Nearly a century after it first emerged in Egypt, political Islam is redefining the Muslim world. Also called Islamism, this potent ideology holds that the billion-strong global Muslim community would be free and great if only it were pious—that is, if Muslims lived under state-enforced Islamic law, or sharia, as they have done for most of Islamic history. Islamists have long been confronted by Muslims who reject sharia and by non-Muslims who try to get them to reject it. At times benign and at times violent, these confrontations have fueled the revolutions in Egypt in 1952 and Iran in 1979, the al Qaeda attacks in 2001, the Arab Spring of 2011, and the rise of radical Islamist groups such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS).

It is not Islam the religion that is generating discord. Rather, the problem is a deep disagreement among Muslims over the degree to which Islam ought to shape the laws and institutions of society. Most Muslims, Islamist or otherwise, are, of course, not jihadists or revolutionaries. But the ongoing competition over what constitutes good public order has polarized them, creating vicious enmities that resist compromise. The result is a self-tightening knot of problems in which each aggravates the others.

Western scholars and policymakers have long struggled to understand the nature of this conflict, but so far, their efforts have fallen short. Although experts on Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and history have produced rich scholarship on Islamism, they have tended to treat it as if it were unique. What they forget is that Islamism is not only Islamic but also an “ism”—an ideology and a plan for ordering common life that should be analyzed alongside other ideologies. No part of the world has generated as many isms as the West itself, and so to aid clear thinking about the contemporary Middle East, it is useful to look back at the West’s own history of ideological strife.

Parts of the Muslim world today, in fact, bear an uncanny resemblance to northwestern Europe 450 years ago, during the so-called Wars of Religion. Then, as now, a wave of religious insurrection rolled across a vast region, engulfing several countries and threatening to break over more. In the 1560s alone, France, the Netherlands, and Scotland each faced revolts led by adherents of a new branch of Protestantism called Calvinism. Theirs was not the Calvinism of the Presbyterians of the twenty-first century or even the nineteenth. Early modern Calvinism—like Catholicism, Lutheranism, and other Christian isms of the time—was a political ideology as
much as a set of religious doctrines. It emerged in an era when Europe’s socioeconomic order was built around, and partly by, the Roman Catholic Church, and it defined itself in opposition to that order. Choosing an ideology was as much a political commitment as a religious one; the Wars of Religion were also wars of politics.

The revolts came in the middle of a 150-year-long contest over which form of Christianity the state should favor—and today, that story has a familiar ring. As ideologues vied for influence, dissent was brutally suppressed, religious massacres broke out periodically, and outside powers intervened on behalf of the rival parties. The turmoil ultimately led to the miserable Thirty Years’ War, which killed at least a quarter of the population of Germany (then the center of the Holy Roman Empire). And when that crisis ended, two other ideological battles followed: between monarchism and constitutionalism in the eighteenth century and between liberalism and communism in the twentieth.

These three long periods of ideological strife, in which Western countries were divided over the best way to order society, offer crucial lessons for the present. At the broadest level, Western history shows that the current legitimacy crisis in the Middle East is neither unprecedented in its gravity nor likely to resolve itself in any straightforward way. Political Islam, as did many ascendant ideologies of the past, has drawn new strength from the regional conflict it helped fuel, and it is here to stay. Moreover, ideological contests of the kind experienced by the Middle East rarely conclude in a winner-take-all fashion; they often rage until the competing doctrines either evolve or converge. Often this occurs only after the crisis has embroiled outside powers and redefined the regional order. These lessons yield no clear silver bullet for solving today’s challenges in the Middle East, but they do at least show that the region’s problems are not unique—and that leaders and countries can take steps to reduce the violence and create conditions more conducive to human flourishing.

FROM CALVIN IN EUROPE TO HOBBES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

“History doesn’t repeat itself,” the saying goes, “but it does rhyme.” Although the rise of Islamism in the Middle East is a uniquely modern phenomenon, the path it has followed and the crisis it has spurred echo parts of the West’s own past. What began as a simple contest between Islamism and secularism in the Muslim world has evolved into a complex struggle, but the nub of the question is who or what is sovereign in society, and the flashpoint is the source and content of law. Islamists insist that it must be sharia, meaning that it would be derived from the sacred texts of Islam: the direct revelations from Allah to the Prophet Muhammad, which make up the Koran, and the sayings of the Prophet (or hadith). Secularists counter that law should derive from human reason and experience, not from Islam—or, for moderate secularists, not from Islam alone.

