

CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC POLITICAL AND SOCIAL  
THOUGHT BEFORE AND AFTER THE ARAB SPRING:  
MAPPING THE FIELD

SAVREMENA ISLAMSKA POLITIČKA I DRUŠTVENA MISAO  
PRE I POSLE ARAPSKOG PROLEĆA: MAPIRANJE POLJA



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## EDITORS' NOTE

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The special issue, “Contemporary Islamic Political and Social Thought Before and After the Arab Spring: Mapping the Field,” emerges amidst a year of war in Gaza and the West Bank. As of August 30, 2024, Israeli military actions have resulted in the deaths of 40,602 Palestinians, 52% of whom are women and minors, with an additional 93,534 injured in Gaza alone.<sup>1</sup> Journalists and medical personnel have been disproportionately targeted, intensifying an already dire humanitarian crisis. This ongoing conflict reveals the deep-seated challenges confronting Muslim societies and states today. With the notable exceptions of Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen, most Muslim-majority governments have confined their responses to expressions of diplomatic concern, thus offering little in the way of substantive action to end this televised genocide.

This apparent inertia must be understood in the broader context of the post-Arab Spring political landscape, marked by counter-revolutionary efforts led by the monarchs in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other autocratic actors, such as the Egyptian military junta. These forces have systematically targeted progressive intellectuals and liberation movements, seeking to extinguish any revolutionary or reformist momentum that had the potential to develop a people-centered governance. Such efforts are further bolstered by the support from Euro-American liberal regimes whose strategic interests seem to prop up many autocratic regimes in the Global South. The evidence suggests that the pluralization and liberation of Muslim societies are perceived as fundamentally at odds with the Euro-American geo-political and economic colonial objectives. Furthermore, this coordination transcends the Middle East as Western powers, in alignment with Israeli intelligence and Gulf monarchies, have shown a willingness to suppress dissident Muslim voices even within their own borders.

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<sup>1</sup> See the complete data on the website of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-209-gaza-strip>.



By situating these developments within a broader analytical framework, we can better understand the intersection of local and global forces that continue to constrain the possibilities for committed Muslim agency and mobilization. The Arab Spring uprisings exposed not only the complex interplay between regional and international actors but they also highlighted significant shortcomings within indigenous movements advocating for change. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, once regarded as a vanguard of Islamic revivalism, has been repressed and persecuted to the brink of extinction. Its adaptability in responding to contemporary challenges has been severely limited. Subversive military, security, state, and local bureaucratic apparatus continued to be their staunch opponents even after winning several national and local elections. This subversive process resulted in the military coup in July 2013.

But even before the onset of the Arab Spring, the movement's reformist method and skepticism towards rapid changes limited its capacity to generate innovative political and economic ideas that could address the immediate and practical needs of ordinary Egyptians. Indeed, movements like the Muslim Brotherhood have struggled to pivot from lofty rhetoric to pragmatic, policy-driven strategies that could create real, measurable improvements in the lives of ordinary people. Many Muslim thinkers and Islamic movements have prioritized authenticity over agency, clinging to historical ideals rather than grappling with the complexities of the modern world. This general stance reflects a reluctance, or perhaps an inability, to engage fully with the shifting dynamics of our global reality. As a result, they have failed to devise forward-thinking strategies that could address the urgent challenges of today and tomorrow. This was particularly clear during 2012 when the liberal, nationalist, and rival religious and political opposition leveled a barrage of criticisms and protests against the elected Brotherhood-dominated government. The critique was directed primarily towards the Brotherhood's unwillingness to engage in serious negotiations of non-partisan issues such as the content of the country's constitution.

When examining the dynamics of post-Arab Spring Islamist political movements, it is essential to look beyond the immediate failures, such as the exclusion of the Brotherhood and their inability to adapt swiftly. A broader perspective reveals that many similar movements and thinkers have concentrated more on the authenticity of their ideological projects than on the role of ethical agency in fostering socio-political change. While this focus on authenticity plays a crucial role in affirming identity moral commitments, and resisting neocolonialism, it often comes at the expense of recognizing the dynamic and contingent nature of political engagement required for transformative and lasting change.

This narrow emphasis suggests that a significant segment of Islamist political opposition needs to be more adequately prepared to navigate the rapidly shifting contemporary landscape. To remain relevant, these movements must combine a firm ideological foundation with strategic adaptability and a nuanced understanding of power. Several articles in this special issue highlight the limited capacity of these groups to devise forward-looking strategies. The

lack of a comprehensive political strategy – one that integrates both ideological rigor and responsiveness to socio-economic realities – exposes a significant gap in their ability to effectuate meaningful and lasting change.

The special issue offers a critical and provocative exploration of the layered terrain of Islamic political and social thought, particularly during the transformative period following the Arab Spring. It aims to map the complex interplay between Islamic political theory, ethics, and social movements within diverse socio-religious contexts and economic conditions. The issue underscores the need to reconceptualize political thought in a manner that is not merely reactive but capable of envisioning alternative futures. Rather than providing definitive answers, it seeks to chart the current intellectual and political landscape, reflecting on new and historical ideas – including mobilization and activism – in order to stimulate future debates on the evolution of Islamic political thought and Islam as Method as well as on its potential role in shaping more just and equitable societies.

In this context, the significance of political thought grounded in Islamic ethics and political experiences cannot be overstated. It is not merely a matter of reclaiming a cultural or religious identity; rather, it entails articulating a vision that directly confronts global challenges such as economic inequality, lack of social justice, and systemic violence.

Again, the muted responses of most Muslim-majority governments to this televised genocide in Gaza – confined to mere diplomatic expressions – underscore a critical void in political imagination and ethical agency as well as an inability to imagine an alternative international order. This gap reveals an urgent need for a political thought that is capable of transcending reactive postures and that can envision an alternative future grounded in the lived experiences and ethical imperatives of Islamic traditions. The current crisis demands reimagining Islamic political thought in a way that is not only relevant to contemporary socio-political landscapes but also in a way that can galvanize action against oppression and inequality. To remain relevant, Islamic political theory must find ways to engage with crises, transforming ideals of virtues, justice, and governance into tangible actions that effectively address local and global challenges.

