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CHAPTER

Illiberalism and Islam

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Abstract

The evolution and spread of illiberalism occurs against the backdrop of increased contact between Muslim-majority countries and Western democracies. This chapter examines two ways in which non-Muslim illiberal movements engage with Islam to define themselves and their agendas. On the one hand, the growing visibility of Muslim groups in the Global North has led to the rise of illiberal discourse that seeks to exclude Muslims by portraying them as a threat. Nevertheless, some illiberal actors instead endorse certain Islamic principles, seek cooperation with Muslim groups, or even convert to Islam. The instrumental use of Islam by illiberal actors relies on images of the religion as a homogeneous, conservative, and male-centered system of faith. The discussion shows that the convergence between illiberal and Muslim elements primarily occurs as a critique of cultural liberalism, and it tends to be driven by expediency, is temporary in nature, and does not challenge existing power relations.

Keywords: Islam, Christianity, migration, gender, cultural liberalism

Subject: Comparative Politics, Political Theory, Political Institutions, Politics

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Introduction

The complex and multifaceted relationship between Islam and illiberalism has begun attracting scholarly attention (Huq 2021) in the context of ongoing efforts to conceptualize "illiberalism" as a comprehensive analytical concept (Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes 2021; Laruelle 2022; Waller 2023). While much of the discussion has focused on the Islamophobic trends within far-right and populist movements, which exploit the notion of Islam's supposed incompatibility with Western liberal norms and lifestyles to undermine liberal institutions, this chapter contends that this anti-Islamic stance represents merely one aspect of the intricate interplay between Islam and illiberalism. In fact, there exists a contrasting phenomenon where non-Muslim illiberal actors embrace Islam's purported anti-liberalism. Both approaches—Islamophobic and pro-Islamic—draw on a mediated depiction of Islam that attributes the perceived anti-liberal behaviors of Muslims to the essentialized features of the religion.

The chapter is organized as follows: In the first part, the central concepts will be introduced, with a particular focus on the limitations of the term "Islam" as used here. The following analysis will explore the key pillars of the mediated image of Islam concerning gender, reason, and political action, which are crucial to the discourses elaborated by the two forms of non-Muslim illiberalism mentioned above. In the second part, various illiberal actors and movements will be examined to demonstrate how pro-Islamic illiberalism employs the mediated image of Islam to challenge different aspects of liberalism.

Liberalism, Illiberalism, and Islam

In defining *liberalism*, the chapter draws on Marlene Laruelle's (2022) concept paper that distinguishes the five primary "scripts" that shape contemporary liberalism. These include: (1) a political script that centers on individual freedom and democracy, (2) an economic script that is associated with a market economy and private property, often implemented in the form of neoliberalism, (3) a cultural script that is linked to the political script and emphasizes the emancipatory potential of individual rights, particularly identity rights, (4) a geopolitical script that is connected to the liberal international order and US post-Cold War unilateralism, and (5) a colonial script that presumes the West's imposition of supposedly universal liberal values on the "Rest" and the unfeasibility of "multiple modernities" (Laruelle 2022, 311–313). The chapter will focus primarily on the cultural script that constitutes the major area of illiberal counteraction; to a lesser extent, the discussion will engage also with the political, geopolitical, and economic scripts.

Illiberalism has an *ex negativo* relation to liberalism, yet, unlike anti-liberalism, it does not negate liberalism as a whole, but rather seeks to modify some of its postulates or correct what are seen as its excesses. Importantly, illiberalism can be distinguished from earlier anti-liberal ideologies by the fact that it is a relatively recent phenomenon specific to societies that have reacted to liberalism in the post-1980s period —that is, after having experienced it in various and conflicting forms (Laruelle 2022). The chapter examines how symbols, ideas, and practices inspired by Islam serve as a form and means of expressing the "backlash" against liberalism in its various forms.

Critical conceptualizations of the complexity and heterogeneity of Islamic practice and theology have moved beyond the notion of "religion," defining Islam—in the most extensive sense of the word—as a "discursive tradition" or "religion-cum-worldview" (Asad 1986; Anjum 2007; Ahmed 2016). This chapter draws on the assumption that Islam—like other systems of faith—is not necessarily anti- or illiberal in nature. However, as emphasized by Gregorio Bettiza in his contribution to this volume, "specific kinds of religious and civilizational ideologies are today involved in some of the most sustained forms of contestation and critique of multiple liberal aspects." Such ideologies, by and large, tend to ignore the complex diversity of Islamic lived experience across time and space, collapsing utterly distinct societies

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across the Middle East, Africa, Eurasia, and Southeast Asia, and now also in the countries of the Global North, under the category Islam/Muslimness (Said 1978; Morrison 2009; Motadel 2014; for a critique of the contemporary use of "Muslim" as a category of analysis, see Brubaker 2013).

