other hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran emerged following the victory of the Iranian Revolution, giving rise to an unusual model characterised by the concept of Wilāyat al-Faqīh (Guardianship of the Jurist). This concept is foreign to Western societies and evokes painful memories from their dark historical periods, which remain present in their collective consciousness.

Despite the contradictions, many Muslim-majority countries continue to seek legitimacy within this framework due to the practical benefits associated with participation in the international system. In the early 2010s, several countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey, were governed by Islamist leaders and political parties, raising hopes for an Islamic renaissance. However, internal and external challenges ultimately contributed to the decline of this phenomenon.

Muslims, who constitute over a fifth of the world's population, find themselves in a moral dilemma due to this hegemony. Although Sharia is often integrated into constitutions as a primary or supplementary source of legislation, it has become institutionally ineffective. As Muslims accept the new reality of international systems, they have become more engaged in decision-making processes, contributing to the reinforcement of the international order, even signing agreements and resolutions that directly contradict the principles of Sharia.

In recent years, jihadist groups have exhibited a notable shift from global ambitions towards a focus on local or national liberation. This transformation reflects an adaptive response to the influence of nationalism in shaping the agendas of these movements. If we examine the second generation of al-Qaeda members, particularly those who joined after 1992, we find they represent a significant departure from their predecessors.

A similar division can be observed within the Taliban, where the first generation embodies ideological rigidity and strictness, while the second generation adopts a more pragmatic and adaptive approach, highlighting the decisive impact of nationalism on their movement. However, the Iranian model is characterised by an ideological foundation centred on the export of revolution, indicating an intention to spread the revolution globally.

Amid ongoing transformations, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), led by Ahmad al-Shar'a (formerly known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani), represents another model, having shifted towards tactical changes in ideology by forming alliances with diverse factions, including former adversaries, and negotiating agreements with various regimes, such as Turkey that ultimately enabled them to assume power.

These pragmatic stances within jihadist movements have resulted in a lack of ideological commitment, prioritising survival with limited focus on immediate goals. This undermines the grand aspirations of Sharia and its ultimate objectives, redefining jihad as a national effort to establish a portion of Sharia on national soil, thus creating a distorted understanding of jihad.

## **THE FUTURE OF ROMANTIC ISLAM**

The future trajectory of Romantic Islam hinges on how it navigates the complexities of the contemporary world. This potential path can be divided into two distinct trajectories:

The first suggests that Romantic Muslims will continue to reside in a grey area, which may hinder the achievement of a fully-fledged Islamic state, thereby reinforcing instability within the international system. As a result of this prolonged existence in the grey area, Muslims committed to the romantic vision may lack a coherent Islamic theory of international relations.

The second trajectory warns of a potential decline in modernity or the possibility that the international system may be susceptible to disintegration. Given that the fate of Romantic Islam is closely tied to these two factors, it becomes evident that any transformations in the international landscape will inevitably resonate.