Secularism came to the Middle East with European colonialism. Many Muslim elites adopted it following independence precisely because the powerful European states had surpassed and humiliated the Ottoman Empire, generally regarded as the caliphate, or the dominant Islamic polity. But secularism was met with pushback: Islamism. Although Islamists present their ideology not as an ism but as simply Islam, the pristine religion of the Prophet, their belief system has more modern origins. In the second quarter of the twentieth century, early Islamists
grew convinced that it was hard to live as a pious Muslim under a secular regime and began organizing resistance movements. In the 1950s, Islamists became more radical and began advocating for a return to state-enforced sharia. Secularism had the upper hand until the 1960s, but key moments in subsequent decades—the 1967 defeat of secularist Egypt by Israel, the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the 1990–91 Gulf War—turned the momentum in favor of Islamism.

In one sense, then, political Islam has already triumphed. Although modern Muslims are neither purely secularist nor purely Islamist, the average Muslim in the Middle East and North Africa leans Islamist. A 2013 poll by the Pew Research Center showed that large majorities in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, and the Palestinian territories wished to see sharia as the law of the land. A 2012 Gallup poll revealed that in five countries of the region—Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen—women were as likely as men to favor sharia. And although deep internal divisions persist within the Islamist camp—over the role of religion in public life and the role of the clergy in government, for example—even secular rulers now embrace elements of Islamism.

Despite these successes, however, political Islam still encounters skepticism about its ability to survive. Early on, outside observers dismissed it as an idea that was out of step with modernity. More recently, experts have assured one another that rising violence in the Middle East, including suicide terrorism and beheadings practiced by jihadist groups such as ISIS, is a sign of a desperate movement on its last legs.

Yet if Europe’s own history of ideological strife provides one key lesson for the Middle East, it is this: do not sell Islamism short. Europe’s Wars of Religion illustrate why underestimating a seemingly outdated ideology is so dangerous. At many points during those wars, reason and progress appeared to dictate an end to hostilities, as the Catholic-Protestant rivalry was taking its toll on local populations and economies. At several junctures—including in 1555, when leading German principalities agreed to religious self-determination, and in the 1590s, when the French Wars of Religion ended and the Protestant Dutch Republic secured its independence from Catholic Spain—it appeared that the crisis had passed. Princes, nobles, city councils, and their subjects seemed to have settled on a practical peace. Pragmatic political rationality appeared to reign, raising hopes of a new Europe in which states would look after their material interests and not their ideological ones.

But Europe was not finished with ideological violence, because the legitimacy crisis that had fueled it remained unresolved. Most Europeans continued to believe that permanent political stability required religious uniformity. So long as they thought so, the slightest spark could repolarize them into radically opposed groups—which is exactly what happened when a Protestant revolt in Bohemia tipped Europe into the Thirty Years’ War in 1618. It was not until Europeans separated questions of faith from those of politics, toward the end of the century, that religious dogmas lost their incendiary power.

A different kind of ideological short-selling took place in a more recent era: during the global contest between liberalism and communism in the twentieth century. In the 1930s, the travails of the Great Depression convinced many leading Western intellectuals that liberal democracy was an idea whose time had passed. For a while, centralized, coercive states appeared to be better
equipped to deal with the new economic and social challenges, leading some thinkers to buy into communism. A few visited and openly admired the Soviet Union, where, under Joseph Stalin, industrialization proceeded apace and workers never went on strike. The sentiment was captured by the U.S. journalist Lincoln Steffens: “I have been over into the future, and it works.” In the end, of course, liberal democracy rebounded and won out.

The point is not that Islamism will necessarily win in the Middle East but that smart people can underrate the viability of alternative political systems, sometimes with grievous results. Indeed, one secret of political Islam’s longevity is that outsiders have underestimated the system all along. History also shows that an ideology’s life can be extended when that ideology has state sponsors, as liberal democracy did in the 1930s and as Islamism does today. Far from being on its way out, political Islam may well be getting its second wind.

