Islam Beyond Borders: The Umma in World Politics

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By James Piscatori and Amin Saikal
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There are very few religious concepts that have enjoyed such a prominent place in modern political discourses as the umma, the global community of Muslim believers. With different meanings attached and without an overarching formal institution, the umma has nevertheless maintained strong symbolic, normative and political appeal in the world of nation states. However, as James Piscatori and Amin Saikal observe, with the structural fragmentation after the abolishment of the Sunni Caliphate and the absence of Shia Imamate, new forms of interconnectedness that embody "Muslim communalism today" are replacing old forms and bringing new theological and practical quandaries (p. 7).

In Islam Beyond Borders: The Umma in World Politics, Piscatori and Saikal "explore the dynamics by which the concept of the umma affects, and is affected by, Muslim politics" (p. vii). Based on an examination of Sunni and Shi'i political doctrines and case studies of actors such as Iran, ISIS and Saudi Arabia, they present a comprehensive account of the umma's relevance in the modern period. The main recurring theme of the book is that the concept of the umma has been constructed and reconstructed ideologically, politically, socially, strategically and theologically in different times and contexts. Piscatori and Saikal make novel observations about these processes in their analysis. While the main focus of the book is on "intellectual and political elites," the authors study these articulations in the context of real-world politics (p. 161). The book successfully combines modern articulations with discussions coming from medieval scholars such as Abu al-Hasan al-Mawardi, Ibn Qiba al-Razi, Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyya and Shahid al-Thani, as well as political developments such as the Kucuk Kaynarca treaty, the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

In a generic sense, the umma "denotes a cluster of believers bounded by their faith and religious and moral responsibilities, in a single borderless community" (p. 50). Regardless of the shared understanding of a transnational sense of belonging, contested theological and political meanings have been applied to the umma. Controversy has emerged about some general themes such as (i) membership/comprehensiveness (the issue of inclusiveness vs. exclusiveness), (ii) legitimate...