

**Political Loyalty in Modern Islamic Thought:
Multiplicity and Implications**

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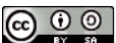
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Abstract

This paper argues that mainstream Muslim schools of thought support multiple loyalties, including country, ethnicity, tribe, and religion. First, we provide a summary of the major positions held by various Muslim schools of thought regarding the concept of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* (loyalty and disavowal). The article then addresses the implications of these loyalties in contemporary Muslim politics. We focus on how these discourses on loyalty construct enemies of Islam and Muslims. Finally, we show how various political factors impact Muslim allegiances and how commitment to Islam can complement and be consistent with civic responsibility in secular and pluralistic democracies, particularly Western societies.

Keywords: Loyalty; Islamic thought; enmity; alliance



Introduction

Loyalty is an emotion that is essential to any functioning social, political, or organizational structure. Loyalty is also relevant to important issues of public interest today through the West and beyond such as identity, citizenship, coexistence, legal obligations, and business. As a fundamental value to group ethics, it can be expressed in various rituals of allegiance, social practices, political alliances, group memberships, and rivalries and conflicts within societies (Kleinig, 2022). Among other things, loyalty/disloyalty is used to adapt to challenges, resist pressures, respond to crises, undertake individual and collective actions, and repel attacks from rival groups. This moral foundation is, thus, essential to bonding (family, clan, community, nation), political action (party, elections, coalitions, war), as well as identity formation (in-group vs out-group belonging) (Haidt, 2012, pp. 154–157).

Religions and spiritualities, in particular, demand committed loyalty from their followers towards their religious symbols, communities, and teachings. Born in Arabia in a time of intense war and societal division, the Quran and later classical Islamic theology envisioned political allegiance, although not exclusively, as a matter of belief that separates Muslims and non-Muslims. Thus, allegiance—*walā'*—was expected to be shown for Muslims, and disavowal—*barā'*—for non-Muslims. Yet, a variety of interpretations of political loyalty has emerged in Islamic thought, emphasizing multiple objects of loyalty and relations between Muslims and non-Muslims (Rustow, 2013, p. 318; Moosa, 2003). This multiplicity has also shaped modern Islamic political theory, leading to the development of a diversity of discourses on loyalty, some of which take an exclusionary stance while others are more inclusive (Gabsi, 2025; Hassan, 2015).

However, adequate scholarly research on the diversity of loyalties in modern mainstream Islamic thought is lacking. The existing literature concentrates on Salafism, a Sunni school of thought that has constituted the ideological basis for Jihadism in the Muslim world and the West, particularly represented by terrorist organizations such as al-Qaida and ISIS (although within Salafism itself Jihadism is contested by traditionalist and non-violent branches). Most academic studies show that the political theology of Salafism is based on a strong break with non-Muslims and a complete dedication to religious loyalty (reduced to orthodox Muslims anyway) (Seddon, Hussain, & Malik, 2003; Volpi, 2007; Wagemakers,

2008; Duderija, 2011; Shavit, 2013; Shavit, 2014; Hassan, 2015; Damir-Geilsdorf, Menzfeld, & Hedider, 2019). The majority of researchers on political loyalty in Islam published their works in the clear backdrop of the securitization of Islam following the 9/11 attacks and other acts of Islamist violence in the West and the Muslim world. Beyond the securitization of Islam, there is a need in Islamic studies and political science for a thorough and critical examination of political loyalty in Islam that considers the diverse Muslim political theologies and the ramifications of these conceptions of loyalty to Muslim politics today. Thus, the novelty of the current study consists in showing how the concept of multiple loyalties in Islamic political thought can be religiously justified, align with each other, and coexist with modern concepts of citizenship and nationhood.

The concept of multiple loyalties does not imply co-equal or co-inclusive loyalties. In a sense, civic and Islamic loyalties are not at the same level. The evidence we offer here supports compatibility and cohabitation of loyalties in the majority of cases (but not in conflicts of loyalties). Although they are not mutually exclusive, loyalties are arranged hierarchically; Islamic thought still sustains a pyramid of allegiances in which religious loyalty primes over other loyalties. Thus, mainstream Muslim schools of thought allow for multiple allegiances (to nation, ethnicity, tribe, and religion), although Islamic allegiance is prioritized (but does not make other loyalties illegitimate or mutually exclusive). In contrast to the theology-only exclusivism of Salafi and Shi'i traditionalist schools of thought, this accommodation rather than co-equality constitutes the foundation for coexistence and civic engagement in contemporary pluralistic societies.

Although Salafism is a minority Islamic interpretation and does not represent mainstream Sunni Islam, the concept of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* in contemporary Islamic thought is a Salafi construct. However, it is unavoidable to begin with the idea of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* when discussing political loyalty because Salafism has marked Islamic thought on various issues with the support of the Gulf financial resources and strong connections with a range of Islamic movements both theologically and politically. Rather than establishing Salafism as the standard for political loyalty, the goal here is to examine the arguments of the Salafi concept of allegiance and the reasons it might be appealing for a particular Muslim public. We also examine some of the Muslim critical stances of the Salafi perspective throughout the text. In this regard, Islam is no different from any other religion in that it has the concept of inclusion and exclusion (believers vs. disbelievers being