The contemporary producers of illiberal religious ideologies that rely on Islamic symbolism include both Muslims and non-Muslims. However, given the objectives of this chapter, we will not delve into the compatibility of Islamic institutions with political liberalism (Hashas 2019; March 2011), nor will we explore the diverse range of trends within political Islam that, by and large, belong to the right of the political spectrum (March 2015) and exercise a critique of liberalism (often in connection to nationalism, democracy, Marxism, and capitalism). These topics, albeit crucial for understanding the complex interplay between European political thought and Islam, tend to redirect attention to Muslim communities that are then assessed against the liberalization scale, which often leaves the normativity and mechanisms of exclusion specific to (il)liberalism in the shadow. Instead, the discussion will concern non-Muslim illiberal actors that often rely on an essentialized understanding of Islam as an inherently anti-liberal, culturally conservative, and/or violent religion. These salient cognitive schemata are rooted in the ideological frame of Orientalism (Said 1978), practices of exoticization and essentialization of Muslims as the Other under colonial domination, as well as a discursive framework of "neo-Orientalism" that explains the value polarization between the West and the East primarily through Muslims' supposed inability to implement democratization in the modern period (Schmidt 2014; Tuastad 2003; Sadowski 1993).

In the tradition of "early Orientalism," which persisted until roughly the 1960s, Muslims were viewed as Others who could be observed and fantasized over from a distance. These depictions often conflated prejudiced views of Islam with a fascination for its mystical tradition. In contrast, contemporary illiberal portrayals of Islam are reinforced by the physical presence of Muslims in Western societies following migration and refugee flows, as well as the salience of negative representations of Muslims (particularly Arabs) in mass media, increasingly after events such as the oil crisis in 1973, the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979, and especially after the 9/11 attacks in the United States and the ISIS-directed attacks in Europe, all depicted as manifestations of Muslims' arguably innate cruelty (Schmidt 2014, 159–166; Cherkaoui 2010; Wöhlert 2007).

Mediated Islam and Illiberalism

Non-Muslim illiberal actors rely on a constructed image of Islam that rests on three key pillars, which are commonly portrayed as antithetical to liberal values. First, Islam is often portrayed as a conservative and patriarchal religion that is perceived as rejecting women's and sexual-minority rights. Second, Islam is considered an anti-secular religion that challenges the separation of religion and state. Finally, Islam is seen as a political religion that prioritizes religious identity over any other identity. While these preconceptions may be fueled by real-world phenomena, such as ongoing Arab-Israeli hostilities, repressive authoritarian regimes in Muslim-majority countries, or violence against women or gay men in Muslim migrant communities in Western Europe, it is important to note that the underlying causes of these issues are often complex and multifaceted, involving historical, socioeconomic, and political factors, and hence cannot be reduced to the essence of religion or the perceived innate characteristics of believers.

Gender, in particular, is a significant factor in attitudes toward Muslims, with Muslim men often being portrayed as aggressive, hot-tempered, and intolerant, while Muslim women are depicted as oppressed and subjugated. Early Orientalist discourses stereotyped gender roles in Muslim societies through popular culture (Yegenoglu 1998; Dobie 2001; Beaulieu, Roberts, and Thomas 2002), but this depiction became increasingly polarized as the veil became the central symbol of feminist discourse in the West in the

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twentieth century, which portrayed sexism and violence against women practically as the exclusive domain of Islam (El Guindi 1999; Massad 2015).[1]

In recent years, the portrayal of Islam as a conservative, patriarchal system of values that upholds traditional gender norms has become aligned with the illiberal critique of feminism, which views women's activism as undermining "real" masculinity.[2] Thus, while non-Muslim critics of Islam have been focused on the feminist agenda, sympathizers have begun engaging with Islamist masculinity. This masculinity, emphasizing maleness, purity, and faith through a warrior culture, is in itself a product of Islamist and fundamentalist movements born out of the Cold War-era struggles in the MENA region (Gerami 2005). In the contemporary context, it gains traction, for instance, in the larger "manosphere," an online space consisting of blogs, forums, and social media dominated by men who share a belief in traditional gender roles and male supremacy. The "manosphere" often employs "the femonationalist depiction of Muslim patriarchy as oppressive toward women" to advocate for a "return to a patriarchal order that secures white men's natural place" (Ghumkhor and Mir 2022, 144).

The binary opposition between Islam and liberalism is further reinforced by the portrayal of Muslims as individuals who are obligated, by the norms of their faith, to unconditionally accept religious norms, thereby rejecting the superiority of reason, rational thinking, and scientific evidence. This framing often attributes Islam's alleged cultural "backwardness" to the absence of religious reforms of the kind instigated in Christianity by the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. This perception overlooks the intricate sociopolitical factors that have impeded the progress of science and technology in numerous Muslim-majority countries and communities under colonial rule. It also ignores the history and outcomes of Muslim reformist movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that formulated diverse strategies to achieve an "Islamic Reformation" in order to overcome political and cultural subjugation (Kurzman and Browers 2004; Sibgatullina 2022).

In the contemporary context, the lack-of-Reformation trope reinforces the assumption that secularism, understood as the separation of the church and state, is unattainable in Islamic societies. However, there is a growing body of scholarship that illustrates how the problem often lies not so much in Islamic postulates as in innate characteristics of secular hegemony in liberal democracies that tend to discriminate against non-Christian practices and reinforce white Christian privilege (Blumenfeld 2006; Joshi 2020). This happens not least through the blurring of the categories "secular" and "culturally Christian": the latter renders culturally Christian traditions, such as Christmas, to be neutral and thus inclusive to individuals from all religious backgrounds (Lauwers 2022). Particularly populist and far-right parties in Europe articulate the European Christian identity primarily as secular, where "Christianity is embraced not as a religion but as a civilizational identity understood in antithetical opposition to Islam" (Brubaker 2017, 1194). In such cases, "secularism is embraced as a way of minimizing the visibility of Islam in the public sphere" (Brubaker 2017, 1194).

