

THE ARABIC POLITICAL LEXICON: HISTORICAL EVOLUTION AND CONCEPTUAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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Abstract: The evolution of Arabic political vocabulary reflects the historical, ideological, and linguistic transformations that have shaped governance and legal thought in the Arab world. Rooted in Islamic jurisprudence, Arabic political terminology has continuously adapted to external influences, from colonial legal systems to modern international law. This article explores the historical trajectory of key political and legal concepts, including *shar'iyya* (legitimacy), *shûra* (consultation), *muwâtin* (citizen), *qânûn* (law), and *jihâd* (struggle), tracing their adaptation from early Islamic governance to contemporary political discourse. Special attention is given to the impact of colonialism, the *Nahda* (Arab Renaissance), the post-independence period, and the Arab revolutions of 2011 on the development of legal and political terminology. The study examines how modern Arab states have integrated—or resisted—the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, often navigating a complex interplay between secular governance and Islamic political thought. The findings reveal that while Arabic political vocabulary has been influenced by global legal norms, ideological contestation continues to shape its meaning and usage. The article concludes by assessing the challenges and prospects for further linguistic and legal evolution in Arab political discourse.

Keywords:

Arabic political vocabulary, Islamic governance, *shar'i'a*, *shûra*, *muwâtin*, legitimacy, democracy, *jihâd*, rule of law, Arab revolutions, *Nahda*, legal reform.

Résumé : L'évolution du vocabulaire politique arabe reflète les transformations historiques, idéologiques et linguistiques qui ont façonné la gouvernance et la pensée juridique dans le monde arabe. Ancré dans la jurisprudence islamique, le lexique politique arabe s'est continuellement adapté aux influences extérieures, allant des systèmes juridiques coloniaux au droit international moderne. Cet article retrace l'évolution historique des concepts politiques et juridiques clés, notamment *shar'iyya* (légitimité), *shûra* (consultation), *muwâtin* (citoyen), *qânûn* (loi) et *jihâd* (lutte), en examinant leur adaptation depuis la gouvernance islamique classique jusqu'au discours politique contemporain. Une attention particulière est accordée à l'impact du colonialisme, de la *Nahda* (Renaissance arabe), de la période post-indépendance et des révolutions arabes de 2011 sur le développement du langage juridique et politique. L'étude met en lumière la manière dont les États arabes modernes ont intégré—ou résisté—aux principes de démocratie, des droits de l'homme et de l'État de droit, tout en vivant une tension constante entre gouvernance séculière et pensée islamique. Elle révèle que, bien que le vocabulaire politique arabe ait été influencé par les normes juridiques internationales, les luttes idéologiques continuent de façonner son usage et sa signification. L'article se termine par une évaluation des défis et des perspectives d'évolution linguistique et juridique dans le discours politique arabe.

Mots-clés :

Vocabulaire politique arabe, gouvernance islamique, *shar'i'a*, *shûra*, *muwâtin*, légitimité, démocratie, *jihâd*, État de droit, révolutions arabes, *Nahda*, réforme juridique.

Introduction

The Arabic language has played a fundamental role in shaping the political discourse of the Arab-Muslim world. Since the advent of Islam in the 7th century, Arabic has not only served as the medium for religious revelation but also as the primary linguistic vehicle for the codification of political and legal concepts. The very first command in the Quran, *Iqra'* ("Read!"), underscores the centrality of language as a tool for knowledge transmission and the structuring of social and political organization. This initial act of revelation, occurring in a pre-Islamic Arabian society marked by oral traditions, signified the transition of Arabic into a sacred language—one that would subsequently be used to define religious precepts, legal principles, and political institutions.

Over the course of fourteen centuries, the political lexicon of Arabic has undergone significant transformations. These changes have been driven by historical contingencies, including the expansion of the Islamic empire, cross-cultural exchanges with Persian, Byzantine, and later European civilizations, as well as the internal evolution of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). However, despite these transformations, the vocabulary has retained an inherent theological foundation. This is largely due to the doctrine that Islam is "valid for all times and places," a principle that has historically constrained the linguistic and conceptual evolution of political thought in the Arab world (Hourani, 1983).

A defining characteristic of the classical Arabic political lexicon is its fusion of religious and legal terminologies. The Quranic and Hadith traditions provided the foundational vocabulary for governance, social contracts, and moral obligations. Terms such as *haq* (right, truth), *fardh* (obligation), *shûra* (consultation), and *bay'a* (allegiance) were embedded in Islamic discourse to delineate the relationship between rulers and the governed (Crone & Hinds, 1986). This theological-political language shaped the early Islamic caliphate and was later codified by scholars of jurisprudence across the four major Sunni schools (Hallaq, 2005). The *shari'a* (Islamic law) became the dominant framework through

which governance was legitimized, embedding religious norms within political structures.