the fundamental idea of such division). The first discussions in Islamic thought on *walā`* and *barā`* were also developed by the medieval Shiite and Kharijite groups. However, in modern times, the Wahhabi movement and later Salafism systematized and conceptualized inclusion and exclusion as a belief in *al-walā` wa-l-barā`*. More inclusive Muslim views on allegiance, as well as critical voices of this Salafi doctrine, have challenged the normative hegemony that Salafis gained at some point in the twentieth century, forcing their terminology on others (including those who disagree with them theologically). We will show how different modern Muslim viewpoints are nonetheless uneasy with the doctrine of *the al-walā` wa-l-barā`* idea because of its genealogy and underlying presumptions, or because they reject it completely. We also analyze how Salafism influences discussions in Islamic thought in general and provide a more comprehensive examination of the terminology used by scholars in relation to allegiance. Accordingly, the specific goal of this study is to show that loyalty in Islamic political thought has multiple layers, including loyalty to tribes/ethnic groups, loyalty to leadership/state, loyalty to religious affiliation, loyalty to homeland/nation, loyalty to the Caliphate, Muslim loyalty to non-Muslim states, and Muslim loyalty to non-Muslims in non-Muslim societies. Since all of these layers might provide conflicting objects of loyalty, Muslims must make difficult decisions and set up loyalty hierarchies, usually amidst major polarization and conflict. This study avoids the over-theologization of loyalty prevalent in scholarly works on contemporary Muslim loyalties, excessively focusing on Salafism, while it is a minor Muslim school of thought. However, we still explore diverse Muslim theological perspectives on loyalty in modern Islam as practical heuristics and entries into a much more complex world of Muslim loyalties. In a sense, our work here both completes the gaps in previous research and improves upon them. We view theology as a variable that influences but does not define, on its own, the decisions on allegiance that modern Muslim schools of thought and Muslims may make. Therefore, our aim is, in addition to the above, to investigate the ways in which a theology of loyalty and the politics of loyalty interact in contemporary Muslim political discourses.

Muslim multiple loyalties could be categorized, for practical purposes, into two major types: flexible-inclusionary loyalty and rigid-exclusionary loyalty. Even though all Muslim schools of thought mobilize Islam as justification for their perspectives on political loyalty, the more a Muslim school of thought depends

on theology, either primarily or completely, the more it tends to support rigid exclusionary views on allegiance. Otherness becomes a source of rejection, disavowal, and distrust (Ashraf, 2021). On the other hand, the more a Muslim view of loyalty considers social and political dynamics, either beyond or in addition to theology, the more it tends to embrace flexible-inclusionary loyalty. In this instance, a community is formed from different religious traditions, and the ethics of acknowledging otherness are put into practice. Muslim allegiances are also dynamic in the political sphere; they change in tandem with shifting power relations and various scales of political action. Depending on social dynamics, networks, and self-interest, among other things, various political personalities, religious leaders, communities, tribes, and ethnic groups negotiate various forms of allegiance. In fact, religious loyalty cannot be isolated and considered as a single decisive factor in local, regional, or international politics. It is a variable that must be considered in the context of other important factors, especially the economic, political, and social motivations of loyalty. Decisions about loyalty depend on a variety of criteria and not solely on belonging to a given religious belief or community.

To address the problems created by Western colonialism and authoritarianism in Muslim societies, many contemporary Muslim thinkers have become concerned with redefining intra-Muslim relations and relations with non-Muslims. They engaged with the Quran and Muslim theological writings, particularly the *walā'* and *barā'* doctrines, in an effort to hermeneutically address these issues and reconcile, as much as possible, between tradition and change. Therefore, in revisiting the *walā'* and *barā'* doctrine, there was an interest in reinterpreting scripture to fit modernity, as well as a political effort to accommodate new forms of political belonging. The answers from contemporary Muslim scholars regarding loyalty can be viewed as forms of hermeneutic engagement that frame the stances taken by liberal, reformist, Salafi, and Shi'i thinkers. In the following section, we also discuss how these stances on loyalty relate to a certain political environment of regional or international relations and how these contexts affect a particular hermeneutic perspective.

Thus, Muslim scholars and movements endorse multiple loyalties because they tend to support distinct hermeneutic viewpoints and advance different political agendas. Different reading tools and political goals lead to different concepts of loyalty. Some political differences are already evident in the type of state model

a particular thinker or group favors (Islamic vs. democratic) or in the perspectives on foreign relations (confrontation vs. moderation). Thinkers and movements have embraced opposing hermeneutical systems. In contrast to critical modernist hermeneutics, which align with a broader sense of loyalty in which theology plays little or no role, proponents of a more traditionalist interpretation of the Quran, such as reading the Quranic verses literally or semi-literally and taking them out of their context, produce more rigid forms of loyalty, excluding non-Muslims, and rejecting modern notions of citizenship.

This article will not cover the *fiqh* division of territory into *dār al-Islām*, *dār al-ḥarb*, and *dār al-‘ahd*, which forms the medieval jurisprudential framework of loyalty and allegiance. This topic has been extensively discussed, and Muslim countries have abandoned this categorization since the 19th century. While important classical authorities (Ibn Taymiyya, al-Māwardī, al-Shaybānī, al-Nawawī) influenced Salafi contemporary authors on *walā’* and *barā’* discourse, here we focus on the idea of multiple loyalties and its implications, which has surpassed the conventional *fiqh* categories, rather than on Salafism.