Illiberal discourses of the opposite type embrace Islam's assumed "unspoiled" nature, arguably untouched by the Reformation and Enlightenment.[3] These voices are critical of the far right's liberal-civilizationist shift and perceive rationalism and secularism as a threat to "European civilization." Unlike the illiberal groups that promote a secular and individualist approach to life and religion, this group "[attributes] wider powers to religion and [sees] it as a collectively shared source of resistance to globalization, capitalism, and liberalism" (Göpffarth and Özyürek 2020, 11–12).

Finally, the postcolonial context and the development of Muslim-majority states have brought to the forefront Islam's political formulations. In the Cold War era, academic and public discourses began using the term "Islamism" to distinguish political Islam from Islam as a supposedly neutral "world religion"[4] (Mozaffari 2007). However, the usefulness of Islamism as a concept has been debated, since while referring to a range of Muslim movements, the notion tends to erroneously stigmatize them all as advocating

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violence (Martin and Barzegar 2009). Highly politicized discourse on Islamism fosters discrimination and continues to reinforce negative public perceptions of Islam more generally (Varisco 2009).

While Islam shares certain ideological and utopian perspectives with other religions, the concept of Islamism portrays the political aspect of Muslims as something distinct and inherently more violent than those of other faiths. Asad (2003) contested the notion of a secular state being an unbiased arbitrator that tolerates different religions within its borders. He argued that a powerful state reinforces perceptions of dangerous forms of religiosity, which currently underpin notions of "radical" and "Salafi" Islam, resulting in the securitization of a broad spectrum of religious expression (Buijs 2009; Cesari 2010; Fox and Akbaba 2015).

Since the end of the Cold War and the aftermath of 9/11, there has been a dominant narrative that depicts Islam as fundamentally opposed to geopolitical liberalism, a world order led by the United States. Initially, the United States spearheaded the promotion of this discourse, which has since been adopted by Europe as well (Schmidt 2014, 169; Tuastad 2003). This framing has allowed for comparisons between Islamism and twentieth-century anti-liberal ideologies such as fascism, giving rise to concepts like "Islamofascism." The possibility of such an ideological merger has been debated, and critics have brought attention to the term's conceptual vagueness, as both "fascism" and "Islam" lack clear definitions and can be used to denote conflicting realities (e.g., Schulze 2012; Wild 2012; Bar-on 2018).

The term "Islamofascism" may have analytical weaknesses, but it holds significant implications for two reasons. First, it reinforces the assumption that Islamic teachings inherently promote virulent anti-Semitism (for a critique, see Schroeter [2018]), which fuels Islamophobic discourses that paint Muslims as intolerant. On the other hand, this same assumption drives far-right anti-Semitic groups to form alliances with Islamist groups. Second, proponents of the term equate Islam with fascism, depicting it as a modern version of fascism that liberalism must confront once again. Besides being discriminatory toward Muslims, this depiction of Islam may, at the same time, attract individuals attempting to distance themselves from discredited or banned fascist networks while maintaining an exclusivist set of ideas.

In understanding the Islam-inspired radicalism that drives the securitization of Islam in the Global North and its ties with non-Islamic extremism, this chapter relies on the work of Olivier Roy (2004; 2010; 2017). Roy has argued that Muslim youth radicalization and jihadi terrorism are not the consequences of the radicalization of Islam (through Salafism), but rather the Islamization of radicalism. As Islam becomes increasingly "de-culturized"—detached from regionally specific understandings of Islamic practice due to immigration, globalization, and secularization—it loses its social bonding functions. In such a detached form, globalized Islam enables second- and third-generation immigrants to piece together a religion without social and cultural embedding while also becoming a convenient framework for non-Muslim radicalized groups to express their views and seek alliances.

Two Forms of Illiberalism and Islam Relations

As the discussion in the previous section has already indicated, we can distinguish two forms of relationship between illiberalism and the mediated image of Islam: one form contests Islam for its assumed anti-liberal essence, while the second form embraces this essence. In both cases, illiberal actors use references to Islam to define themselves and/or their agenda; and in both forms, Muslims, although named, do not participate in shaping the illiberal agenda, or do so indirectly and without much control over their involvement.

The first form is represented by the rise of far-right, populist, and anti-Islamic movements in Europe (less so in the United States), which gained momentum in the late 1990s and especially after 2015. These movements have relied heavily on and fueled anti-Islamic sentiment to mobilize voters (Kallis 2018; Oztig,

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Gurkan, and Aydin 2021; Pickel and Öztürk 2021). Framing Islam and Muslims as a matter of security, social tension, or cultural threat has enabled "politicians acting within an overall liberal political constellation ... to advance illiberal impulses" (Huq 2021, 332). This development has brought together formerly antagonistic parties under a shared anti-Muslim agenda, making Islamophobia a form of "widely accepted racism" in many European political landscapes (Hafez 2014, 2; Kallis 2018). The actual numbers of Muslim minorities and the degree of their integration in individual countries have played little role, as even Eastern European countries with considerably smaller Muslim migrant populations have exhibited similar or even more prominent Islamophobic discourses than those in Western Europe (Pickel and Öztürk 2018).

