

# BEYOND THE LOGIC OF POLITICAL ISLAMIC THREAT IN THE WORLD POLITICS

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to discuss the underlying assumption of Western people in discussing the issue of political Islam in world Politics. This issue is analyzed using post-colonial approach in International Relations. This perspective rejects many claims of Western scientific approach on universality and objectivity of the truth or knowledge. Post-colonial approach believes that the process in producing knowledge must have relations with power. This article argues that knowledge about Political Islam that produced within Western perspective is not an objective and universal truth rather it is produces or constructed for a specific political interest, namely to have a control and hegemony to other states and societies.

**Keywords:** political Islam; representation; post-colonialism; global politics

## Introduction

The emergence of Political Islam is presumed by many scholars as a threat to the world in international politics today. The coming of religion in politics and social life is believed will bring existing modern, stable, and prosperous civilization coming back to uncivilized, irrational, barbaric, and backward civilization. Therefore, almost all languages of politicians and scholars all over the world put Political Islam in negative terms. They share the same language used by George W. Bush, after 911, that the Islamic state is a totalitarian state and so on.

This kind of language is used also in many Islamic countries, either politicians or scholars in Middle East, South East Asia, and South Asia. It is discussed in many forums, seminars, books, and articles that show the hatred toward the notion of Political Islam and Movements. As the result, in many

countries, many Islamists and Islamic movements are treated very hard, physically, or by law. Even, many international projects are specializing in fighting the influence of this thought and movement.

The work of many scholars in analyzing political Islam has been questioned and challenged of their objectivity and validity of their study by many other scholars. In fact, Political Islam is very often interpreted and explained on the basis of western secular perspective. That is why, political Islam is seen to be dangerous because it opposes the logic of secular states, democracy, human right, and nationalism. This is part of the argument of some scholars who criticize on the pessimistic view of Political Islam.

This article aims to discuss the perspective used by scholars in analyzing Political Islam and its movement. Also, it will take some example on how the impact of such interpretation in the foreign policy of great power countries and also domestic policy of Muslim states. And the last part will be discussed postcolonial method in solving the problem of representing political Islam.

### **Representing Political Islam**

The term representation is always related to post positivist or reflectivist work in International Relations theory. The word representation is used based on a belief that there is no universal truth of knowledge that can be produced by scholars. Thus, what scholars present, as a truth in their knowledge is not really a truth but represented or constructed knowledge.

Truth in postcolonial perspective is produced through discourse and spread to dominate, shaping and forming specific understanding on an object or reality. At the end, it can have material or political impact on the object or reality. In terms of social sciences, rather than describing and showing the real nature of social reality, the scholars represent, construct and create the manner in which it is perceived and understood. Postcolonial analysis seeks to explain the way of understanding and representing the world became dominating and then to demystify and politicize the truth.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, post colonialist scholars focus on how the western world are using their constructed truth and knowledge as an instrument to expand their colonial power in non-western or Southern world. The practice of colonialism in this sense does not only refer to the past history but also such practices, which still exist nowadays in the modern world. Postcolonial believes that the practice of direct colonialism by controlling land and people is not in existence anymore today; rather it changes its form and character and with the same aims or mission to control and dominate.<sup>2</sup>

In analyzing western colonization, postcolonial scholars, have found that colonizers used their scholars to do research on native people in colonized states. In fact, their researches did not really include all the people to speak by themselves; rather the scholars speak on behalf of native people that they represented it. The scholars interpreted the native people based on their belief, tradition, and assumption, or Western perception. As a result, their knowledge became a legitimacy to treat the local or native people.<sup>3</sup>

In regards of political Islam, western scholars have different view on how to see and deal with those issues. Some perceive that Political Islam is an inherent threat to modern world while others see it differently that the rise of political Islam is caused by material problems in Muslim world such as poverty, authoritarianism, social problem etc. Despite there is different view on Political Islam, Western Scholars are the same that Political Islam is a strange and un-natural condition in modern world.

