Before President George W. Bush proclaimed in September 2001 that Islam is a “religion of peace,” policymakers, academics, journalists, and private American citizens had struggled to talk about Islam. The challenge has been to understand Islam’s relationship to peace, politics, citizenship, and security. In *Political Islam from Muhammad to Ahmadinejad: Defenders, Detractors, and Definitions*, an impressive array of scholars takes on this challenge in fifteen short essays.

The authors are predominantly professors of history and political science, which explains the academic tone of the writing, and many have also been affiliated with the military, which adds real-world insight. This mix is embodied in the editor, Dr. Joseph Morrison Skelly, an Associate Professor of History at the College of Mount Saint Vincent, where he specializes in international terrorism, military affairs, and diplomatic history. Skelly, the National Treasurer/Secretary for the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa, has authored and edited several books. He is also a decorated officer in the United States Army Reserve, who recently completed a tour of duty as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom, for which he participated in

---

Hannah Elka Meyers holds an M.A. in International Relations from Yale University and works in intelligence and counterterrorism in New York City.
counter-terrorism missions and helped to rebuild schools in Baquba, Iraq, and support the national elections.

The book’s underlying premise, as described by Dr. Skelly, is that there is a phenomenon called “political Islam,” which is different from Islam as a religion. This has arguably been a conservative idea; Skelly quotes Daniel Pipes: “As an ideology, militant Islam can claim none of the sanctity that Islam the religion enjoys.” He also borrows Pipe’s explanation for the term Islamism, which is synonymous with a radical, politicized Islam. Some of the book’s authors seem to slant slightly to the “right,” in terms of the non-academic institutions with which they are affiliated. However, the majority of the book is historical, not ideological or explicitly political, so there aren’t arguments with clear partisan tilts or counterparts. The book is useful for policymakers eager to understand Islamism: but each reader must extract his own political lessons.

The flow of the compilation is partially chronological and partially thematic. The book is divided into six parts. The organization of the book—with both separate sections and disparate topics—is both a strength and a weakness. It allows the reader to pick and choose which essays to read and in which order. However, it also means that a reader unfamiliar with a given topic or theme may find it challenging to follow.

Following Dr. Skelly’s introductory essay is McGill University’s Philip Carl Salzman’s “Balanced Opposition,” his description of the tribal foundations of Arab Middle Eastern culture. Salzman’s piece, reminiscent of his wonderful recent book on Arab tribal culture, Culture and Conflict in The Middle East, sets the scene of the tribal political culture onto which the Islamic religion would fit and grow.

Several of the essays throughout the subsequent sections take specific historic moments as case studies. They examine whether Muslim military actions were motivated by religious or political considerations, how these were justified, and how they fit into the broader context of the time. These chapters, such as David Cook of Rice University’s “Why Did Muhammad Attack the Byzantines?” and High Point University’s George L. Simpson, Jr.’s “Mad Mullahs and the Pax Britannica: Islam as a Factor in Somali Resistance to British Colonial Rule,” may be more readily satisfying to historians, but are nevertheless illuminating for the lay reader. In fact, their reliance on test cases to analyze the nexus of religion and politics in Islam also allows them to be applicable to policymakers.

In a more conceptual vein, but still relying heavily on real-world examples, Sherko Kirmanj, a doctoral candidate at the School of International Studies
at the University of South Australia, examines some of the non-Muslim origins of Muslim political concepts often invoked by Islamists. Similarly, United States Army career officer Joseph C. Myers’ chapter on “The Quranic Concept of War” offers a fascinating insight into the place of terror in the Islamic tradition. Quoting Pakistani Brigadier K.S. Malik, who wrote influential texts on the topic, he writes that, in terms of strategy, Malik believes “terror is an effect, the end-state.” Thus through perpetrating terror, Malik “states that if properly prepared, the ‘war of muscle,’ the physical war, will already be won by ‘the war of will.’”

Looking to elucidate the relationship between contemporary jihadism and mainstream Islamic tradition, Daniel J. Lav, Director of the Jihad and Terror Threat Monitor of the Middle East Media Research Institute contributes an important chapter undertaking an analysis of “jihadist writings in the field of jurisprudence and a new corpus of ‘revisionist’ jihadist texts.” “Jihadists And Jurisprudents” focuses on a comparison of the revised views of Sayyid Imam (better known in the United States as Dr. Fadl) and of Al-Gama’a Al-Islamiyya (also known as the Egyptian Islamic Group, or EIG). Dr. Fadl, a renowned scholar of Islamic jurisprudence, has received much attention—in the Middle East and especially in the West—for having changed his position while in an Egyptian prison, rejecting violent jihad within contemporary Egypt. He is famous partly for the potential that he embodies, for his personal evolution from jihadi ideology toward less violent—or at least less manifestly violent—iterations. Understanding the scope and limitations of this process is important for American policymakers.