In this form of illiberalism, Islam is used as a tool to critique and, in some cases, dismantle liberal institutions and "corrupt elites," which are blamed for failing to effectively manage migration and the integration of Muslims (including guest workers, their families, and refugees), which arguably endangers the social cohesion, safety, and economic well-being of host societies. In this kind of illiberal discourse, Muslims function as the primary "enemy of the people," where "the people" are defined in terms of a shared Christian faith or, in a more secular interpretation, in terms of a shared cultural Christian identity (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Peace 2021). Classifying outspokenly anti-Islamic political actors solely as anti-liberal is complicated, as they rely on legitimate democratic practices such as elections and operate within the discourse of liberalism. Parties like the Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) in the Netherlands, the Northern League (*Lega Nord*) in Italy, the French National Rally (*Rassemblement National*), and the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*) criticize the "failed" or "insufficient" integration of Muslims in Europe in terms of individual freedoms. Opposition to Muslims, in their rhetoric, means defending fundamental liberal values, such as individualism, secularism, and gender equality against religious fundamentalism (Betz and Meret 2009; Brubaker 2017; Oztig, Gurkan, and Aydin 2021).

The second part of this chapter will, however, focus primarily on the second type of relationship between illiberalism and mediated Islam, in which the religion is portrayed not in negative but in positive terms. The illiberal actors of this second type tend to embrace Islam's perceived opposition to liberalism: they may adopt notions considered uniquely Islamic, such as "sharia" and "jihad" (e.g., alt-right groups promoting "white sharia"); facilitate "fringe fluidity" by forming ideological alliances between far-right and Islamist groups (e.g., the far right's endorsement of the Islamic State); or articulate critiques of economic and cultural liberalism from the position of an educated Muslim convert.

This relationship stems primarily from resentment toward certain aspects of liberalism that are perceived to originate from the core principles of Judeo-Christian civilization. The trend is not limited to countries that historically have been in tension with Western European values of democracy, civilization, and progress, such as Germany and Russia. A hostility toward liberalism as a phenomenon specific to the Judeo-Christian heritage also occurs from within—traditionally Christian-majority countries in Western Europe that have experienced a diminishing moral authority of Christian churches in the post-World War II period.

Illiberal actors in this second group see liberalism as engendering the erosion of moral norms and the dissolution of historically dominant community ties. They question assertive secularization practices that seek to exclude religion from the public space and challenge advocacy for women's rights and LGBTQ equality as endangering the family institution. These actors also speak against the dominance of rational and scientific forms of thinking that, they argue, are often framed as the only legitimate ways of social thought and knowledge construction (Göpffarth and Özyürek 2020).

While illiberal actors in this second group may appear sympathetic toward Islam, their association with this religion does not contest the prevailing discriminatory practices against Muslim communities in the Global North (Sibgatullina and Abbas 2021). In their discourse, these actors tend to emphasize their position of moral and cultural superiority and reinforce the existing racialization of Muslims as inherently aggressive

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and ultraconservative, while these characteristics become recontextualized and praised as assertiveness and loyalty to tradition.

Both types of relationships between illiberalism and Islam discussed in this chapter are illiberal because they "[propose] solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favoring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity" (Laruelle 2022, 304). Their ideological genealogy is, however, different. The anti-Islamic movement that emerged after 9/11 originates not from the far right but from the anti-Islamic tradition within historical liberalism (Huq 2021). This movement thus represents a partial coupling between liberalism and authoritarianism from a liberal starting point—that is, liberalism that has drifted to the right (Berntzen 2019). By contrast, pro-Islamic illiberalism illustrates the growing complexity of anti-modernist and anti-liberal trends in the context of the global culture wars, which has led non-Muslim conservatives to engage with their Muslim counterparts in challenging the dominant world order (geopolitical liberalism) or cultural normativity (cultural liberalism).

At first glance, these two types seem to be mutually exclusive. The first type suggests that Islam is a threat to liberal values and therefore advocates for controlling the religion through securitization, secularization, and/or assimilation. The second type, in contrast, welcomes Islam as a driving force behind social change, as a necessary correction to what illiberal actors see as liberalism's predisposition to producing moral decline. However, the two types constitute two sides of the same coin, as they draw on the same essentialized depiction of Islam and Muslims constructed in opposition to what are perceived as liberal values, religious norms, and worldviews. For some, this imagined opposition to Western civilization is something to be controlled and ideally eliminated; for others, it is to be adopted.

Embracing Islam to Challenge Liberalism

The following part of the chapter discusses the prevalence of the second type of relationship between illiberalism and Islam in various domains, in line with the "scripts" of liberalism proposed by Laruelle (2022). Compared to the illiberal forces that oppose Islam, the institutions and individuals discussed in this section represent a minority group, and their efforts to embrace Islam with the aim of challenging certain aspects of liberalism remain relatively marginal. But despite their limited numbers, these actors, often because of their paradoxical affiliation with Islam, receive significant media attention and enjoy a disproportionate level of visibility. Furthermore, their integration into existing political institutions, their intellectual and symbolic capital, and their tech and media savviness, along with their ability to speak to communities that feel threatened by cultural liberalism, contribute to their significant authority and power.

Against Cultural Liberalism

As discussed in other chapters of this volume (Bettiza; Henning; Stoeckl and Ayoub), illiberal religious politics frequently stands against what Laruelle describes as "cultural liberalism." This form of illiberalism opposes multiculturalism and minority rights and instead promotes traditionalist, essentialist, nativist, or assimilationist visions of community.