Put as the examples, in Bassam Tibi's book which is entitled, *Islamism and Islam*, (2012), he explains in the book about what makes difference between Islam and Islamism. He argues, Islamism does not really represent the true face of Islam. Islam is faith while Islamism is all about politics, he calls it "religionized Politics". "The religionization of politics means the promotion of a political order that is believed to emanate from the will of Allah and is not based on popular sovereignty."<sup>4</sup>

He mentioned that this kind of interpretation of Islam despite grows out from Islam but it is not Islam itself, it is a political ideology that is different for the teaching of Islam. Despite there are so many kinds of Islamist movement; from very radical to moderate style, they have the same goal, to establish political order based on sharia. He insisted, Sharia state is merely the same with all totalitarian states that existed years or decades ago like Fascism, Communism, and Nazism.<sup>5</sup>

In many places in his book, Tibi figures out Political Islam as it is not the part of Islamic teaching (un-Islamic), a totalitarian mission, rejecting modernity, radical, threat to freedom, utopian ideals, and murderous ideology. Indeed, he put the idea and the mission of Islamism is the same with communist idea.

Consider, for instance, its effect on Islam's claim to universality. The politicization of this universalism results in a political ideology of activist internationalism resembling that of internationalist communism. Both ideologies seek a remaking of the world. No wonder that Islamists, while rejecting many Western ideas (and claiming to reject all of them), borrow from communism the idea of world revolution.<sup>6</sup>

Graham E Fuller has offered another way of analyzing Political Islam. In his book, *the future of Political Islam*, 2003, he states that, Political Islam cannot merely be viewed as an ideology and contrasted to other political ideologies; it rises as a response to local problem in Muslim World. Fuller claims that it is hard to say that political Islam is an ideology due to inability of this concept to materialize its vision in all aspect of life, in politics, economy, social, education and etc. in his view, all radical and conservative language of Political Islam is not homogenous but has different meaning in practice. Thus, he concludes that instead of using ideological term, political Islam is best called as “cultural variant”.<sup>7</sup>

An important critical view of Fuller is about *Sharia law* in which he does not believe that Islamic law can fulfill all human need to manage a state. He understands that Islam, most of its doctrine, contains about moral principle, understanding the world and relation between god and society. Islam does not speak more about how to manage a state. He emphasizes that there is no one state in Muslim World that applies sharia has succeeded to make good improvement in all aspects of life within society.<sup>8</sup>

There are two different way of analyzing the phenomenon represented from both scholars above. This kind of perspective represents common view of Western scholars in responding the issue of Political Islam. Michael E. Salla (1997) has categorized the two different approaches that he calls, the essentialist-orientalist approach and the contingencies-reductionist approach. Put simply, The Essentialist perceives the political Islam as a monolithic threat to democracy; anti-western, and aggressive, that this idea should be contained. This perspective is represented by some scholars, Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes, Martyn Indyk and Samuel Huntington.

On the other hand, contingencies approach argues, the rise of political Islam as the respond of political, economy and social condition in Muslim states. Political Islam in this perspective, cannot be seen as an enemy or adversary but should be appreciated and freed in politics. This group is represented by scholar like, John L Esposito, Edward Said and James Piscatori.<sup>9</sup>

Elizabeth Shakhman Hurd in her work on Political Islam has shown different ways of western analysis toward Political Islam. She divides it based on distinctive type of secular view in Europe and America. She calls Secular tradition or assumption in Europe as laicism, while in America is called as Judeo Christian secularism. These two categories of secularization have its own view on how to see the relations between religion and politics.