IN GOD’S NAME?

Political Islam, like many competing ideologies of old, is not monolithic. Although Islamists share a general devotion to sharia, they come in many stripes: Sunnis and Shiites; extremists and moderates; nationalists, internationalists, and even imperialists. This kind of variance has led to a debate in the West over whether the United States and its allies should accommodate moderate, pragmatic Islamism in places where it competes with more radical movements. Those who say no generally depict Islamism as a single movement united by its hatred of the West. Those who say yes portray Islamism as internally divided.

This debate is nothing new, and opponents of an ideology often try to exploit ideological cleavages to tip a conflict in their favor. Throughout Western history, outside powers have periodically attempted to use such divide-and-conquer tactics, although they have had mixed results; at times, their efforts backfired. Take the Wars of Religion again. The prolonged conflict led to the splintering of Europe’s dominant ideologies, and some of the resulting mutations survived to compete with the originals. Protestantism started out as Lutheranism but quickly developed into Zwinglianism in Switzerland and Anabaptism in Germany, before sprouting a Calvinist version in France and an Anglican one in England. Calvinists and Lutherans often competed for influence and could be worse enemies of each other than either group was of the Catholics. The Catholic Habsburg dynasty that ruled the Holy Roman Empire worked tirelessly to nurture these divisions. In the end, however, this strategy failed to either weaken the Calvinists or prevent them from forming a united front with the Lutherans in the Thirty Years’ War.

The trick for outsiders, therefore, is to ascertain whether some ideologues are predisposed against radicalism and to know how to cultivate them. It’s possible to do this successfully. In the post–World War II effort to limit the Soviet Union’s influence in Europe, U.S. President Harry Truman showed great dexterity in determining which of the Western European leftist parties could become U.S. allies. He correctly concluded that Italy’s Communists and Socialists were monolithic: they were united in supporting the Soviet Union and opposing the U.S.-sponsored Marshall Plan. Truman instead cultivated the Christian Democrats, helping them win a crucial election in 1948. In France, however, Truman recognized that the Socialists opposed communism and struck a deal with them, allowing France to become an ornery but genuine U.S. partner.
Such overt and covert interventions by outside powers are another defining trait of prolonged legitimacy crises. The clash between Islamism and secularism is just the latest contest in which a host of external actors have involved themselves in the internal affairs of other states, either by working behind the scenes or by using military means. Some have criticized many such outside interventions; in particular, critics have argued that the U.S. campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and, more recently, Libya represented irrational bursts of crusading that fell outside the bounds of prudent statecraft. In fact, however, it is normal practice for a great power to use force to alter or preserve another country’s regime. External interventions are not a separate, foolish, and avoidable addition to ideological struggles; they are part and parcel of them. More than 200 such interventions have occurred over the past 500 years, the vast majority of them during regionwide legitimacy crises such as the one racking the Middle East today.

The deep polarization produced by these kinds of struggles helps explain why intervention is so common. Often, ideological conflicts deepen social schisms so much that people become more loyal to foreigners who share their principles than to their own countrymen who do not. These clashes strongly predispose people and countries toward either friendship or enmity with foreign actors, especially with those that are powerful enough to give them or their opponents the upper hand. And foreign actors, for their part, see these kinds of crises as opportunities to make new friends or prevent the emergence of new enemies.

Intervening powers need not have a religious stake in the conflict; sometimes a material stake is enough. At other times, ideological and material calculations combine to trigger an intervention. For example, in 2011, during the Arab Spring, Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia sent troops into Bahrain to help stop a Shiite rebellion, thereby containing both the reach of Shiite Islam and the power of Shiite-dominated Iran. A short while later, Iran intervened in Syria to prop up the Assad regime against Sunni rebels who would likely align Syria with Saudi Arabia if they won. Developments such as these have given rise to fears that the Middle East will see increasingly reckless, ideologically driven states that are bent on destroying the regional order. Some observers worry, for instance, that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, it might use them to upset the precarious balance in the Middle East and even provoke an apocalypse.