The non-Muslim illiberal actors' rapprochement with Islam takes place against the global tendency, where international conservative actors join forces in their effort to prevent advocacy of a culturally liberal agenda around issues related to family, abortion, sexuality and gender, education, and religious freedom (see the contribution by Stoeckl and Ayoub in this volume). Initially, these alliances were primarily made up of Christian Right actors, but over time, Islamic organizations have become more frequently included in conservative platforms. For example, Christian-Muslim networks were formed around "traditional" family values at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), provided legal and ideological support

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for legislation outlawing abortion in Nicaragua (2006), and endorsed a bill against gay rights in Uganda (2009) (Bob 2012, 37–38; Graff and Korolczuk 2021, 38–66). These networks, which Bob (2012, 37) described as "Baptist-Burqa networks," bring together religiously motivated activists from various trends within Christianity and Islam. The emergence of these networks reflects the growing sophistication of moral-conservative Christian activists who understand that conservative change on a global scale requires a networked alliance of orthodoxies (Buss 2003). These alliances between Christian and Islamic power groups cross religious denominations, but they do not ignore the long-standing theological antagonisms between the two religions. Rather, they reflect pragmatic yet temporary collaboration around shared agendas.

On a grassroots level, a similar dynamic is to be observed in the political reorientation of European far-right parties. In 2018–2019, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, several far-right parties previously known for their anti-Islamic stance shifted their focus to other issues. The "Muslim threat" became less pressing as migration slowed during lockdowns, and party leaders realized that a solely Islam-focused approach would not attract a voter base broad enough for the party to become influential. In 2022, Marine Le Pen from France's Rassemblement National, for instance, downplayed the headscarf ban and concentrated more on bread-and-butter issues to compete with another far-right presidential candidate, Éric Zemmour.[5] Furthermore, far-right parties have to differentiate themselves from their competitors in the same political spectrum. In the Netherlands, for instance, the relatively young Forum for Democracy (*Forum voor Democratie*, FvD) could not compete with the veterans of the anti-migration, anti-Islam movement, the Party for Freedom. Hence, the FvD turned to a broader "anti-woke" protest base and began targeting young male Muslims through social-media platforms (Halouchi and Loomans 2023).

Far-right and center-right parties have shown an interest in collaborating with Muslims, particularly Muslim intellectuals, as a way to distance themselves from discredited theories of nativism and biological racism and focus on cultural or civilizational exclusivism instead. For example, in Germany, there is a diverse range of advocates with migration backgrounds operating in connection with the far right. Some of them reinforce the civilizational divide between the West and the East and call for a radical transformation of Islam to make it more compatible with Germanness, while others believe that the spiritual potential of Islam can help to revive a spiritual sense of Germanness (Göpffarth and Özyürek 2020). An important role in this process is played by converts to Islam, some of whom have previously been associated with European far-right parties. In the past, two former members of the Dutch far-right Party for Freedom (PVV), Arnoud van Doorn (in 2012) and Joram van Klaveren (in 2019), caused public controversy by announcing their conversion to Islam. Similarly, Daniel Streich of the Swiss People's Party (2009), Maxence Buttey from France's Front National (2014), and Arthur Wagner from the Alternative for Germany (2018) made a drastic change in their rhetoric after embracing Islam (Sibgatullina and Abbas 2021). Although there are strictly individual reasons for conversion, European converts to Islam nevertheless serve as mediator figures between Muslim and non-Muslim conservative groups. As the converts become more ideologically aligned with non-Muslim conservative groups, they tend to adopt majoritarian identity discourses and become less inclusive of non-white Muslims (Birt 2022).

Another type of connection between cultural illiberalism and Islam at the grassroots level is symbol-borrowing. In this case, non-Muslim illiberal forces have appropriated certain elements from illiberal Muslim counterparts without necessarily establishing a formal partnership. For instance, in February 2016 the British neo-Nazi group National Action released a recruitment video that called on British youth to launch a "white jihad." The concept of "white jihad" symbolized a set of white-supremacist goals to be achieved by emulating the tactics of militant Islamist groups such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda. Jack Renshaw, the leader of National Action, repeatedly performed the raised-finger gesture associated with jihadists (Zelinsky 2015).

A notable example of symbol-borrowing is the "white sharia" meme introduced in 2016, which referenced the patriarchal aspect of Islamic (sharia) law. It started as militant advocacy of traditional gender roles, a

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rejection of feminism, and a tribute to the "inner barbarian" in men. Sacco Vandal, the author of *The American Militant Nationalist Manifesto* (2015) and one of the originators of the meme, argued that "calls for our people to adopt a Sharia-like form of extreme patriarchy is an effective tactic because, again, it is the only living example of extreme patriarchy left in the world today" (Kelley 2017). The meme remains controversial, as it is popular among some conservative groups but also draws criticism from others.

Symbol-borrowing in online culture can go in both directions. Generation Z (Gen-Z) Salafists, in particular, have been increasingly fluid in their ideology, blending traditional Salafist discourses with alt-right-style imagery. Ayad (2021) has discussed in detail the English-speaking Salafi influencers who make up the community known as "Islamogram." These influencers operate on Instagram but use the visual and linguistic culture of 4Chan, Reddit, and Discord, which are prominent forums among the alt-right. Examples of their use of alt-right imagery include a meme of Pepe the Frog in armed-group garb and a beret emblazoned with *shahada*, the Islamic creed (Ayad 2021, 5).