One of the most politically astute chapters is by Ofira Seliktar of Gratz College and Temple University. She gives a wonderfully lucid analysis of Iranian politics since the Revolution, speaking to the problem of how misunderstanding the nature of Iranian politics and actors has misled American policymakers. She notes the proliferation of terms to describe the Iranian government: “One popular theory holds that the fundamentalists created an Islamic version of a fascist state, often labeled as ‘Islamofascism.’ Academic discourse has yielded such designations as Islamic theocracy, Islamic policy state, a barrack regime, garrison, state, Islamic neopatrimonialism, clerical oligarchy, or theodemocracy.” Readers familiar with this perplexing array of terms will appreciate a clear analysis of the structure, policies, and history of Iranian government and its relationship with Islam.

The section on economic reform is particularly useful for non-economists who wish to comprehend the crossover between Islam and the economic systems of Islamic countries. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s Patrick Clawson’s concise chapter on “Economic Justice in the Middle East: A Bad
Idea, Badly Done,” reads like an article from The Economist. He describes the stagnation and weakening of Middle East economies over the last half century, noting that the predominant regional model has shifted from Third World socialism, as charismatically articulated by Egypt’s President Nassar, to contemporary political Islam.

Among other patterns, he notes that the Middle East countries with ties to the United States have done best economically, while those hostile to the United States have done worst. But he clarifies, “It would be quite wrong to say that the reason for Israeli or Gulf monarchical prosperity has been good relations with the United States, or that the cause of Iraqi and Algerian stagnation has been bad relations with the United States. Instead, both the economic performance and the state of relations with the United States have flowed from the same cause: the absolute priority placed on radical political ideology at the expense of all else.” Using the Iranian Republic as a test case, he asks whether some form of Islamic economics could make the Middle East more economically just. He concludes that the economic prospects of the Middle East look bleak as they maintain their “priority of political ideology over prosperity, suspicions about the outside world, and resistance to change.”

The book ends by considering Islamic reform. Edward T. Barrett, director of research for the U.S. Naval Academy’s Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership, looks to the grand topic of liberalism: how Catholicism came to embrace it, and the work of four Islamic scholars dealing with the issue, in his “Hermeneutics and Human Rights.” Barrett attempts “to refine the ideological component of an adequate strategy to counter Salafism, arguing that the primary goal should be neither public diplomacy nor secularization, but instead theological and philosophical reform in support of an Islamic theory of human rights.” While his prescriptions speak of a very long-term, fragile process, he does highlight some potential ways forward—and the prospects for Catholicism becoming so well reconciled with liberalism were perhaps equally slim just two centuries back.

The necessity of speaking about Islam and politics will remain crucial into the foreseeable future. President Obama is certainly finding this to be the case. Since before his presidency, Obama has made a special effort to reach out to Muslims. He avoided making pronouncements about the nature of the faith itself, but rather tried to speak about exterior political factors: “To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society’s ills on the West: Know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy,” he stated in his inaugural address. In his first overseas tour as President, Obama told the Turkish Parliament:
“Our partnership with the Muslim world is critical in rolling back a fringe ideology that people of all faiths reject.”

However, as the issue of terrorism—including the complex danger of homegrown terrorism—has asserted itself, Obama has gotten muddled in how to address Islam. In the immediate aftermath of Major Malik Hasan’s attack on Fort Hood and following the attempt of the Christmas Day Bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, Obama was reluctant to acknowledge or address the role of Islam in the attacks.

Understanding the complex relationships between Islam, faith, and politics is challenging. The academic nature of the book makes it more difficult to extract clear policy paths: there are fewer solutions than historical explanations of the current problems. However, such scholarly books can help form a foundation for policymakers to reframe the way certain issues—such as Islam and its relationship to politics and terrorism—are discussed.

NOTES

2 Ibid. pg. 91.
3 Ibid. pg. 105.
4 Ibid. pg. 163.
5 Ibid. pg. 212.
6 Ibid. pg. 223.
7 Ibid. pg. 260.