

## **Book Review: On the Concept of Umma in World Politics**

*Islam Beyond Borders: The Umma in World Politics.* James Piscatori & Amin Saikal. Cambridge University Press (2019)

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The concept of the *Umma* is elusive, with a wide array of meanings and interpretations. It is used differently by various circles within the Muslim community and states. To date, most Muslims comprehend *Umma* scripturally as a bond among Muslims everywhere, both majority and minority, with which the two entities are united by Islamic law. Furthermore, most traditional Muslims interpret the concept of *Umma* more spiritually as a type of family in the faith. Although departing from the doctrine of the *Qur'an*, the concept of the *Umma* has never been singular. Whereas the network of trust has driven the goal of 'one community' of faith, some perceive the *Umma* as not requiring territory, while others see it as competition with the modern nation-state. These different interpretations even go so far as an extreme interpretation of the *Umma* in pan-Islamism which has been suspected by the West of being an attitude of hostility and aggressiveness towards non-Muslims. Despite the diversity of interpretations of the dominant concept of the *Umma* being scriptural and spiritual, it has not been widely studied from the political Islam paradigm. Therefore, a thick description of the concept will enrich the literature for Muslims exposed to globalisation and social change globally.

To overcome the complexity of the *Umma* in political Islam, James Piscatori and Amin Saikal seek to explicate the concept and dynamics of the *Umma* in their book, *Islam Beyond Borders: The Umma in World Politics*. The authors argue that the *Umma's* affective symbols have shaped Muslim identity today and inspired social and political actions. Piscatori and Saikal note that the *Umma* also involves a level of ambivalence in Muslim states regarding solidarity. The political unity of Muslims is strong in some circles, although it is unclear how this strength is realised.

Since at least the twentieth century, the political mission of pan-Islamists has been represented in many states. However, they routinely push a cosmopolitan standard of legitimacy. Furthermore, both scholars assert that multiple opinions on *Umma* arise, and the imagining of the *Umma* as the unity of the believers has been developed before the material conditions inciting it have been achieved. Nevertheless, disregarding its symbolic impact and integral place in forming Muslim identities devalues its presence in Muslim life. In this sense, although unity may be a vague goal, conditions of solidarity have already developed, regardless of how many state and non-state patrons seek to control them.

In their investigation of the concept of the *Umma*, both authors provide a backdrop of the intricate geography of Muslims before explaining some perspectives on the *Umma*. Piscatori and Saikal observe a fragmentation phenomenon that occurs not only in the nation-state but also in places where Muslims are the minority in the West, where they are divided between the Islamic 'here' and non-Islamic 'there'. In addition, established and existing transnational Muslim networks add to the complexity of fragmentation. This also includes Muslim groups that have experienced internal borders of sectarian, doctrinal, and territorially-nationally: Sunni-Shi'a, Wahhabi-Shi'a, and Saudi-Iranian-Turkish rivalries. Another phenomenon briefly studied is interconnectedness. According to the authors, Muslims see themselves as part of one connected group. The *Hajj*, educational journeys, networks of trade, and the mystical fraternity that exist today and are fulfilled by globalised communication position transnational Islamist movements as extensions of the embodiment of the *Umma*. Today's embodiment of Muslim communalism moves on two interconnected levels: identity and instrumentality. The identity aspect includes the competing ideas and attached labels such as Wahhabi, Salafi, and Shi'a that have long existed in Muslim societies and both exacerbate and complicate pan-Islamic projects. Meanwhile, the instrumentality aspect may be observed in the phenomenon in which the Muslim governments – such as the Saudis, Pakistanis, Iranians, and Malaysians, and groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, to mention a few – proclaim their defence of the *Umma* as self-justification for their actions.

The four chapters presented in this book are devoted to elucidating the effect of the *Umma's* influence on Muslim societies. Chapter 2 focuses on the opposite meaning of the *Umma* from a Sunni perspective. The authors examine the meaning of the *Umma* from the time of the Prophet and his successors and through to the

medieval period, followed by an extensive exploration of the views of modern scholars. In short, the *Umma* discourse in the Sunni perspective tends to be universalist and inculcated. However, both Piscatori and Saikal caution that achieving a universal and inclusive consensus of the meaning of the *Umma* is open to questions, and the contestation of the promotion and control over the concept is an inherent part of today's Muslim political dynamics. Chapter 3 explores the Shi'a perspective of the *Umma*. Unlike Sunni Islam, Shi'a is divided into imams who are legally accepted as successors to the Prophet and part of his household (*ahl al-bayt*). This section explains Shi'a theology's role regarding the role of imams and imamate as the key to understanding the idea of the *Umma*. In addition, the authors assess the evolution and application of the doctrine of the imamate in the contemporary period from 1979, under the leadership of Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini then Ayatullah 'Ali Khamenei. The authors consider that Khomeini's revolutionary leadership led to the idea of a universal *Umma*; however, it was weakened due to sectarian interpretation and geopolitical resistance. Next, Chapter 4 examines Saudi Arabia, which seeks to spread the importance of the idea of *Umma* through various channels. As an advocate of Sunni-Wahhabi ideology, the Saudis have experienced opposition from both Shi'a and 'unbelievers', threatening their credibility to achieve the previously mentioned objective. As a result, geopolitical considerations have countered the assertion of the *Umma* from the Saudis, among which is Turkey seizing Saudi influence in the Sunni-world leadership. Last, Chapter 5 explicates the application of literalist and politicised interpretations of the *Umma* by ISIS, which has led to political agitation and the establishment of an Islamic state by way of violence. In addition, ISIS' brutal actions against Shi'a Muslims and other groups have made ISIS a common enemy around the world.

In conclusion, *Islam Beyond Borders* is an enlightening book. It explores and analyses the concept of the *Umma*, which remains debated and holds multiple meanings, especially by presenting the differing perspectives of Sunni and Shi'a. Moreover, countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia use their interpretations of the *Umma* to perpetuate their leadership and are currently competing for influence as Muslim leaders worldwide. This book is very important in the study of political science and international relations.



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