In Laicism, Political Islam is understood as the result of material problems within Muslim society, such as poverty, authoritarianism, and political corruption. No place of religion in public sphere in secular laicism belief, therefore, not identity or religion itself that affects the rise of political Islam, but of material factors. Using Islam or religion as political language is a kind of backwardness or regression.<sup>10</sup>

Whereas Judeo-Christian or Christian secularism believes that political Islam is totally different with Christian tradition. Islam is politics at once, and it is the real nature of Islam derived from Islamic sources, history and tradition. Therefore, there is no space of secularism and its notion in Islamic perspective like democracy, nationalism, human rights and so on. This type of secularism, therefore, perceives political Islam as imminent threat of modern world and at the same time, showing the picture of backwardness character of Islam. This secular claimed is used many times to link the act of terrorism, extremism, and totalitarianism in Islamic world.<sup>11</sup>

What makes difference between the two kinds of secularism is that; laicism still has optimistic view of engaging Muslim society to be modernized like some Muslim states have succeeded to do that way. Whereas, Judeo-Christian has been pessimistic and thus it presumes no way of change in political Islam unless it changes and revises their concept and tradition the same as Christian did. As a whole, both share the same belief on the separation between religion and politics and extreme rejection of religious role in political life.

Hurd and Salla categorize the two common view of western analysis on Political Islam based on consideration that Western scholars understanding of Political Islam are influenced and inspired by Western secular ideology. Both refer to postcolonial & post-structuralist views in questioning the way of western scholars in producing their truth about Political Islam. Political Islam that is considered as a threat, negative things, and backward is result of western representation to Political Islam and not the true feature of Islam itself. In fact, the two different representations of political Islam in Salla view, use different methodology, essentialist focuses on the role of texts and languages in painting essentialist picture while contingencies focus on discourse about the region. However, Salla claims both approaches ignore the real existing discourse of Political Islam in the region.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, Hurd focuses on the term, secularism influence in western analysis to Political Islam. Hurd points out that the dominant negative and pessimist European and American understandings of political Islam is caused by their belief on secularization of religion and politics. These secular attitudes are embodied in western people, shape, inspire and

influence their view on religion and society. Secular view then becomes a set of parameters, focal points, around which political discourse revolves. Again, it then becomes powerful pattern of political rule that influence the process of decision making in Western states.<sup>13</sup>

Hurd argues that the failure of western understanding on Political Islam because they seek to analyze it through the lens of western assumption and epistemology which is not match with the body of Islamic knowledge. Western secularism believes that religion should be in private and excluded from political life while in Islam there is no such a separation between private and public life. Therefore, analyzing political Islam through secular epistemology will be misled and premature understanding

Hurd and Salla share the same conclusion that Political Islam should be put as another alternative that challenges the ideology of secularism. Political Islam should be understood through it own language because it speaks different language based on distinctive & unique epistemology and methodology comparing to secular ideology. Once Political Islam is explained through Secular framework, it might result negative and monstrous picture of Political Islam.

Salla offers new approach in negotiating between Political Islam and the secular western perspective that he calls it, "*new convergence thesis*". This new perspective, he says, move beyond the debate between is Islam compatible to western political system, democracy or not. He states "Political Islam should be seen as representing paradigm that is in direct competition with liberal democracy in terms of the universal appeal and scope of their respective norms". Thus, the critic of Political Islam toward democracy or secular politics is placed at the same position with Marxism-Leninism. Salla suggests that the conflict between Marxism and Capitalism in the cold war era, has contributed to adaptation of some Marxist concepts on state and political economy in capitalist state, the rise of welfare state as an example. The relationship between Political Islam and Western secular world should be seen the same.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Political Impact to the Muslim World**

The ideas of Political Islam constructed by the western scholars not only produce a claimed universal truth and knowledge, but also become a political legitimacy in responding the issue of Political Islam in the world. In the USA Foreign Policy related to Political Islam, albeit there are contesting view in how to see and responding the issue in the word, the group of essentialist are more appreciated and adopted as the US framework

on Political Islam. As a result, the USA treats Political Islam the same with ideological competition like in the era of cold war.

There two policy consequences in using of essentialist methodology. Firstly, Political Islam is seen through the lens of threat perception as a political force that needed to be contained as hard as possible and destroyed. This is a containment policy that implemented in cold war era whereby the USA has to limit the spread of communism, and today political Islam. Accordingly, the USA has to built cooperation and invites all countries to fight with its ideological enemy. Through this containment policy, the stick and carrot policy can be well understood.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, learned from its success from cold war, using proxy war strategy as the way to suppress and destroy Political Islam or Islamism. In the cold war, the strategy was successful to destroy the power of communism in the world. Through this strategy, The USA and its allies were supporting their clients either economic or military support in order to fight against communism in their countries. In terms of the clash between political Islam and the Western ideology, the USA also uses similar strategies.<sup>16</sup>

How the USA foreign policy on Political Islam can be seen after the tragedy of 9/11. Suddenly, this world were divided by Bush administration with a global warning “either you are with us or with the terrorist”. The terrorist and the extremist in this sense is not only al-Qaeda but also Islamic groups or people that share the same ideology, pro-Islamic state, caliphate, anti-democracy, anti market liberalism, and anti Western ideology in general. Subsequently, the project of anti-terrorism and radicalism become a world agenda. The USA becomes the leader of that agenda. In any place, where there is dominant Islamist influence, USA must be there to fight them, like in Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

More recent example is the intervention of America in Syrian War that it not only supports rebels to fight against Assad regime but also fight against Islamic militant such like ISIS and Jabhat an-Nusra. Moreover, it seems that the top priority to be destroyed is militants than Assad itself. In 2016, president Obama ordered the US military to more focus to destroy al-Qaeda-linked group in Syria, especially Jabhat Nusra that was considered as the vanguard in fighting against Assad regime. At that time, America worried that Syria would be new political and military base of al-Qaeda and could bring a new threat to the Western States. Indeed, President Trump promised when he elected to make a more aggressive policy toward Islamic militant in Syria. This policy changed the US priority to destroy Islamic militants than to focus on Assad regime.<sup>17</sup>

The threat perspective of Political Islam in Trump administration brought him to issue a new travel ban for several Muslim majority countries in January 2017. There are seven countries that their people, refugees or not are suspended to enter in USA, those countries are, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. Trump emphasized that his policy is not based on religious consideration but to keep America from security threat from the of people those countries. However, this policy was suspended because of constitutional issues. This policy also got many critics from many American people who saw that it was a kind of racism and discrimination on one religion. The most important point here is, very clearly Trump travel ban policy is influenced by his belief on the threat of Political Islam.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the US is still supporting many of its strategic partners in Middle East, Central Asia, and South East Asia to impose severe punishment toward Political Islamic groups.

In domestic political experience, political Islamic groups have experienced many worst and discriminated policies from regimes. The coup of president Muhammad Mursi as an elected president in Egypt by military forces is one recent example. He was overthrown because there was a worry from many nationalist secular and liberal people if Mursi and his party would turn Egypt to be an Islamic state, and impose Islamic sharia law within the state. Having overthrown, then Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Muslimin*) was disbanded and outlawed by the regime. Thousands of its members were sentenced to jail, hundreds of them got dead penalty. Mursi and most of Muslim Brotherhood leaders were imprisoned. This group today is considered as a terrorist group in Egypt.

In Saudi Arabia, no one political Islamic group can grow due to government strict policy toward them. The existence of Saudi state is supported by Ulama (Islamic scholars) and the state itself has been acknowledged as an Islamic state that all people have to obey on. Once there is people or group disobey, the Ulama will call them as perpetrators and violating Islamic law. The government then can give punishment to them. Muslim Brotherhood is considered as terrorist group in this country.

Indonesian apparently follows other countries that have hardly against political Islam. In the midst of 2017, Indonesian government has announced to dissolve Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). HTI is considered as radical, extremist group that is seeking to establish Islamic state in Indonesia. The radical view of HTI is seen as contrast with Indonesian state ideology, Pancasila. Embracing radical ideology in current government terminology is an “extraordinary crime” proved by how the government has treated HTI,

such as issuing a **specific law** (perpu Ormas), and without religious edict from Indonesian Ulama Council (MOI).

## Conclusion

The Western people have long depicted Muslim in a very negative description. Islam is portrayed as a backward, irrational and brutish religion. When they come to discuss about political Islam, the same attribute was always used. It then becomes dominant discourse not only in Western scholars but also non-Western scholars. This kind of interpretation toward Political Islam has a big political impact to the group or people who are characterized as embrace such belief. American governments use this perception of Political Islam to impose aggressive policies toward Islamic groups. A lot of cooperation has been signed to contain the influence of Islamist.

Postcolonial perspective offers critics to how the western people have represented political Islam or Islam itself. In fact, such kind of representation is an instrument of western states to speak on behalf Political Islam in order to control them politically, or dominate them. It is like the orientalist project in colonial era, studying the orient as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the orient”, in Edward Said language<sup>19</sup>. Hence, the postcolonial scholars suggest in discussing and explaining culture and identity through involving the natives in the process either formulating the concept and also the implementation. Without that process, the knowledge resulting from ‘observations’ of and about ‘natives’ was neither constitutively native knowledge nor based on native concerns. Finally, imperial knowledge was not universally accessible to natives.<sup>20</sup>

In post-colonial perspective, The Western interpretation of Political Islam is neither universal nor objective truth that should be accepted by all people. Rather, it is represented and constructed as a tool to impose Western power to other cultures and societies, especially in Muslim societies. Therefore, in order to understand and to deal with the issue of Political Islam in the world politics, one should do is let the followers speak on behalf of their language, culture and identities.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rita Abrahamsen, “Postcolonialism”, In *International Relations Theory for the Twenty-First Century: An Introduction*, ed. Martin Griffith, 111-121. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 115.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 114

<sup>3</sup> Grovogui, S., N, “Postcolonialism”, In *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity, Third Edition*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milaj Kurki., Steve Smith, 247-265, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 250.

<sup>4</sup> Bassam Tibi, *Islamism and Islam* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Graham, E. Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 193.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 198

<sup>9</sup> Michael, E Salla, “Political Islam and the West: A New Cold War or Convergence?”. *Third World Quarterly*, 18 (4, 1997): 729 – 742, 729-730

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “Political Islam and Foreign Policy in Europe and the United States”, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 3 (2007): 345–367, 351-352.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 355-357

<sup>12</sup> Michael, E Salla, “Political Islam and the West: A New Cold War or Convergence?”. *Third World Quarterly*, 18 (4, 1997): 729 – 742, 731

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “Political Islam and Foreign Policy in Europe and the United States”, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 3 (2007): 345–367, p 346

<sup>14</sup> Michael, E Salla, “Political Islam and the West: A New Cold War or Convergence?”. *Third World Quarterly*, 18 (4, 1997): 729 – 742, 740

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 733

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, 734

<sup>17</sup> Adam Entous. “Obama directs Pentagon to target al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, one of the most formidable forces fighting Assad”, *Washington Post*, November 10, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-directs-pentagon-to-target-al-qaeda-affiliate-in-syria-one-of-the-most-formidable-forces-fighting-assad/2016/11/10/cf69839a-a51b-11e6-8042-f4d111c862d1\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.bf6b8f1c8719](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-directs-pentagon-to-target-al-qaeda-affiliate-in-syria-one-of-the-most-formidable-forces-fighting-assad/2016/11/10/cf69839a-a51b-11e6-8042-f4d111c862d1_story.html?utm_term=.bf6b8f1c8719) (Accessed November 22, 2017)

<sup>18</sup> “Trump’s executive order: Who does travel ban affect?”. *bbc.com*, February 10, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38781302> (Accessed November 11, 2017)

<sup>19</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Book, 2003), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Grovogui, S., N, “Postcolonialism”, In *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity, Third Edition*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milaj Kurki., Steve Smith, 247-265, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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