Thus, certain physical objects (such as the veil or a *kufi* [male cap]), phenomena (like sharia), and language (Arabic loanwords and expressions such as *shahada*) that are associated with Islam and Muslimness in popular culture become mediated as symbols of a specific, often conservative and exclusive, ideology. In the alt-right online culture, those who endorse anti-Semitism, homophobia, and male dominance view ultraconservative Muslims as ideological allies. This leads to the blurring of boundaries between non-Muslim alt-right and radicalized Muslim youth communities, with symbols previously associated with the Muslim Other becoming shared, if not universal, for criticizing LGBTQ, feminist, and anti-racist agendas. This trend has the potential to spill over to relatively mainstream platforms and go beyond exclusively male audiences. For example, in a recent TikTok trend, young Christian women in France have adopted the "Islam-specific" symbol—the veil—to signal their moderate Christian religiosity (Lauvergnier 2022), which also highlights the impact of Islamic dress code on fashion and style in non-Muslim communities.

The two kinds of associations between illiberal actors and Islam discussed in this subsection—intellectual alliances and symbol-borrowing—share several common features. They rely on a mediated understanding of Islam as an inherently conservative religion regarding gender norms and family structures, although the specific characteristics attributed to Islam and their interpretation vary. As a result, the affiliation with Islam serves a specific political purpose, whether to enhance social power for established institutions, create distance from more extremist groups for political actors, or provoke and attract more followers for alt-right and online influencers.

Against Political Liberalism

Another group of illiberal actors who endorse the lifestyle perceived as Islamic tend to question the moral legitimacy of liberal democratic states and distrust their ability to protect the majority group. These actors often identify with a radical counterculture and exhibit an affinity for violence against state institutions and/or other social groups. Some seek to dismantle existing government systems, while others use political violence to pressure the state into strengthening its security apparatus at the expense of individual freedoms. Conspiracy theories, outspoken anti-Semitism, and a willingness to use violence are dominant features of this group of illiberal actors.

Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman (2019) have coined the term "fringe fluidity" to describe alliances between violent illiberal actors and radical religion-inspired movements. This term encompasses a range of processes, including instances where individuals from ultranationalist circles or those with criminal backgrounds convert to Islam and join militant Islamist organizations such as the Islamic State. Fringe fluidity can also refer to cases where illiberal actors endorse violent Islamism without necessarily becoming adherents themselves. For example, the US-based white supremacist organization Aryan Nations not only

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praised the 9/11 attacks but also created a branch called "the Ministry of Islamic Liaison" to foster connections with international Islamist groups. (In 2002, Aryan Nations sent a "message of solidarity and support" to the then-president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein.) However, the pro-Islamist orientation of the Aryan Nations leadership was not without controversy, as some members believed the organization should remain solely tied to Christian identity groups, while others argued that the arguably shared hatred of Jews made the group inclusive to Muslims as well (Schuster 2005).

Another example is the "Boogaloo Bois," a decentralized ideological network whose members believe in the inevitability of a second US civil war. Within this network is a subgroup called the "Boojahideen," a term that plays off the word "mujahideen," Islamic guerrillas best known for toppling the Soviet-backed communist state in Afghanistan. The association with mujahideen emphasizes the subgroup's anti-government and anti-law enforcement rhetoric. One could also argue that it allows the group to distance itself from other far-right groups in the country, especially in terms of attitudes toward racism. Some "Boojahideen" members have even expressed support for allying against the government with the Black Lives Matter and anti-fascist movements (Newhouse and Gunesch 2020).

Several studies have analyzed cases where organized crime networks and jihadist cells have collaborated in causing disruption within the countries of the Global North. However, such cases are not systematic and remain occasional collaborations (Chermak, Freilich, and Simone 2017). In some instances, vigilantes aim to make up for what they see as deficient governmental structures—for example, in moral policing. The so-called "sharia police," conceived in 2014 by Sven Lau, a convert to Islam, and other members of the German Salafi scene have addressed individuals in front of gambling halls and other entertainment establishments to warn them of the risks of moral corruption in gambling, alcoholism, and pornography (Schröter 2016).

The phenomenon of "fringe fluidity" may be explained by socioeconomic causes in some cases, as there are often similarities in the social background of those prone to cross boundaries between radical religious or political movements. These individuals tend to come from low-income, low-education families and have typically experienced economic disadvantage and various forms of discrimination (Abbas 2017). However, there are also ideological parallels that drive such alliances as well. Meleagrou-Hitchens, Crawford, and Wutke (2021) have identified ideological overlaps between radicalized Muslim and far-right fringe movements: chauvinist collective identity, conspiracism, anti-Semitism, utopianism, and belief in the necessity and legitimacy of violence. Both fringe groups view political liberalism and cultural liberalization as a threat to their respective in-groups, which they define in supremacist terms. Threats to the in-groups are considered part of a wide-ranging conspiracy, an idea often serving as a thin veil for overt anti-Semitism. Both groups have authoritarian and, in some cases, totalitarian characteristics and legitimize the use of violence as the only means to counter threats and construct a utopian society. This achievable utopia is grounded in the idea of a past civilization or society—the Islamic or ethnic state, respectively—that has been destroyed or dismantled at the hands of nefarious forces.