Methodology

This article traces the intellectual development of the concept of political loyalty in contemporary Islamic thought, using two primary tools: 1. Textual analysis of Muslim discourses. 2. Placing these discourses in the perspective of contemporary discussions about political allegiance in Western political theory and the political development of Muslim communities and societies. To choose schools of Islamic thought that are representative of “mainstream” Muslim thought, I relied on the criteria of hegemony, that is, the dominance they exercise in producing Islamic authoritative discourses that have an impact on Islamic institutions, state organs, Islamic media, or communities. I use the writings of 20 Muslim authors who live in various Muslim contexts to demonstrate how Muslim allegiances are perceived as malleable, diverse, and dynamic. Regarding the primary texts selected, I used the Arab Union Catalogue's inventory of Arabic texts on *walā’* and *barā’*, which map publications on Islamic thought in a very diverse way. As Muslim discourses on political allegiance incorporate elements of political theory and theology, this article combines political theory analysis with a philological-historical review. The theoretical framework that guides the

study and informs this article is historicist; it consists of framing Islamic political thought as changing from rigid loyalties in traditionalist Islamic thought (still supported by Salafism and political shiism) to flexible loyalties mostly supported by reformist and liberal Muslims. It has been argued that flexible loyalties are less normative and more practical than those endorsed by conservative Islam. Flexible loyalties also acknowledge the complementary, hierarchical, or situational nature of allegiance to one's family, ethnicity, religion, nation, and so forth.

Terminology

The various theological, social, and political aspects of loyalty are inter-related in Islamic thought (similar to various other concepts of politics, secular, and religious alike) because identities are complex or shifting between groups, nations, and religious denominations. To help clarify loyalty as constantly shifting, which compels us to move from religious to political loyalty in this article, we suggest a semantic analysis of *walā'*. First, the idea of loyalty cannot be reduced to *walā'* and *walā'* itself cannot be reduced to loyalty. Beyond *walā'*, classical Arabic expresses the idea of loyalty through at least six words: *bay'a*, *ḥifāẓ*, *istimsāk*, *wafā'*, *amāna*, *ikhilāṣ* (Wehr, 1976, pp. 36, 105, 221, 295, 1067, 1273). Each of these words connects loyalty to a set of meanings: social, political, and religious. For example, *ikhilāṣ* can mean the belief in the unity of God, but also indicates sincerity, devotion, frankness, faithfulness, loyalty, and purity (Wehr, 1976, p. 295). *Walā'* itself indicates the meanings of friendship, amity, benevolence, goodwill, fidelity, fealty, allegiance, devotion, loyalty, and clientage (Wehr, 1976, p. 1100). The Doha historical dictionary of Arabic provides various usages of *walā'*, including that of loyalty to the master as joining him, affiliation with him, support, the right due to the heir, obedience, following, family relations, succession and continuity, love for God through, allegiance, and love for Muslims (Doha Dictionary, 2025).

This brief semantic analysis indicates that the terms *walā'* and loyalty encompass a range of meanings that are distinct but closely linked. For this reason, any study of political loyalty in Islamic thought must consider various loyalties. In the section that follows, we shall show how modern Muslim thinkers have developed multiple interpretations of *walā'*.

Multiple Loyalties

In general, Salafism rests its understanding of loyalty on the acceptance or rejection of Islamic beliefs. It may be claimed that Salafism grounds political allegiance in theology, making the degree of adherence to Sunni orthodox beliefs and behavior a key factor in determining the political allegiances that should be validated; it is a political theology that identifies allies and foes in terms of their pietistic beliefs. Salafism embraces stringent loyalty that forbids various flexible allegiances (Fawaid & Nashihah, 2022). Who belongs to the group and who does not is a matter that depends on the rigidity and clarity of beliefs. Thus, Salafism bans loyalty to non-Muslims and heterodox Muslims (Al-Fawzān, 1990, pp. 7-16). Salafis, however, differ between various factions in their views on orthodoxy and how they interact with non-Muslims and non-pious Muslims (Wagemakers, 2008). Salafi movements exhibit diverse political agendas because they were born in different political contexts. For instance, the Egyptian al-Nur party, an orthodox Salafi movement, supports the Egyptian regime and does not promote extreme views on the Copts in Egypt (Deschamps-Laporte, 2023). Conversely, Copts have been the target of terrorist assaults by al-Jamā'ā al-Islāmiyya, a militant Egyptian Salafist movement.

In contrast, Sunni reformism endorses a more inclusive form of allegiance (that is, accepting the co-existence of loyalties, but not co-inclusiveness), founded on good relations and peace that comprises non-Muslims in its contract of political loyalty. Of course, Sunni reformism categorically excludes non-Muslims who wage wars against Muslims. This opens the door to dual and numerous allegiances. However, a Muslim should be loyal only to non-Muslims who are not antagonistic. Generally, Sunni reformists distinguish between loyalty to Muslims and non-Muslims. The former is based on community membership (solidified by the factor of religion, although Muslim sinners are also part of this more inclusive community), whereas loyalty to non-Muslims is based on whether or not non-Muslims attack the Muslim community. Thus, for Sunni reformists, political commitment to Muslims (because of their communitarian unity) and non-Muslims (because of their peaceful attitudes) serves as the foundation of loyalty (Shavit, 2013; Shavit, 2014; Hassan, 2015). In other words, Sunni reformism recognizes, in clear terms, the multiplicity of loyalties. However, it is not argued here that mainstream Muslim schools of thought support the concept of multiple