History does not offer a simple verdict on that fear, but it does show that a state can be at once ideological and rational. A regime ruled by ideologues may have ideological ends, such as a radically different regional order. To pursue those ends, it may employ rational means, retreating when aggression becomes too costly. But it could also occasionally act in a way that belies the traditional cost-benefit logic of geopolitics.

The behavior of a leading German principality called the Palatinate during the Wars of Religion illustrates both of those possibilities. The principality’s rulers were militant Calvinists who strove to end Catholic domination in the Holy Roman Empire and all of Europe. They repeatedly tried to cobble together grand Protestant alliances against the Catholic powers, sending troops on several occasions to help Calvinists in France and the Netherlands. For much of the sixteenth century, however, their calculus included a healthy mix of ideology and rationality: when they encountered sufficient resistance from the mighty Habsburgs and indifference from fellow Protestants, they pulled back. But then, Calvinist rebels in Bohemia (another subject of the empire, governed by Catholics) invited the Palatinate ruler Frederick V to defy the Habsburgs
and become their king. Frederick accepted and, in 1619, claimed Bohemia for himself despite the obvious risks of a Habsburg backlash and the fact that most European Protestants refused to openly support him. Sure enough, the Habsburgs crushed Frederick’s army and went on to ravage the Palatinate and suppress Protestantism there. These were the opening moves of the Thirty Years’ War.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

Like all prolonged, regionwide ideological contests, the one between Islamism and secularism will one day end. How that will happen, however, and what prospects there are for democracy in the Middle East are both open questions.

Western history shows that legitimacy crises usually resolve themselves in one of three ways: a decisive victory by one side, a transcending of the conflict by the warring parties, or the emergence of a hybrid regime that combines rival doctrines in ways that once seemed impossible. Today, the first scenario, a straight-out win by any single ideology, appears unlikely; given that Islamism is far from monolithic, a triumph of Islamism in general would not settle which of its many strands—Sunni or Shiite, moderate or extreme, monarchical or republican—would predominate. But the other two scenarios are conceivable.

Although it may be difficult to imagine a Middle East that transcended its current legitimacy crisis, one of the West’s past crises indeed concluded in that way. Early modern Europe ultimately overcame its religious strife with the emergence of new kinds of regimes that rendered old ideological differences irrelevant. Catholics and Protestants remained faithful to their religions, but they stopped thinking of them in zero-sum terms and gradually embraced the separation between church and state. A similar kind of outcome in the Middle East would require that Muslims, both elites and mass publics, cease to see the question of Islam’s influence on laws and the public order as a life-and-death matter. Given the deep polarization that prevails, however, the prospect of such a transcendence appears remote.

Alternatively, competing ideologies could begin to converge, adopting some of one another’s institutions and practices. Europe experienced this development, too. From the 1770s until the 1850s, the continent was torn between monarchists, who believed that rule must be inherited, and republicans, who wanted governments to be elected. These two ideas at first seemed mutually exclusive; monarchies repeatedly crushed republican revolts. But after a period of repression, Europe’s monarchs struck a new bargain with the middle classes. Following the lead of the United Kingdom, a number of states—Austria, France, Italy, and Prussia—constructed a new kind of regime. Sometimes called “liberal conservatism,” it combined monarchy with parliamentary constraints and greater civil liberties.

This story points to the final historical lesson: the ultimate success of an ideology, or a hybrid of several ideologies, often depends on whether it has a powerful state champion. The triumph of liberal conservatism in Europe was partly caused by the manifest success of the United Kingdom, the state that best exemplified it. That country had long had a hybrid regime, a constitutional monarchy that merged tradition and reform. The United Kingdom was also, without doubt, the world’s most successful state of the time, boasting the largest economy, the
most extensive empire, and a remarkably stable social order. The reason its hybrid regime inspired imitation throughout the region was that it had proved to work.