The encounter with European modernity in the 19th century, particularly through colonialism, trade, and intellectual exchanges, challenged the historical continuity of the Arabic political lexicon. The introduction of new concepts such as *hurriyya* (freedom), *qânûn* (law), and *dustûr* (constitution) initiated a complex process of semantic adaptation and resistance. Reformist thinkers of the *Nahda* (Arab Renaissance), such as Muhammad Abduh and Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, attempted to reconcile Islamic governance with modern political thought, often by reinterpreting classical concepts rather than completely adopting foreign frameworks (Hourani, 1983; Laroui, 1976). However, this process was neither uniform nor universally accepted. In some contexts, the traditional lexicon persisted, often co-opted by emerging nationalist and Islamist movements seeking to reassert indigenous frameworks of governance (Kramer, 1993).

In the contemporary Arab world, political discourse remains deeply influenced by both historical continuities and modern transformations. The political vocabulary of Arabic continues to oscillate between its classical Islamic foundations and the demands of modern statecraft. The *shûra*, once understood as a consultative mechanism within an Islamic polity, has been rebranded by Islamist movements as a supposed equivalent of democracy, despite fundamental differences in scope and application (Esposito & Voll, 2001). Similarly, the concept of *muwâtin* (citizen), rooted in post-colonial nation-building, competes with the transnational religious identity signified by *umma* (Islamic community). These linguistic and conceptual tensions have been further accentuated by the political upheavals following the Arab uprisings of 2011, where terms such as *shar'iyya* (legitimacy) and *jihad* (struggle) have been strategically deployed by various political actors to assert competing visions of governance (Ghobadzadeh, 2015).

This article seeks to explore the historical evolution and conceptual transformations of key political terms in the Arabic lexicon. By tracing the genealogy of these terms, from their Quranic

origins to their contemporary usage, this study aims to shed light on the dynamic interplay between language, political authority, and ideological contestation in the Arab world.

The Evolution of Concepts and Ideas

The Arabic language has historically served as a powerful medium for the articulation of political and religious thought in the Muslim world. Unlike many languages where political terminologies have developed largely through secular historical processes, Arabic's political lexicon has been intrinsically tied to religious discourse. This is largely due to the role of Islam in shaping governance, law, and social organization.

Yadh Ben Achour (2011) aptly describes this phenomenon when he states: *"The great anxiety of Islam throughout history is precisely that reason might become a legislative reason. The essential problem is not how to think, direct, and elaborate the norms of a just social conduct. That was already conceived by God. The whole problem consists in knowing how to read."* This observation underscores the extent to which Islamic governance and jurisprudence were traditionally viewed as divine mandates, rather than human constructs subject to evolution and reinterpretation.

Political Concepts: The Governance of the Umma

The Quran and Hadith provided the primary sources for constructing the political lexicon of early Islamic governance. Several terms emerged to describe structures of authority, legal obligation, and political duty. Among the most foundational terms are:

- *Haq* (right, truth): A term with both theological and legal dimensions, often used to denote divine justice and human rights within an Islamic framework (Kamali, 2008).
- *Fardh* (obligation): Referring to religious and social duties imposed upon Muslims, often used in legal discourse to determine binding obligations (Hallaq, 2005).
- *Uli al-Amr* (those who command): A Quranic term (Surah An-Nisa 4:59) used to

describe legitimate rulers or those in positions of authority. The interpretation of this term has historically oscillated between an endorsement of absolute rule and a call for consultative governance (Esposito, 2003).

- *Ahl al-hal wal 'aqd* (those who bind and unbind): A term referring to the political elite or scholars entrusted with the authority to elect or depose rulers (Crone, 2004).
- *Shûra* (consultation): A key concept in Islamic governance, often framed as an early form of democratic decision-making, though traditionally limited to a select group of advisors (El Fadl, 2004).

These terms established the ideological foundation for governance within the early caliphate and later evolved into formalized structures under the Abbasid, Ottoman, and modern Arab regimes. However, despite their foundational role, the interpretation and implementation of these concepts have been subject to considerable debate across different historical and cultural contexts.

For instance, while classical Islamic governance emphasized *shûra* as a consultative mechanism, contemporary Islamist movements have sought to equate it with democracy, despite fundamental differences in inclusivity and representation (Tibi, 2012). Similarly, the role of *uli al-amr* has been contested between those advocating for absolute monarchy and those supporting constitutional governance (Abou El Fadl, 2004).

The Expansion of Political Terminologies: Jihad, Caliphate, and Sharia

As Islamic rule expanded beyond the Arabian Peninsula, the need to govern diverse populations necessitated the adaptation and expansion of the political lexicon. This period saw the formalization of key political-religious terms, including:

- *Jihâd* (struggle, war): While commonly translated as "holy war," *jihâd* historically encompassed both military and spiritual dimensions. The term gained prominence during the early Islamic conquests, but

later interpretations, particularly in the modern era, have been deeply contested (Cook, 2005).

- *Khalīfa* (caliph) and *Khilāfa* (caliphate): Initially used to denote the successors of the Prophet Muhammad, the caliphate became the central institution of Islamic governance. The term remains ideologically significant today, particularly among Islamist movements seeking to restore a global Islamic polity (Lapidus, 2014).
- *Sharīʿa* (Islamic law): Encompassing all legal and moral precepts derived from the Quran and Hadith, *sharīʿa* has historically been a cornerstone of Islamic governance. Over the centuries, the interpretation of *sharīʿa* has evolved, with modern states selectively incorporating or excluding its provisions in their legal systems (Hallaq, 2009).

The institutionalization of these terms through jurisprudence (*fiqh*) led to their entrenchment in Islamic legal and political thought. The codification of *sharīʿa* by the four major Sunni schools (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali) ensured its continuity, but also solidified a framework that resisted legal adaptation in later centuries.

One of the most significant aspects of this linguistic and legal framework is its emphasis on continuity. As Wael Hallaq (2009) argues, classical Islamic law developed in a pre-modern context and, unlike secular legal traditions, did not undergo the same evolution towards nation-state legal codification. This persistence of an older lexicon in modern political discourse often results in conflicts between traditionalists and reformists.

Religious Economic Concepts: Zakât and Economic Justice

Among the religious-political terms embedded in Arabic, *zakât* (almsgiving) remains one of the most debated. As one of the five pillars of Islam, *zakât* is a mandatory charitable contribution, historically aimed at redistributing wealth within the Muslim community. However, its application has often been critiqued for reinforcing social

hierarchies rather than addressing systemic economic disparities (Talbi, 2009).

Mohamed Talbi (2009) argues that while *zakât* was originally conceived as a mechanism for economic justice, its implementation has disproportionately exempted the wealthy in modern societies. As he states, *“The crime of shari’a in matters of zakât towards God and men is evident: the rich, no more yesterday than today, practically do not pay zakât. In the turban of shari’a, there is more than one trick (hiyal) to exempt them.”*

This critique highlights a broader tension within Islamic economic thought—whether *zakât* should function as a moral obligation or as a structured economic policy. In contrast to modern tax systems, *zakât* is often administered independently of state mechanisms, limiting its effectiveness as a tool for poverty alleviation.

Beyond *zakât*, other economic terms, such as:

- *Habs* (endowment): A form of charitable trust, often used to fund religious and educational institutions.
- *Riba* (usury): Forbidden in Islamic finance, leading to the development of alternative banking models.

These economic concepts continue to shape Islamic economic policies today, particularly in regions where Islamic banking and finance have become prominent. However, as Kuran (2004) notes, the integration of these traditional economic principles with modern financial systems remains a significant challenge.

The Question of the “Renaissance” (Nahda)

The 19th and early 20th centuries marked a period of profound transformation in the Arab-Muslim world, particularly in response to European colonial expansion, internal political stagnation, and the rise of modern nation-states. This period, often referred to as the *Nahda* (Renaissance), was characterized by significant intellectual, linguistic, and political reforms that sought to reconcile Islamic traditions with modernity.

Triggered by Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the subsequent exposure to European institutions, knowledge, and technology, the

Nahda was driven by reformist thinkers and statesmen who sought to modernize governance structures, educational systems, and legal frameworks. At the core of this movement was the effort to reinterpret key political and religious concepts within the Arabic language, particularly through the notions of *islâh* (reform) and *tajdîd* (renewal).

This section explores the ideological and linguistic transformations of the *Nahda*, focusing on the key political and religious concepts that shaped the movement. By analyzing reformist discourses and their impact on Arabic political terminology, we can better understand the historical tensions between modernity and Islamic tradition that continue to shape contemporary Arab societies.

Concepts of Reform: Islâh and Tajdîd

The *Nahda* cannot be understood without considering the broader framework of Ottoman reform efforts. The Ottoman Empire, facing pressure from European powers and internal challenges from nationalist uprisings, initiated a series of reforms known as the *Tanzimat* (1839–1876). These reforms aimed to modernize the military, centralize administration, and secularize aspects of the legal system to ensure the empire's survival in an era of growing European dominance (Shaw, 1977).

The *Tanzimat* reforms were encapsulated in key legal documents, such as the *Hatt-i Sherif of Gülhane* (1839) and the *Hatt-i Hümayun* (1856), which sought to guarantee legal equality among all subjects of the empire, regardless of religious affiliation. The reforms introduced new legal terminologies, some of which contrasted with classical Islamic jurisprudence. As Robert Mantran (1989) notes, the principles enshrined in these reforms, such as equal justice for Muslims and non-Muslims, were "in contradiction with Islamic law." This shift in legal language and governance structures marked the beginning of a linguistic and conceptual transition in Arabic political thought.

Parallel to the Ottoman legal reforms, Arab intellectuals and political reformers engaged in a process of *islâh* (reform) and *tajdîd* (renewal) to

modernize Islamic governance while preserving its religious foundations. Figures such as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801–1873) in Egypt and Khaïr-Eddine Pacha (1822–1890) in Tunisia played key roles in articulating a vision of governance that incorporated constitutionalism and civic participation.

Khaïr-Eddine Pacha, for instance, championed constitutional governance in his work *Aqwam al-masâlik* (1868), arguing that "the most advanced nations in civilization are those whose institutions are founded on freedom and constitutional law" (Mantran, 1989). However, these concepts, particularly *hurriyya* (freedom), had no direct equivalent in classical Arabic political thought and had to be semantically adapted.

Mohammad Abduh (1849–1905) and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897) further developed these ideas, advocating for a reinterpretation of Islamic jurisprudence that embraced modern political concepts while remaining rooted in Islamic epistemology. However, their efforts were often constrained by conservative religious scholars who viewed *tajdîd* as a deviation from established doctrines (Keddie, 1983).

Concepts of Liberty: Hurr and Hurriyya

One of the most significant linguistic shifts during the *Nahda* was the reinterpretation of the term *hurr* (free) and its derivative *hurriyya* (freedom). Traditionally, *hurr* in Arabic denoted the status of a freed slave, reflecting the historical legal structures of Islamic societies. However, during the 19th century, reformers sought to expand the meaning of *hurriyya* to align with the European concept of political freedom and individual rights (Laroui, 1976).

The transformation of *hurriyya* as a political concept was largely influenced by exposure to European legal traditions. In Egypt, Mehmet Ali's (1769–1849) modernization efforts and the subsequent British occupation introduced Western legal codes, forcing Arab intellectuals to rethink the notion of individual liberty in governance. Similarly, in Tunisia, the *Pacte fondamental* (1857) introduced legal protections that closely resembled European constitutional

guarantees. Ahmed Ibn Abi Dhiyaf (1804–1874), one of its principal architects, argued that "slavery does not end the natural right of man" (Arkoun, 1988), signaling an important shift towards recognizing human rights within Islamic discourse.

Despite these efforts, the notion of liberty in Arabic political thought remained fundamentally different from its Western counterpart. As Mohammad Arkoun (1988) suggests, Islamic political discourse was structured within a *logosphere*—a conceptual world that resisted external epistemologies. The term *hurriyya* was thus integrated into political rhetoric but was often interpreted in ways that maintained the primacy of religious and communal obligations over individual autonomy.

The Nahda and the Limits of Reform

The *Nahda* movement, despite its emphasis on modernity, ultimately remained constrained by its commitment to Islamic tradition. The reformist discourse, while introducing new terminologies, often failed to fully break away from premodern political structures.

Mohammed Abduh's interpretation of *shûra* (consultation) as an Islamic form of democracy illustrates this tension. While acknowledging the need for governance reform, he maintained that the Islamic state must serve as the protector of religious law. He famously stated that "Islam, while being a religion and not a nationality (*ginsiya*), must nonetheless have its state" (Abduh, 1899). This position placed Islamic law above secular constitutionalism, limiting the full integration of modern democratic principles.

The persistence of classical concepts such as *imâm* (leader), *umma* (community), and *uli al-amr* (those in authority) in *Nahda* discourse reflects the difficulty of reconciling Islamic political traditions with the emerging nation-state model. While reformers introduced modern political vocabulary, these terms often retained their original theological connotations, preventing a full embrace of secular governance (Tibi, 2012).

The Evolution of Legal Concepts

The concept of law (*qânûn*) in the Arab-Muslim world has undergone significant transformations over the centuries. Unlike European legal traditions, where law evolved as an independent institutional framework rooted in Roman jurisprudence and later Enlightenment thought, Islamic law (*sharî'a*) has historically been embedded within a religious framework. This fundamental difference has shaped not only legal terminology but also the very notion of rights and state authority in Islamic societies.

Islamic law, derived primarily from the Quran, Hadith, and subsequent juristic interpretations, initially functioned as a comprehensive system governing all aspects of life, from personal conduct to governance. However, with the rise of modern nation-states and the influence of European legal frameworks, tensions emerged between traditional Islamic jurisprudence and modern legal systems. These tensions are particularly evident in the conceptual evolution of *qânûn* (law), *haq* (right), and *huqûq* (rights), as well as in the broader discourse on human rights and individual liberties.

The Concept of Law (Qânûn)

The term *qânûn* has a complex etymology, originating from the Greek *kanôn* (κανών), meaning "rule" or "standard," and entering Arabic via Persian and Ottoman Turkish. In classical Islamic thought, however, *qânûn* was not initially synonymous with law in the Western sense. Instead, legal norms were understood through *sharî'a*, a system based on divine revelation, and *fiqh* (jurisprudence), the human interpretation of Islamic law (Hallaq, 2005).

It was only during the Ottoman period that *qânûn* began to be used to refer to state-imposed regulations that supplemented Islamic law. The *Kanunname* of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–1566), for example, codified administrative and tax laws that functioned alongside *sharî'a* but did not override its authority (Imber, 2002). This dual legal system persisted until the 19th century when European legal codes began to influence Ottoman and Arab legal traditions.

The 19th-century Ottoman *Tanzimat* reforms (1839–1876) marked a turning point in the conceptualization of *qânûn*. Inspired by the French *Code Napoléon*, the Ottomans introduced new legal frameworks that secularized many aspects of governance. The *Mecelle* (1877), a civil code largely based on Hanafi jurisprudence but incorporating modern legal principles, exemplifies this transition (Shaw, 1977).

This shift was not without resistance. As Yadh Ben Achour (2011) notes, modern law in Europe developed around the concept of individual liberty as a safeguard against absolute rule. In contrast, traditional Islamic legal thought viewed law as a divine mandate, leaving limited space for secular legal structures. This divergence remains a key challenge in legal reform across the Arab world today.

The Concept of Rights (*Huqûq*) and Human Rights Debates

The concept of *haq* in Arabic, often translated as "right" or "truth," has theological roots in the Quran, where it is used to denote divine justice rather than individual entitlements. The plural form, *huqûq*, later evolved to signify obligations and rights within an Islamic legal context (Kamali, 1993).

Unlike Western legal traditions, where rights are seen as intrinsic to individuals, Islamic jurisprudence traditionally framed rights as duties owed to God and the community. For instance, personal freedoms were conditioned by broader religious and social responsibilities, reflecting an overarching communalist perspective (An-Na'im, 1990).

One of the most contentious debates in contemporary Islamic legal discourse is the compatibility of *shari'ah* with international human rights norms. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 introduced a rights-based framework that many Islamic scholars and states found difficult to reconcile with Islamic law.

Key points of contention include:

1. Freedom of Religion – While the UDHR upholds the right to change one's religion, Islamic legal traditions have historically

viewed apostasy (*ridda*) as a punishable offense (Peters, 2006).

2. Gender Equality – Islamic family law often grants different legal statuses to men and women, particularly in inheritance and testimony laws, conflicting with the UDHR's principles of equality (Mir-Hosseini, 2006).
3. Freedom of Expression – Blasphemy and defamation of Islam are criminalized in many Islamic legal systems, limiting freedom of speech as understood in international law (Brown, 2017).

In response to these tensions, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) introduced the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (1990), which sought to provide an Islamic framework for human rights. However, this declaration subordinates human rights to *shari'ah*, thereby reinforcing the primacy of religious law over universal legal principles (Mayer, 1999).

Another key issue in the legal evolution of the Arab-Muslim world is the absence of certain rights commonly found in modern legal frameworks. For example, the right to strike is not recognized in classical Islamic law, as work and contracts are generally viewed as binding religious obligations (Vogel, 2000). This has contributed to a historical reluctance toward labor unions and social movements in many Arab states, where political authorities often suppress organized dissent under the pretext of religious legitimacy.

The Role of Fatwas in Legal Discourse

A significant challenge to legal modernization in the Arab-Muslim world is the persistence of *fatwas* as a source of legal authority. Traditionally, a *fatwa* is a non-binding legal opinion issued by a qualified Islamic scholar (*mufti*) in response to a religious or legal query. However, in many contemporary societies, *fatwas* have acquired de facto legal status, particularly in conservative Islamic states where they influence both formal law and social norms (Masud, Messick, & Powers, 1996).

The proliferation of *fatwas*, especially through satellite television and online platforms, has

further complicated legal interpretations. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, state-backed religious scholars issue *fatwas* that often override civil law, while independent clerics disseminate rulings that challenge state policies (Al-Rasheed, 2007). This results in a fragmented legal environment where individuals may choose between conflicting religious and civil legal rulings.

Islamist movements have also utilized *fatwas* as a political tool, particularly to delegitimize opponents or justify actions against governments. Radical clerics have issued *fatwas* condoning violence against perceived "enemies of Islam," illustrating how religious legal interpretations can be weaponized for political ends (Commins, 2006).

The Question of Independence (*Istiqlâl*)

Political independence in the Arab world has often been perceived as a decisive rupture from colonial rule. However, the end of European imperial control did not necessarily equate to intellectual or cultural emancipation. Many newly independent Arab states continued to operate within frameworks inherited from their former colonizers, particularly in the realms of governance, law, and political discourse. The adoption of republican or monarchical models based on European precedents, along with the importation of parliamentary structures and political parties, shaped post-independence state formation.

This transition was not uniform. While some states embraced Western-style constitutionalism, others developed military-led regimes that retained the external symbols of republican governance but functioned as authoritarian states. At the same time, societies in the Arab world experienced a gradual but complex detachment from the dominance of religious culture in public governance, as new political vocabularies emerged to define the relationship between the state, the individual, and the community.

From Subject to Citizen: A Linguistic and Conceptual Shift

One of the most significant transformations following independence was the emergence of

the concept of *muwâtin* (citizen) as the new political identity of individuals within the state. Before the introduction of modern political structures, Arab societies were organized around hierarchical power relations, where individuals were classified based on their allegiance to a ruler or their religious identity. Terms such as *ra'y* (sovereign) and *ra'iyya* (subjects) were used to define the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, reflecting a paternalistic structure in which political authority was concentrated at the top and largely unchallenged (Laroui, 1976).

Independence, however, necessitated a new vocabulary that aligned with the nation-state framework. The concept of *muwâtin* was introduced to replace the premodern hierarchical terminology. This linguistic shift signified a move toward a rights-based relationship between the state and the individual, where political participation and legal equality became defining elements of national identity (Hourani, 1983).

In many newly independent states, this transformation was reinforced through constitutional frameworks. The Tunisian *Pacte Fondamental* (1857) was among the first legal documents in the Arab world to articulate a distinction between the ruler and the governed based on legal equality rather than personal allegiance. However, the persistence of older power structures meant that this transformation was not always complete. The new elite, often derived from nationalist movements, took on a role similar to the precolonial religious and political aristocracy, maintaining a degree of exclusivity in political decision-making (Anderson, 1991).

With the establishment of nation-states, elections became a central mechanism for legitimizing political authority. This introduced new terminologies into Arabic political discourse, including:

- *Aghlabiya* (majority) and *Aqalliya* (minority), which reflected the emergence of numerical legitimacy as a basis for governance.
- *Intikhâbât* (elections), which replaced older notions of leadership succession based on lineage or religious authority.

- *Tawâfuq* (political consensus) and *mu'âradha* (opposition), which entered modern political vocabulary to describe pluralistic political systems.

Despite this linguistic modernization, democratic practices in many Arab states remained constrained by authoritarian structures. The disappearance of the *bay'a* (oath of allegiance) in political rhetoric did not always translate into genuine political openness. Instead, one-party states and military-led regimes often manipulated electoral processes to maintain control while using the language of democracy to project legitimacy (Tibi, 2012).

The Concept of Community (*Umma*) and National Identity

One of the most enduring concepts in Arabic political thought is *umma*, a term that historically referred to the collective Muslim community. However, in the post-independence period, the meaning of *umma* became increasingly ambiguous.

In nation-states, *umma* was often used interchangeably with *watan* (homeland) to refer to the national community. This shift reflected an attempt to integrate religious and national identities within a unified political framework. However, Islamist movements continued to use *umma* in its traditional transnational sense, advocating for a supranational Muslim identity that transcended the borders of individual states (Esposito & Voll, 2001).

This ideological duality created tensions between secular nationalists and Islamists. While nationalist leaders emphasized territorial sovereignty and state-building, Islamist thinkers viewed the fragmentation of the Muslim world as a colonial imposition that needed to be reversed. This was particularly evident in movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, which sought to revive the concept of the *caliphate* as a means of reuniting the *umma* under a single Islamic polity (Kramer, 1993).

The persistence of *umma* as a central concept in Islamist discourse has often clashed with the modern notion of the *muwâtin*. In secular nation-states, citizenship is based on legal status and

political participation, whereas in Islamist thought, the individual's primary allegiance is to the religious community.

The Individual and the Citizen: Between Tradition and Modernity

In Islamic political thought, authority has traditionally been conceptualized as a vertical hierarchy: God – Prophet – Ruler. This structure legitimizes power through religious doctrine rather than popular sovereignty. The Quranic injunction “*O believers! Obey Allah, obey the Messenger, and those in authority among you*” (Surah An-Nisa 4:59) has frequently been cited by Islamist leaders to reinforce this hierarchy (El Fadl, 2004).

By contrast, modern republican systems operate on a horizontal model of governance, where legitimacy is derived from the will of the people. The introduction of the term *muwâtin* sought to redefine political agency, but the deeply ingrained religious framework of authority has limited the extent to which secular notions of citizenship have been fully embraced.

Islamist parties that have entered government, such as Ennahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have attempted to reconcile these two worldviews. While adopting the vocabulary of democracy, legitimacy, and elections, they often retain theological justifications for governance. The establishment of *Majlis ash-Shura* (Consultative Councils) as internal party structures reflects this hybridization, where Islamic terminology is used within modern political institutions (Roy, 1994).

However, this linguistic adaptation does not always correspond to a genuine ideological transformation. Islamist movements frequently invoke modern political terms while maintaining an underlying commitment to traditional authority structures. This results in a political landscape where the rhetoric of democracy coexists with authoritarian practices, leading to what some scholars term “Islamic electoral autocracy” (Tibi, 2012).

The Arab Revolutions and the Language of International Law

The Arab uprisings of 2011, often referred to as the *Arab Spring*, marked a turning point in the political and legal discourse of the Arab world. These revolutions challenged long-standing authoritarian regimes, leading to a reconfiguration of the relationship between state power, religious authority, and the rights of individuals. However, the struggle for democratic governance and legal reform did not take place in a vacuum. The political lexicon of the region remains deeply influenced by historical, religious, and ideological frameworks, which continue to shape contemporary debates on legitimacy, governance, and justice.

In this context, the language of international law—rooted in concepts such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law—has increasingly intersected with Islamic legal traditions and political discourses. While secular democratic movements have largely adopted the terminology of international law, Islamist groups have engaged in a complex process of linguistic appropriation, selectively integrating modern political vocabulary into their ideological frameworks. This dynamic has led to both convergence and conflict, as different political actors struggle to define the parameters of governance, legitimacy, and justice.

The Concept of Legitimacy (*Shar'iyya*) and Its Political Manipulation

One of the key linguistic battles that emerged after the Arab revolutions concerned the concept of *shar'iyya* (legitimacy). In secular democratic thought, legitimacy is derived from the consent of the governed, typically expressed through free and fair elections. However, in Islamist political discourse, *shar'iyya* has often been linked to divine law (*shari'a*), creating an implicit connection between political authority and religious legitimacy (Esposito & Voll, 2001).

The Islamist party Ennahdha in Tunisia exemplifies this dynamic. In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, Ennahdha leaders proclaimed their commitment to democracy and pluralism, publicly renouncing their earlier calls for the implementation of *shari'a*. This rhetorical shift

was largely strategic, aimed at reassuring secular elites and international partners. However, within their internal discourse, Ennahdha leaders continued to use *shar'iyya* in its religious sense, conflating electoral legitimacy with religious endorsement (Ghobadzadeh, 2015).

The tension between these two interpretations of legitimacy became particularly evident in moments of political crisis. When faced with mass protests and opposition, Islamist leaders invoked *shar'iyya* as a divine mandate, portraying dissent as an attack on Islam itself. This strategy, which echoed the rhetoric of earlier Islamist movements, was used to delegitimize political opponents, who were often labeled as *kuffâr* (unbelievers) or enemies of Islam (Tibi, 2012).

The Confusion Between Electoral Legitimacy and Allegiance (*Bay'a*)

In some cases, Islamist movements conflated modern electoral legitimacy with the traditional concept of *bay'a* (oath of allegiance), a practice rooted in Islamic history where subjects pledged loyalty to a ruler. This confusion was particularly evident in Tunisia, where Ennahdha leaders, despite participating in electoral politics, often reacted to criticism as though it constituted an act of treason against a divinely sanctioned authority (Roy, 1994).

This ideological ambiguity has had significant implications for governance. In democratic systems, political authority is contingent upon accountability and the possibility of electoral defeat. However, by framing legitimacy in religious terms, Islamist parties have often resisted the notion that electoral victories confer only temporary mandates. Instead, they have treated political power as a sacred trust, leading to authoritarian tendencies even within formally democratic structures (El Fadl, 2004).

Jihad: From Religious Struggle to Political Violence

The term *jihad* has undergone significant semantic shifts throughout Islamic history. Originally, *jihad* encompassed a broad range of meanings, including personal spiritual struggle and military defense. However, in the post-9/11 and post-Arab Spring era, the term has been

increasingly associated with violent extremism and armed insurgency (Cook, 2005).

Historically, *jihad* was conceptualized in defensive terms, as noted by Abdallah Laroui (1976), who argues that from the 11th century onward, *jihad* was primarily understood as a defensive war against external aggression. However, contemporary jihadist movements have reinterpreted this concept to justify attacks against both foreign occupiers and domestic regimes deemed insufficiently Islamic (Gerges, 2005).

In the aftermath of the Arab revolutions, jihadist groups such as Ansar al-Sharia, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Katibat Oqba Ibn Nafie exploited political instability to expand their influence. These groups positioned themselves as the true defenders of Islamic governance, rejecting both secular and moderate Islamist political actors (Mandaville, 2014).

While mainstream Islamist parties distanced themselves from violent jihad, they struggled to articulate a clear stance on its legitimacy. For instance, Rached Ghannouchi, leader of Ennahdha, initially adopted an ambiguous position, emphasizing Islamic tolerance while maintaining that *jihad* remained a doctrinal principle in Islam. Under political pressure, he later clarified that *jihad* should not be used as a justification for violence in democratic societies. However, this rhetorical shift did little to alter the underlying ideological framework that continues to legitimize political violence in certain Islamist circles (Ghobadzadeh, 2015).

Democracy and *Shura*: The Islamist Semantic Strategy

Islamist movements have long faced the challenge of reconciling democracy with Islamic governance. In response, they have often engaged in a process of semantic appropriation, presenting *shura* (consultation) as an equivalent to democracy. The Quranic verse "*wa amruhum shura baynahum*" (Their affairs are conducted through consultation) (Surah Ash-Shura, 42:38) is frequently cited to support this claim (Tibi, 2012).

However, there are fundamental differences

between *shura* and democracy. While modern democracy is based on universal suffrage and the separation of powers, traditional *shura* was an advisory mechanism limited to an elite group of scholars and rulers (*uli al-amr* and *ahl al-hal wa al-aqd*). Islamist movements have often sought to blur this distinction, using *shura* as a way to claim democratic legitimacy while maintaining an exclusionary political structure (El Fadl, 2004).

Justice and Equality: The Limits of Islamist Reform

While Islamist parties have increasingly engaged with modern legal frameworks, they have often resisted the full integration of international human rights norms. A key area of contention is gender equality. Islamic jurisprudence traditionally distinguishes between men and women in matters such as inheritance, testimony, and legal guardianship. While some Islamist parties have endorsed legal reforms, they have frequently substituted the concept of "justice" (*adl*) for "equality" (*musawât*), arguing that Islam guarantees justice while maintaining gender-based distinctions (Mir-Hosseini, 2006).

This resistance was evident in Tunisia, where Ennahdha initially proposed replacing the principle of gender equality with the notion of "complementarity" between men and women in the 2014 Constitution. However, faced with widespread opposition, including from women within their own ranks, the party was forced to retreat from this position (Charrad & Zarrugh, 2021).

Conclusion

The evolution of Arabic political vocabulary is a testament to the complex interplay between religious tradition, colonial legacies, and modern political transformations. Over the centuries, the Arabic language has served as both a medium of governance and a battleground for competing ideologies. From the early Islamic period, where religious terminology structured political authority, to the colonial and postcolonial eras, where European legal and political frameworks were gradually adopted, the language of power in the Arab world has continuously evolved.

However, this evolution has been neither linear nor uniform. The persistence of religiously rooted concepts, the adaptation of modern legal terms, and the ideological struggles surrounding legitimacy, citizenship, and justice have shaped a dynamic and often contentious political discourse.

One of the key themes that emerges from this study is the tension between continuity and change in the Arabic political lexicon. The early Islamic period established foundational concepts such as *sharī'a* (divine law), *shûra* (consultation), *bay'a* (oath of allegiance), and *umma* (community), which defined governance and political legitimacy. These terms remained dominant throughout the classical and medieval periods, shaping the structures of the caliphate and the broader Islamic political order. However, with the expansion of Islamic rule and encounters with diverse civilizations, new terminologies were incorporated, leading to the gradual transformation of political thought.

The modern era brought about a significant rupture with the past, particularly through the impact of colonialism and the emergence of nation-states. The *Nahda* (Arab Renaissance) and subsequent legal reforms introduced a wave of new political concepts—*islâh* (reform), *hurriyya* (freedom), *muwâtin* (citizen), *qânûn* (law), and *dustûr* (constitution)—which sought to reconcile traditional governance structures with modern political institutions. However, this adaptation was often incomplete, as newly independent Arab states maintained elements of religious legitimacy alongside secular governance models. The persistence of hierarchical structures, where political elites (*al-khâssa*) continued to exert control over the general population (*al-'amma*), reflected the difficulty of fully transitioning to inclusive democratic systems.

The post-independence period further complicated this linguistic and ideological landscape. While many Arab states adopted the formal structures of republican or monarchical governance, the ideological contest between secular nationalists and Islamists shaped the way political concepts were understood and implemented. The rise of political Islam in the late 20th century reintroduced religious terminology

into governance, often in opposition to the secular frameworks inherited from the colonial era. Concepts such as *shar'iyya* (legitimacy), *jihâd* (struggle), and *shûra* (consultation) were reinterpreted to align with Islamist political visions, sometimes challenging the foundations of modern democratic governance.

The Arab revolutions of 2011 provided yet another inflection point in this evolution. The political upheavals of the *Arab Spring* forced both secular and Islamist movements to engage with the language of international law, democracy, and human rights. While some Islamist parties, such as Ennahdha in Tunisia, initially embraced democratic rhetoric, they continued to struggle with integrating modern legal principles into their ideological frameworks. The use of terms like *shar'iyya* to justify political authority, the ambiguous stance on human rights, and the reluctance to fully endorse gender equality highlighted the persistent ideological divides within Arab political discourse.

As the region moves forward, the future of Arabic political language will depend on the ability of its societies to reconcile their historical legacies with contemporary political realities. The challenge remains in fostering a language of governance that embraces modern legal and democratic principles while respecting the cultural and religious heritage of the region. The success of this endeavor will not only determine the trajectory of political development in the Arab world but also shape its engagement with global legal and political norms.

Ultimately, the evolution of Arabic political discourse reflects broader struggles over identity, governance, and modernity. Whether Arab societies can fully embrace the principles of constitutionalism, human rights, and pluralism without resorting to ideological rigidity remains an open question. However, what is clear is that language will continue to be at the heart of these debates, serving as both a tool of political mobilization and a mirror of the region's evolving political landscape.

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