loyalties in which, for example, loyalty to religion is equal or comes after loyalty to the nation-state. Multiple loyalties here indicate that these schools of thought are willing to accept the legitimacy of other loyalties, including the nation-state, and thus accept the principle of the coexistence of allegiances. Still, this concept of coexisting loyalties is far from optimal if we look at loyalty from the legal-liberal stance of modern nation-states and consider loyalty as citizenship. The Twelver Shi'i viewpoint is similar to Salafism in that it emphasizes political theology and holds that allegiance is primarily determined by religious convictions. However, merely holding a belief in Islam and belonging to the Twelver Shia group is insufficient. Attitudes towards the right of the imams and their deputies to rule should form an essential component of belief and loyalty. That is, a person is only worthy of allegiance if he or she accepts the religious and political authority of the imams (and the clerics who claim to represent the imams in their absence). To be included in the rescued imami group, independent of one's faith or religious piety, one should embrace the divine authority claimed by the imams and their deputies. A legitimate community ought to firmly believe in the religious and political authority of the imams and their deputies (Al-Āṣifī, 1997, pp. 6-23). However, there are multiple deputies. In addition to the supreme jurists in Iran, a number of figures of authority in Iraq and Lebanon claim religious and political authority today among the Twelver Shia, making political allegiance contingent on the goals stated by the designated figure of authority. Twelver Shii leaders hold diverse opinions on a range of political matters and, as a result, ask their followers to be loyal to their own perspective (the divide between Sistani's leadership and Khamenei's leadership is obvious in Iraq, where various Shii factions follow different agendas) (Barzegar, 2013, p. 92). Furthermore, religious authority in Twelver Shiism is based on a variety of factors, including belief in divine selection, an individual's innate superiority over others, or some other merit, in addition to lineage. That is to say, even while it is a requirement, the bloodline is insufficient for most Shii groups, both historical and contemporary.

Muslim liberal thinkers have also developed their own interpretations of the doctrine of loyalty and disavowal. Thus, the Egyptian Muslim liberal intellectual Jamāl al-Bannā (1920–2013) considers that this doctrine makes sense in a climate of war, but in everyday life, which ought to be the norm, it becomes completely meaningless and coexistence with other people is supposed to be the natural state (al-Bannā, 2007). Similarly, Assem Hefny, a modernist Azhari

scholar, views attitudes toward non-Muslims as a situation- and time-bound phenomenon. For him, as long as they are not at war with Muslims, the Quran advocates cordial relations with non-Muslims (Hefny, 2011, p. 123). The Tunisian liberal thinker Riḍā Ḥamdī argues that the doctrine of loyalty and disavowal developed in periods of pressure on marginalized groups, as was the case with the Khawārij and the Shiites (Ḥamdī, 2021). Thus, liberal Muslim intellectuals advocate a contextualist interpretation of the Quran and Muslim theological texts on the concepts of loyalty and disavowal. This enables them to situate the discussion of allegiance within the framework of early Islamic conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims. They believe that another discourse that acknowledges the diversity of loyalties and cultures and promotes peaceful coexistence should arise in the present era.

Due to space constraints and the differences in the weight of each school of thought, we admit that we treat the four schools of thought (Salafism, reformism, liberal Muslims, and Twelver Shiism) in a fairly uneven manner. Due to their dominance in Islamic thought, we concentrate on Salafism and Sunni reformism. We used al-Āṣifī as an example to address the Twelver Shi'i School of Thought, which remains a minority in Islamic thought. However, other writings by Shii leaders or authorities in Lebanon, Iran, and Iraq can serve as examples of differences in loyalty within Shiism. As liberal Muslim authors are extremely rare, we briefly discuss three scholars (al-Bannā, Hefny, and Ḥamdī). In the future, we may examine their arguments on loyalty in further detail.

Implications of Loyalty

While these various Muslim intellectuals agree on holding together the community through the links of loyalty, they disagree on the ramifications of disavowal. Salafism insists on hatred, hostility, and mistrust. In other words, they view non-Muslims or (partially) sinful Muslims as *inimicus* more than *hostis* (the public enemy) (Schmitt, 1996, p. 28). That is, the enemy is a rival or ally in a struggle (of beliefs), a personal foe that one despises. On a larger scale, this enemy could be a fighting population that opposes the Muslim population. Sunni reformism places strong emphasis on the idea of *hostis* (public enemy), which Schmitt described as fighting the collectivity of people against another collectivity in a similar way. As Schmitt puts it “never in the thousand-year

struggle between Christians and Moslems did it occur to a Christian to surrender rather than defend Europe out of love toward the Saracens or Turks. The enemy, in the political sense, need not be hated personally (Schmitt, 1996, p. 29). Regarding Twelver Shiism, the enemy is both a personal and a public enemy, meaning that one should repudiate, hate, and mistrust Muslims who do not submit to the imam's authority as well as see any hostile country or group that engages in fighting the Shii community as a public enemy. Liberal Muslims, on the other hand, completely reject the idea of religious animosity and regard non-Muslims as fellow citizens with equal rights and responsibilities to promote peace and coexistence.

Enmity

The perception of enmity is one significant implication of Muslim discourse on disavowal and loyalty. Yet, there have been hardly any discussions on this topic in Islamic studies. First of all, the phrase enemy of God, *'aduww Allāh* is a Quranic concept that designates the disbeliever, *kāfir* as the enemy which according to the Quran should be also the enemy of the believers (Q. 8:60). Thus, it has a theological meaning, as it mainly designates the polytheists of Arabia as enemies of God. Nevertheless, in contemporary Islamic discourse, this phrase has been used in specific political situations, and various political enemies were identified as God's enemies. For instance, in post-revolutionary Islamic Iran, opponents were referred to as religious enemies by the Iranian clergy and were brutally eliminated (Nasiri, 2025). The phrase enemy of God permits the construction of the other (non-Muslim or political opponents) as God's foes, deserving of all forms of punishment, and becoming the excluded other and the eternal opponent, going beyond the theological meaning of the enemy in the Quran.