Across the Muslim world, a hybrid regime of a different sort has recently been showing signs of strength. That hybrid has sometimes been called “Islamic democracy.” Although scholars have long thought that democracy and Islamism are inherently incompatible, some Islamists and democrats in different countries have been trying to join these two systems in theory and practice. In 2011–13, for example, Egypt’s Freedom and Justice Party (the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood) took pains to portray itself as a moderate force by accepting religious and ideological pluralism. That effort ultimately failed, as President Mohamed Morsi began to accumulate power and Egypt’s military ousted him. Since then, Egypt appears to have abandoned democracy altogether, but the country certainly has the size and influence to become an exemplary state should it ever attempt the experiment again.

Meanwhile, a more successful attempt to combine Islamism and democracy was made by the political party Ennahda in Tunisia, which conducted democratic elections in late 2014 despite openly embracing Islamism. Tunisia is too small to become an exemplary state, but it represents the brightest spot to emerge from the Arab Spring and, at the very least, shows what is possible.

Much depends on the political choices of the two most powerful Muslim-majority countries in the region: Iran and Turkey. Although neither is Arab, each has a long history of regional influence. Iran exemplifies Islamism, having proclaimed itself the standard-bearer for the ideology in its 1979 revolution. Although the country is formally a republic with semicompetitive elections, supreme power rests in the hands of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. But Iran’s prospects as an exemplary state have suffered during the Arab Spring and its aftermath, as Tehran’s unstinting support for the Assad regime in Syria has alienated the vast majority of Sunni Arabs. Moreover, the regime has been looking brittle since the suspicious election of 2009, raising doubts that its neighbors would want to follow its example. So long as Iran remains the role model for Islamism, therefore, Islamism is in trouble.

Turkey could be a different story. Although the country is formally a secular republic, it has been drifting in the Islamist direction. For the past three years, Turkey has appeared well on its way to becoming a model of a new, hybrid kind of Islamic democracy. Competitive elections have repeatedly buoyed its ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, headed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which has styled itself the vanguard of Islamic democracy (even though it prefers to call this style of government “conservative” rather than “Islamic”). The country enjoyed a burst of popularity among publics in the region early in the Arab Spring and has continued to expand its influence since. But when it comes to an Islamist-democratic hybrid, the bloom is off the rose, partly because Erdogan has instead begun embracing an authoritarian style of rule. Turkey may yet come to exemplify a hybrid regime, but that hybrid’s democratic component is now being replaced by old-fashioned autocracy.

WHY THEY FIGHT

As with the many ideological contests before it, the crisis in the Middle East has led some observers to question whether ideology is really its root cause at all. Many critics trace the
conflict to something else altogether, claiming that Western imperialism—first European, now American—has humiliated Muslims and severely limited their ability to control their own future, both as individuals and as societies. In this view, the United States’ military presence in the region and its support for Israel are to blame for the rising violence. But arguments of this sort overlook a key fact: the world is full of powerless, frustrated people and groups, and U.S. hegemony is nearly global. Yet the peculiar knot of problems entangling the Middle East—serial unrest and repression, terrorism and brutality, and recurring foreign interventions—can hardly be found anywhere else.

Others blame poverty. If Muslims had more wealth and opportunity, they maintain, the crisis would abate. But this argument, too, is countered by the world’s numerous other poor societies, many of them much worse off than the average Middle Eastern state, that have managed to avoid turmoil. If poverty were what mattered most, then sub-Saharan Africa would be experiencing many more acts of terrorism, revolutionary waves, and foreign invasions. Evidence points to a different conclusion: although both powerlessness and poverty are key factors, they can produce the kind of dysfunction that defines today’s Middle East only when combined with a prolonged, regionwide legitimacy crisis.

The good news is that the United States may be able to encourage a more stable long-term outcome by nurturing countries and parties that exemplify a moderate system of government, even if that system falls short of being entirely secular. The bad news, however, is that this is all it can hope for: even the mighty United States cannot solve all of the region’s problems, since all sides would inevitably view its interventions as partisan. The United States must, of course, protect its interests—a duty that at certain times and places might again require force. But just as the Ottoman Empire, the Muslim superpower at the time of the Wars of Religion, could not resolve the strife among Christians in the sixteenth century, no outside actor can pacify the Middle East today. Only Muslims themselves can settle their ideological war.

Copyright © 2002-2014 by the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc.