

: What is the value of the grand narrative in looking at the Middle East—something like the clash of civilizations—as opposed to a more contextualized or nuanced version that focuses on diversity within Islamic cultures and religious traditions? Where do you start on that spectrum in your own work, and what’s most productive for the rest of us who aren’t experts in the Middle East?

: I think the appeals of grand narratives are quite natural and understandable. We all want to fit ideas and events into broader and more coherent frameworks. But often, when we examine our grand narratives closely, we find that they don’t quite map onto the realities on the ground and their applicability is limited in particular contexts and times.

In the case of Islam, the problem is compounded by the great diversity of the societies that comprise the Islamic world. Today, Islam has over 1.5 billion adherents, the vast majority of whom don’t live in the Middle East. And yet it is usually the Middle East—with its own diverse cultures, religious traditions, and political regimes—that we have in mind when we talk about Islam. We should also remind ourselves that the vast majority of Muslims, no matter where they live, lead ordinary lives, preoccupied with issues and problems that have little to do with

the current wave of Islamic radicalism and violence.

Moreover, most of the the grand narratives about the relationship between Islam and politics are of fairly recent origin and have been offered in response to the

recent wars, revolutionary upheavals, sec-

more difficult, leading to an ever-present and pervasive role for religion in politics. It is important to keep in mind, however, that until a few decades ago those whose engagement in politics was based on their religious convictions or Islamic ideologies did not seek to exclude secular groups from the political stage and no regime in Muslim-majority countries sought to base its political legitimacy on divine authority.

What I have labeled as the “politicization of religion” may be contrasted to a different type of political Islam, one that seeks to sacralize an ideology, a political movement, or a territorial state by claiming that they are based on divine will and providence. A dramatic example of this form of political Islam happened in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution. What had been a popular and broadly based revolutionary movement was overtaken by Ayatollah Khomeini and his coterie of clerics with

: The origins of ISIS and the reasons for its rapid rise have of course been the subject of much recent debate. There are those who attribute its success to the breakdown of state authority in its base countries. This certainly sounds like a plausible explanation when we consider the fact that ISIS and, more generally, Islamic extremism, have thrived most readily in countries as Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and Yemen. And, without a doubt, some of our ill-conceived policies in the region—most notably the invasion of Iraq and the manner in which the war and the occupation were handled—must carry some of the blame.

Others see the rise of the “Islamic state” as case of terrorism writ large. They point out that the fighters on the frontlines of ISIS are typically unemployed, alienated, and angry young men, some with past criminal records, who act more out of a sense of desperation and lust for power and glamor than religious fervor or devotion. We see many of these characteristics in the background descriptions of some of the captured or killed ISIS operatives and its potential recruits. I recall press reports, for example, that two young men who joined ISIS from the U.K. last May (2014) had bought copies

of *Islam for Dummies* on their way to the holy war.

I believe our principal task as scholars of religion and politics is to understand the causes and consequences of religious extremism and violence, whether in the form of the politicization of religion or in the ill-conceived quest to sacralize politics. In this pursuit, it is certainly im-