Muslim thinkers also use the phrases enemy of Islam in the singular (*'aduww al-Islām*) and enemies of Islam in the plural (*a'dā' al-Islām*). Muḥammad Ḥasan Mahdī Bakhīt, an Egyptian Azhari theologian, considers Jews, Christians, communists, and pagan people to be enemies of Islam (Bakhīt, 2011). Similarly, the Egyptian Salafi scholar Shihāta Muḥammad Ṣaqr, views the Shiites as the secret enemies of Islam because, in his perspective, they are hypocrites who fool Muslims by posing as believers while destroying Islam, whereas Jews, Christians, polytheists, and other non-Muslims are the explicit enemies of Islam (Ṣaqr, 2007,

p. 6). For Bakhīt and Ṣaqr, animosity is rooted in religious differences, excluding non-Muslims and religious others as enemies.

Salafi Jihadist organizations such as Al-Qaeda have declared the United States as the enemy of Islam and Muslims (Gerges, 2009). Al-Qaeda's hostility is also directed toward Jewish interests around the world as well as those of Western countries and even Arab-Muslim countries whose governments align with American foreign policy. Several attacks have been carried out in Saudi Arabia, which is accused of hosting the "American occupier" (Mihoub, 2005, p. 112). In many parts of the world, al-Qaeda and other Islamist terrorist groups, such as ISIS, have fueled bloodshed and strained ties between Muslims and non-Muslims. They established a political climate where attempts to promote peace and coexistence are continuously undermined by the "us vs. them" discourse, and violent acts on all sides were justified by their rhetoric of hatred.

In Lebanon, Lebanese intellectuals of various religious and philosophical backgrounds have constructed Israel in different ways, including that of the colonialist foreigner, that of the Zionists establishing a theocratic state, that of the aggressor and expansionist State of Israel, and that of the Jewish stereotype threatening culture through its decadent morals. They also represent Israel through the figure of the Jewish danger, that of the global Zionist conspiracy, that of the enemy of God, Islam, and humanity, that of a Satanic state, and that of Israel assimilated to the beast and the antichrist of the apocalypse. The multiplicity of enemy figures shows that anti-Israel movements and intellectuals use various political reasons to perceive Israel as the enemy, mostly to control the narrative about resistance, and often generate irrational and non-realist political attitudes (Abdou, 2021, p. 292). Nevertheless, Christians and Sunnis have resisted Hezbollah's use of animosity toward Israel to control and dominate Lebanon's political and economic life over the past 20 years (Zreik, Yazdani, & Caba-Maria, 2024).

Liberal Muslims such as the intellectual Faraj Fūda (1945-1992), an Egyptian intellectual, journalist, and human rights activist, are also labeled as enemies of Islam. Fūda was accused publicly by al-Azhar and various Islamist groups as the enemy of Islam and was assassinated by the Islamist group al-Jamā'a al-Islāmiyya in 1992 (Avon, 2024, p. 55). A similar campaign targeted in the 1990s and 2000s the liberal Syrian Muslim thinker and engineer Muḥammad Shaḥrūr

(1939-2019), calling him "an enemy of Islam" and "a Western and Zionist agent", after he published several innovative and critical views of traditionalism and Islamism (Clark, 1996). Many Islamists and Salafists view modernists as the enemies of Islam, since modernism encourages Muslim nations to adopt Western norms and practices, thus removing Islamic influences on Muslim individuals and societies. Some orthodox Muslims also perceive unorthodox religious groups born in Islamic lands, like the Ahmadiyya, as the enemy of Islam, and some have urged Muslims to fight "this enemy" (Irawan, 2017).

The boundaries between friends and enemies are often not obvious and consistent; it is not enough to identify a common enemy to be allies. For instance, the US and Israel are viewed as enemies of Islam by both the Sunnis and Shiis. However, many Sunni and Shiite movements and ideologues view each other as Islamic enemies. In principle, Muslims and their most common enemies (in this case, the US and Israel) cannot form political partnerships. Nevertheless, in 2001 and 2003, the Iranian regime supported the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively (Parsi, 2007; Alsulami & Almaraghy, 2021, p. 91). Sunni states, such as Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, also closely cooperate with Israel against Iran (Yitzhak, 2026; Baqi, 2022).

Among many Muslims, the political-religious imaginary contributes to the idea that the West is an enemy. The conflict between Muslim and European empires in the Mediterranean, the Crusades, and the religious division of the world into Muslims versus non-Muslims shaped the Muslim medieval imaginary about the Western enemy and firmly rooted it in Muslim cultures and societies. Specifically, the long-standing attitudes of Muslims toward Israel have been shaped by their perceptions of Jews. In the Quran, Muslim traditions, and history, Jews were portrayed as Muslim enemies. However, since Jews were part of the *dhimma* people and were relatively weak enough to be a threat, animosity was mostly kept in check. Nonetheless, the establishment of Israel in the 20th century revived Muslim animosity toward Jews and influenced the political behavior of many Muslims, away from rationality and realism. The political imaginary was ready to be exploited and exaggerated, particularly by militant organizations that put out a vision that disregarded the shifts in global geopolitics and the balance of power (Anidjar, 2003). Such an irrational political imaginary can occasionally lead actors to engage in suicidal discourse and acts that ultimately destroy both their advocates and civilians. The religious-political imaginary of enmity depicts a

particular group (Jews or Christians, Sunnis or Shiis) as deserving of hatred Ab Aeterno, failing to nurture an adaptable and rational behavior that seeks compromises.