Far-right support for global Islamist movements is typically a one-way relationship: radicalized Muslim groups rarely seek to affiliate with American or European far-right groups, except in recruitment efforts. In the few instances where there is outreach toward the far right by radicalized Muslims to build a broader "anti-Zionist coalition," the collaboration often centers around Holocaust denial and conspiracy theories about the 9/11 attacks (Lee 2002; Michael 2006; Winter 2014). In general, partnerships between fringe Muslim and non-Muslim illiberal groups do not lead to ideological convergence or long-term sustainability. Instead, they are temporary alliances formed to achieve a shared set of goals, often utilizing similar tactics. However, white male converts to Islam who engage in violent actions have the potential to act as hybrid figures, as they can translate radical Islamist ideas to non-Muslim audiences by utilizing discourses and language familiar to those audiences.[6]

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Against Geopolitical Liberalism

Finally, illiberal actors have sought to associate themselves with Islam in their contestation of geopolitical liberalism, which has manifested itself in the form of a struggle against the hegemony of the United States as a global superpower and moral norm interpreter, Western European countries as defining EU policies, particularly on women's and LGBTQ rights, and the power of transnational financial institutions as instruments of neoliberalism.

The anti-American and anti-Israeli orientation of Muslim countries and movements, whether outspoken or assumed, has made them an object of interest for critics of the unipolar world, particularly in the immediate post-Cold War years. In Russia, after the demise of the communist project, there were a few attempts to build a unified ideological front comprising national conservatives and Muslims, the most prominent being the project of Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin (b. 1962) to create a Grand Alliance between Russia and Iran. The latter, in Dugin's interpretations, is a perfect geopolitical ally, since Iran shares Russia's anti-Americanist sentiment, while a strategic partnership would finally provide Russia with access to the "warm seas"—that is, the Indian Ocean (Shlapentokh 2008). But despite Dugin's calls in the late 1990s and early 2000s for Russian elites to support Iran economically and militarily, a tight union was not formed; however, Russia still maintains close relations with the country.

In Europe, an association with certain Muslim-majority countries that the EU has condemned for violations of human rights has become a powerful instrument in itself. In Hungary, the far-right populist party *Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom* (Jobbik, Movement for a Better Hungary, est. 2003) framed its resistance to the EU's liberal rule of law by referencing Islam and Turanism. Drawing on theories that advocate a special ethnogenesis of Hungarians (Magyar tribes purportedly arrived in the Carpathian Basin from Asia), Hungarian Turanism has promoted the cooperation of peoples ethnically and linguistically related to Central Asia—today a home region for millions of Muslims. The ideology has enabled the Jobbik party leadership to combine diffuse elements—facts from Hungarian history, nationalist and Christian ideas, as well as esotericism—with pro-Muslim sentiments. In Jobbik's rhetoric, traditional Islam constitutes a beacon of hope in the midst of globalization and the growing dominance of (neo)liberal values. While distancing itself from the populist anti-Islam parties of Europe, Jobbik has invested in fostering international connections, developing ties with Iran, Turkey, and Central Asian republics and advancing a pro-Russian political orientation. However, flirtations with Islam and the arguments for opening up to the East backfired during the 2015 migration crisis, after which Jobbik had to embrace the anti-immigration rhetoric championed by the ruling party (Enyedi 2016; Pap and Glied 2018).

Some illiberal movements have praised principles of Islamic economics in order to challenge the growing political clout of the international financial sector and combat the wealth inequality that followed the introduction of neoliberal market reforms. The economic transformations of the 1980s and the global financial crisis of 2008 led to renewed interest in the possibilities of combining the market economy and Islam, and more specifically, the incorporation of Islamic values into daily financial transactions. For instance, Umar Vadillo, a Spanish convert to Islam affiliated with the Murabitun World Movement, has discussed in detail the possibilities of applying Islamic principles such as *zakat* (an obligatory submission of a portion of an individual's wealth to charities) and the prohibition of usury to address what he sees as the root causes of economic crises in Europe. In particular, he has argued in favor of introducing metal coins—the golden dinar and silver dirham, which were used in the past by the Umayyad Caliphate—to back trading currency with precious metals and thereby abolish fiat money (Brubandt 2010; Vadillo 1991; 1996). Vadillo has been somewhat successful in promoting his ideas in Southeast Asia; however, the embrace of alternative Islamic currencies has remained rather symbolic.

The illiberal movements discussed in this subsection offer critiques of various aspects of global liberalism, including the military, political, and economic dominance of the United States as a global superpower, the

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normative understanding of liberalism in the EU as a supranational organization, and the unequal distribution of wealth within global capitalist markets. These criticisms are typically part of a broader argument that focuses on ethics and the value system of liberalism. Specifically, the geopolitical dominance of the United States and the EU is understood primarily in terms of cultural hegemony, which assumes the superiority of a particular value system.

In this context, Islam is seen as the religion of the Global South and an ideological backbone of countries such as Turkey and Iran, which have the influence to challenge Western alliances. In countries like Russia and Hungary, which have historically recognized their subordinate position to Western Europe and have sought to reformulate their identity in a positive sense as both European and Asian, "Eurasianist" ideas that legitimize partnerships with Muslim-majority countries are naturally present in the broad spectrum of conservative ideologies.

Similarly, the discussion of the harms of unchecked capitalism and neoliberal reform operates not so much in financial terms as in terms of the moral economy—that is, the moral principles in which market action is embedded. (Consider that the 9/11 attacks in the United States aimed not only at political symbols like the Pentagon and Capitol but also at the icon representing the US global economic power—the World Trade Center.) While the concept of implementing Islamic banking principles to promote a fairer economic policy may be intellectually attractive, it has proven to be exceedingly difficult to put into practice.

Conclusion

Illiberalism engages with a mediated image of Islam to challenge an array of dominant structures and mechanisms within the liberal democracies of the Global North. This chapter has primarily focused on non-Muslim illiberal actors. While Islamophobia remains a distinctive element of far-right, populist, and centrist conservative actors, who have been cautious in building alliances with Muslims, a small but visible share of illiberal actors have taken a positive stance toward Islam as a conservative ideological system. The narratives produced to legitimize this positionality indicate several significant trends within the illiberal camp.

First, an affiliation between illiberalism and mediated Islam, which has been clearly intensifying in the post-9/11 environment, suggests that illiberalism has a high degree of ideological plasticity. Dichotomies and group boundaries that differentiate "them" from "us" are being continuously redrawn, and, in the process, (conservative) Muslims have ceased to be part of the out-group. However, alliances with Muslims are often based on political expediency and lack a profound theological or ideological partnership. As the culture wars become increasingly globalized, the cultural distance between the West and the Rest is diminishing. Mediated Islam as a set of specific illiberal values, ideas, and symbols is being reinterpreted to detach it from historical centers of Islamic history and practice; thus, becoming convenient means to express illiberal ideas. In this process, the religion and its practitioners become separated, resulting in the phenomenon of praise for the Islamic system of values coexisting with a negative view of or even hatred toward Muslims.

Second, the illiberalism-Islam relationship reveals that the challenge to liberalism is strongest in the cultural sphere, particularly in the aspects related to the democratization of gender norms. Mediated Islam is attractive to illiberal forces because of the sensationalized depictions of this religion rooted in Orientalist imagery and patriarchal practices in Muslim migrant communities. Depending on the actor's position in the spectrum "fringe-center," interpretations vary. Some illiberal actors appeal to the image of Islam as a religion capable of igniting revolt and nonconformism, while others promote its "masculinity" and "liveliness" over Christianity's "femininity" and "passivity." A common denominator for all these

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interpretations is the idea of Islam being a patriarchal, male-centered religion that has remained static over the centuries and is immune to cultural liberalization pressure.

The discussed examples have shown that a rapprochement between illiberal actors and certain Muslim groups does not lead to reconsidering existing social and political hierarchies. The rapprochement is usually initiated by illiberal forces representing the majority group or a powerful political player in the international arena. Often, alliances with Muslim groups or Muslim-majority countries have no practical utility but function as a performative act to signal affiliation with a counterculture, provoke a public reaction, and invite media attention.

It is possible that a more profound ideological convergence may emerge in the future. In countries in the Global North with growing Muslim populations, institutions governing Islam choose or are being forced to imitate existing state-church relations. This "churchification" (Vinding 2018) of Islamic institutions could result in Muslim leaders adopting conservative Christian discourses on cultural issues. With the increasing incorporation of Muslims into Global North societies and a growing Muslim citizenry with voting rights, political parties will likely start directly appealing to these voters. While the political left has been addressing shares of the Muslim population by advocating inclusive, non-discriminatory, and pro-migration agendas, the political right is in the process of redefining itself. Opponents of cultural liberalization policies may strategically choose to abandon anti-Islamic discourse to attract younger generations of Muslims more concerned with gender and identity issues than with participation and labor rights, which were the primary concerns of first-generation migrants.

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Notes

1 Such ideas are problematic as they tend to draw on selective group studies (youthful masculinities) and practices (abusive, exploitative familial gender relations). A focus on masculinity tends to explain violence against women in Muslim communities as originating entirely in culture, obscuring multiple socioeconomic factors. On the mixed results of (well-intended) policy interventions based on normative assumptions about the role of Islam in oppressing women in Muslim majority countries, see Abu-Lughod (2013); on the paradoxical portrayal of a Muslim woman both as a victim (passive) of her oppressive patriarchal culture and as a threat (active) to Western modernity, see Bilge (2010).

2 For more on gender and illiberalism, see the chapter by Graff and Korolczuk in this volume.

3 Such an aspiration to “fight occidentalist traditions with ‘oriental’ truths” (Marchand 2001, 470) has an earlier precedent: part of the Perennialists or Traditionalists (with capital T), a school of thought originated in the early twentieth century, upholds the idea that a single esoteric truth once existed within all of the world’s religions, but is now only preserved within the Sufi tradition of Islam, and to a lesser extent in Buddhism and some non-Protestant Christian traditions (Sedgwick 2020).

4 As Masuzawa (2005) has shown, the discourse of world religions has allowed for the reproduction of a Christian universalism and a Eurocentric worldview, while simultaneously concealing the power of Christian heritage.

5 For more on Zemmour, see the chapter by Schir in this volume.

6 See, for instance, the paper by Garaev (2017), who analyzed elements of Soviet/Russian academic discourse in the writings of Said Buriatskii (1982–2010), a convert to Islam and ideologist of the internationalist Islamist resistance in the North Caucasus.

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