Context plays a major role in shaping the perception of enemies, not only the legacy of history and the political imaginary. There is undoubtedly a perception among many Muslims that the West is an enemy, on the basis of Western political violence since the 19th century, with the many forms of colonization and ongoing Western interference in the Muslim world, at least since 2001. This perception is shared by many political groups, states, and ideologies, not just by Islamists. Moreover, even if many Muslims show evidence of assimilation and allegiance to Western states, racism and Islamophobia in the West reinforce the idea that Muslims are inherently hostile (Platti, 2006; Schneiders, 2009). On the other hand, some Muslims commit acts of terrorism and violence that only serve to legitimize the portrayal of Muslims as enemies, which is then utilized by some Muslims to depict the West as an enemy as well. Therefore, the perception of the West as an enemy is also influenced by the political actions of Western states in both the Muslim and Western worlds. Nonetheless, some Muslims also behave unreasonably in a way that supports the Western political stereotypes of Muslims.

Additionally, there exists a gray area regarding the definition of an enemy, which could cause a great deal of confusion among Muslims. For instance, many Muslims frequently fail to distinguish between Israeli policies, Zionism, Judaism, and radical Zionism. Radical Islamists also do not distinguish between enemy soldiers, prisoners of war, and civilians (Hatina, 2016). Conversely, many in the West do not differentiate Islamists from radical Islamists or Muslims from Islamists. This gray area can be hazardous since, once more, depicting a whole nation, culture, religion, country, or community as an enemy only encourages illogical, ahistorical, and uncritical thinking, which in turn does not support the development of a realistic and rational perspective on geopolitics and the world, and might need violence or worse to genocide. At the level of state building or nation building, such distinctions are necessary for the sake of social and lasting peace between the components of a single nation or state; the failure to overcome the political imaginary and accept all religious and ethnic minorities as members of the state and nation is detrimental to all its forming groups and communities.

Dependent Loyalties

Another implication of the multiple loyalties in modern Islamic thought is dependent loyalty. Let us illustrate this element from al-Qaraḏāwī's perspective. According to him, Islamic faith is the cornerstone of political allegiance to Muslims. Regarding the implications of this loyalty, he asserts that a Muslim's duty to his *umma* is to protect its boundaries and not permit anyone to assault it, take possession of its property, desecrate any of its holy symbols, or diminish the dignity of some children. That is, this allegiance is divided into two domains: (1) The Islamic world as a whole is composed of states and territories that make up the physical *umma*; (2) loyalty to Muslims as people whose integrity and dignity should be upheld and preserved outside the actual boundaries of the Islamic world, as a larger symbolic *umma*. In both cases, Muslims ought to demonstrate solidarity with other Muslims, especially in cases of persecution. However, al-Qaraḏāwī was inconsistent with this position in 2009 when he dismissed the individual duty argument for jihad in Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan, while in 2013 he called all Sunni individuals for jihad to support Sunni insurgents in Syria against the al-Assad regime (Hegghammer & Zelin, 2013).

Moreover, in the wake of September 11, 2001, al-Qaraḏāwī and other prominent Muslim jurists permitted American Muslim soldiers to fight Muslim nations (Afghanistan in particular) and terrorists for the sake of maintaining the allegiance of these soldiers to the United States, stating that "it's acceptable for the Muslim American military personnel to partake in the fighting in the upcoming battles, against whomever, their country decides, has perpetrated terrorism against them" (Kurzman, 2001). This fatwa asserts that a Muslim soldier in the American army "has no choice but to follow orders; otherwise, his allegiance and loyalty to his country could be in doubt. This would subject him to much harm since he would not enjoy the privileges of citizenship without performing its obligations" (Kurzman, 2001). The legal reasoning of this fatwa follows the rules of Islamic jurisprudence, which stipulate that "necessities dictate exceptions, as well as the rule that says one may endure a small harm to avoid a much greater harm" (Kurzman, 2001). Thus, the preservation of Islam and Muslims in the United States and warding off suspicion about Muslim loyalties, as well as taking into consideration the exceptional conditions of being under pressure, are all variables that could play a role in Muslim loyalties rather than just

community-based loyalty or legal obligations towards the non-Muslim state (Nafi, 2004).

Thus, Muslim loyalty is dependent on a set of variables and does not follow a single factor, be it faith, community, or citizenship obligations. Muslims may consider various factors and their connections to other objects of loyalty when determining loyalty to Muslims. They weigh in interests and values (as al-Qaraḍāwī and his colleagues did in the above-discussed fatwa) and see loyalty to Islam in light of other objects of political loyalty (ethnicity, nation, and civic duties). In many cases, loyalty to Islam must align with loyalty to the nation-state, which forms the backbone of modern identities. For example, since the 19th century, the Wahhabi discourse has modified the idea of *al-walā'* (loyalty to Islam, Muslims, and God) to justify collaboration with the Saudi government (Wagemakers, 2012, p. 104). Contemporary religious authorities in Saudi Arabia also reconciled tribalism and Islam despite opposition from some Salafis (Al-Atawneh, 2008, p. 219). Thus, devotion to Islam, loyalty to the country, and loyalty to the Al Saud dynasty through the *bay'a* ritual (oath of allegiance) are all linked in the Saudi context.

When it comes to living in non-Muslim lands, most Modern Muslim thinkers promote the compatibility-complementarity thesis between loyalty to Islam, country of origin, and country of residence. Thus, various fatwas by the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), a Dublin-based organization of Islamic scholars, established in 1997, under the religious leadership of al-Qaraḍāwī, were issued between 2006 and 2015 on the compatibility between European citizenship and Islamic allegiance (March, 2009; Hassan, 2015). The compatibility-complementarity thesis aims to convince Muslims that their faith is not compromised by being citizens of a given European nation-state. It also emphasizes the moral obligation to protect one's country against aggression (patriotism), which is consistent with Islamic beliefs and ethics. This thesis aims to legitimize citizenship and Islamize its requirements while balancing political discourses of adherence to citizenship with religious discourses of fidelity to Islam. The ECFR considers loyalty in the form of circles and ranks, and can communicate and interact instead of clashing and fighting. It asserts that while "loyalty to religion is a given for every Muslim, and indeed for every religious person, and it is the highest peak of the pyramid of loyalties, it does not exclude loyalty to the homeland and citizenship, as it is not incompatible with loyalty to

religion as long as the citizenship contract does not include a departure from the religion” (Bin Bayya, 2018, p. 420).

Yet, al-Qaraḏāwī admits that there can sometimes be a conflict of loyalty between one’s allegiance to mankind, Islam, one’s native country, or an ethnic group. One of these allegiances and loyalties must be prioritized in this situation. In his view, there is only one solution to the dilemma of whether allegiance to Islam or the nation (or other allegiances) takes precedence over religion: preference should be given to loyalty to Islam because there is no alternative to religion, while there are alternatives to the homeland, for example. Put differently, while homelands may vanish, Islam never does so. This is, in fact, consistent with al-Qaraḏāwī’s hierarchy of allegiance, which places the highest priority on fidelity to Islam (al-Qaraḏāwī, 2010, p. 34). The limits of al-Qaraḏāwī’s Islamism clearly appear here and show the difficulties in embracing the nation-state as the foundation of loyalty in Islamist thought.

Al-Qaraḏāwī illustrates perhaps how the Sunni reformist position, which is the school that we most closely associate with co-existing and multiple loyalties, finds it difficult to integrate the idea of primacy of loyalty to the nation-state. A hypothetical explicit hierarchy is evident in the Sunni reformist position, which sometimes explains the international pan-Islamic character of politics in Islamism. Such a position can trump the nation-state and lead to various clashes between Islamist movements and Middle Eastern nation-states. Sunni reformism supports co-existing multiple loyalties but does not accept the nation-state as an alternative loyalty to Islam or *umma*.

The compatibility-complementarity thesis can be hierarchical if loyalties to religion and citizenship oppose each other (this is barely imaginable according to the promoters of this thesis). This thesis maintains the concept of conditional allegiance because civic loyalty is only acceptable when it does not necessitate a departure from religion. Thus, the compatibility-complementarity thesis is not co-inclusive in the sense of civic loyalty, a political obligation of citizens towards modern liberal democracies. Nonetheless, the compatibility-complementarity concept allows civic and Islamic commitments to coexist in non-Muslim societies. This supports our claim that modern mainstream Islamic thought has shifted to supporting multiple allegiances. However, Islamic political thought is still clearly hierarchical, viewing religion as "the highest peak of the pyramid of

loyalties." In our opinion, this shows that Islamic thought has evolved positively to embrace compatibility with nation-states, even though it still sees civic and national loyalty as secondary to religion.

Reformist Islamic thought can be inconsistent in the application of its declared principles, undermining the idea that it may be co-inclusive in any stable or predictable sense. This inconsistency does not contradict the fact that Islamic reformism encourages and embraces diverse and coexisting allegiances. Since it balances several allegiances, some of which are religious-ethical and others contextual-political, reformist loyalty is a dynamic and politically situational set of allegiances; it follows communal forces and geopolitical alignments rather than a stable framework of co-inclusive allegiances. These allegiances should be considered dependent insofar as they accommodate political settings that are constantly changing and represent political interests rather than fixed values. In some political situations, reformism can quickly transform from a co-existing to an exclusionary perspective.

Most Muslim discourses put boundaries on the multiplicity of Muslim loyalties since they still uphold the hierarchy of allegiances, which prioritizes Islam over other loyalties (although they also advocate for the complementarity and compatibility of loyalties). This shows that Muslim jurists refuse the reality that nation-states have replaced religion as the ultimate source of authority and identity references in the West and beyond. A hierarchy of loyalties reflects a scale of values in which religion may compete with other values. When the interests of Western nations in the Muslim world conflict with those of their home countries or with the duties of Islamic solidarity, some Muslims may feel compelled to choose loyalty to their homeland and Islamic solidarity over allegiance to their new country of citizenship (Ajala, 2014; Ajala, 2018).

Muslim loyalty in Europe also depends on European policies. The securitization of Islam in recent decades has put limits on trust in Muslims, and the marginalization of Muslims in European societies raises questions about the European liberal state's inclusiveness and its ability to be devoted to all of its residents. Despite the fact that European laws and states claim that Muslim citizens are an integral part of the nation, Muslim influence on the political and social fabric, including the media, is constrained. Perhaps one of the most significant obstacles to mutual loyalty is the foreign policies of European states

in the Middle East. Western Europe is accused by many Muslims of endorsing aggressive Middle Eastern policies due to its cooperation with the US and Israeli policies in the region. Some Muslims in Europe have made connections between domestic politics in European countries and European actions in the Middle East. As most Muslims in Europe have affinities with other Muslims in the Middle East (and some of them publicly support Muslims in the region), clashing with the agendas of many European governments, distrust arises between the two sides. The understanding of and attitudes towards politics, society, and geopolitics are significantly influenced by events in the Middle East. It is also critical to remember that Europe's involvement in Western hegemony in the Middle East has shaped its economy and politics, and that any challenge to this hegemony overseas has an impact on Europe's internal politics. In the West, Muslims may also exhibit dependent allegiances in an unfavorable manner to their own integration. Some Muslim immigrants from Turkey clashed in the streets of Germany and Austria over their Kurdish or Turkish allegiances, as did Syrian immigrants over whether they were Arabs or Kurds. In France, immigrants from North Africa may fight Moroccan or Algerian loyalties.

Although the idea of Islamic solidarity has gained traction in Islamic rhetoric over the past few decades, it is irrelevant in terms of political significance because loyalties are dependent and have numerous layers. One recent example of such irrelevance is the war in Iran in 2026, in which Iran attacks its Muslim neighbors in Arab Gulf countries). Iran has used the rhetoric of Islamic solidarity of liberating Palestine to conceal its geopolitical ambitions in the Middle East for both defensive and offensive purposes, while sitting aside during the Gaza War (Maddocks, 2025; Şimşek, 2025). It has also used Shii solidarity to appeal to Shii Arabs beyond Iran, causing war and tension in Arab countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait, and Bahrain (Ricotta, 2016). Iran has appealed to the strength of inter-Shii unity to overcome the fundamental animosity and mistrust that historically divided Arabs and Persians, but alienated the Arab Sunni majority in the Middle East (Haynes, 2010, p. 8). If anything, the Iranian-Arab conflict and the Sunni-Shii sectarian divide show the boundaries of Islamic unity and that Muslim loyalties are dependent on geopolitics, history, and objective elements of power.

As stated in the methodology section, this article endorses a historicist rather than a normative framework. We make the case that mainstream Islamic thought has progressed toward plurality, but not sufficiently or yet toward civil loyalties. Contradictions and inconsistencies exist between religion and the state (which are not exclusive to Islamic thought). We acknowledge that complete allegiance to the nation-state, in the case of opposition to Islam, is still being contested by many Muslim thinkers. However, our argument remains valid since Islamic political thought shifted from allegiance to Islam as the sole acceptable form of loyalty to accepting numerous and compatible loyalties, which at the very least permits Muslims to live in non-Muslim communities and embrace nation-states.

Evolving Loyalties

At the end of this discussion, we briefly address the question of how the debate surrounding Muslim political loyalty has evolved over time. It is clear that the rise of the discourses of *walāʾ* and *barāʾ* is connected to the rise of Salafism and Islamism throughout the Muslim world and the prevalent theme of pan-Islamic solidarity in the 1970s. However, due to the collapse of political Islam and the radicalization of Salafism, in the last ten to twenty years, new national Islam-focused discourses have emerged. Focusing on the Saudi context, for the sake of illustration, we can see that the evolving political context has impacted theological discussions. Alternative discourses to temper and even critique the Salafi loyalty code emerged in the 2000s, particularly after al-Qaida and ISIS used this doctrine to justify violence against Muslims and non-Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan (al-Zawāhirī, 2002; Kepel and Milelli, 2008). Since the 2000s, following the terrorist attacks in the Middle East, a critical discourse on *al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ* started to emerge even within Salafism with authors calling against extremism, such as the Saudi Salafist Ḥātim al-ʿAwnī who published *al-Walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ bayna al-ghuluww wa-l-jafāʾ* (al-ʿAwnī, 2004). While some Muslim intellectuals question this doctrine for opposing religious freedom (Iṣṭānbūlī, 2008), others view it as extreme (al-Nāṣirī, 2019), and still others worry about its potential impact on terrorism (al-ʿUmayrīnī, 2009). However, this doctrine has not been abandoned despite over two decades of controversy, and Salafis still promote it by moderating it (Badr, 2018), using it as a protection against Westernization (Thābit & Nāyil, 2020), or insisting on its Quranic origin (al-

Ḥirbīsh, 2023). We can clearly see some moderation of the discourse on *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, in Saudi theological discourses since 2017 as the new leadership in Saudi Arabia favours a more moderate and liberal discourse.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the majority of Muslim theologians and intellectuals advocate for multiple loyalties, including those to the nation, ethnicity, tribe, and Islam, which foster inclusiveness and coexistence. First, we provide a brief overview of the main stances on the doctrine of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* (loyalty and disavowal) in the Muslim world, arguing that even Salafism has conflicting political allegiances to various regimes and political goals. The article also covers the implications of these discourses on Muslim political loyalties. We particularly concentrated on how Islamic political thought constructs enemies of Islam and Muslims, demonstrating that in addition to “the usual enemies” (the USA and Israel), there are also non-Western countries, Muslim political rivals, religious minorities, and even modernist thinkers, all of whom are denounced as enemies. This element is significant in how Muslims perceive non-Muslims in the modern world, when cultures and societies are becoming more entwined and individuals of different religions coexist to an unprecedented degree. Lastly, it was demonstrated that allegiances are influenced by different geopolitical elements and that loyalty to Islam can be consistent with and enhance civic duties in secular and pluralistic societies, especially in the West.

Additionally, we revealed fundamental limits to the concept of multiple loyalties in Islamic reformism, primarily because the hierarchy of allegiances is not self-executing. In some extreme political situations, especially when the perception of dangers to the Muslim community increases or conflicts arise between loyalties, apex allegiance (Islam) still supersedes secondary loyalties (civic loyalty, national solidarity). This demonstrates that in Islamic thought, different loyalties are dynamically (rather than permanently) stable. Still, Islamic reformism does not negate the ability of Muslim loyalties to co-include under typical circumstances. Muslim reformists make an effort to balance civic and Islamic allegiances, but their discourses react to political pressure, and their attitudes can shift accordingly. Therefore, Islamic political thought still has a long way to go before it emphasizes civic loyalty.

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