Abstract: The exploration of the quiddity of political Islam and the diverse range of categories and terms associated with it has emerged as a prominent research agenda within the social and political sciences. The application of these terms to a wide array of heterogeneous phenomena and currents among Muslim populations worldwide, coupled with the utilization of multiple theoretical approaches to define and formulate them within the realm of social studies, has posed significant challenges to their usage. The inherent ambiguity and lack of determinacy surrounding the dominant categories and definitions prevalent in the study of political Islam have led to a decline in their explanatory capacity, giving rise to a host of theoretical, methodological, normative, and political dilemmas and predicaments. This problematic state, compounded by the extensive body of research in the field of political Islam, necessitates an epistemological interrogation into the prevailing categories and definitions within this scholarly domain. Through a critical examination of prevailing definitions within the field, particularly in relation to the idea of foundation, the present article draws on the post-foundationalist approach to propose a distinctive conceptual apparatus for understanding and interpreting the phenomena categorized under political Islam. By juxtaposing the notions of discursive tradition and social configuration, the article endeavors to construct a nuanced understanding of political Islam that not only incorporates and comprehends the singular characteristics of the objects of inquiry but also encompasses varying levels of universality in elucidating the social phenomena observed among Muslims and in the Islamic world.

Keywords: political Islam; Islamism; post-foundationalism; discursive tradition; social configuration; Islamicity

1. Introduction

Having gained prominence over the past five decades, the notion of political Islam and its associated concepts have become a focal point in the social sciences, public sphere, and realm of policymaking in Western countries. The definitions, foundational elements, and boundaries of these concepts remain highly contentious, with multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives proposed, hindering the achievement of a coherent and definitive conceptualization. Initially, the primary objective was to establish the existence of distinct and novel phenomena known as political Islam and Islamism, while also providing concrete examples thereof. Over time, as the implications of political Islam and Islamism expanded, their existence became assumed and presupposed. Scholars and policymakers with diverse approaches began examining their cultural, political, and economic functions and impacts. Following the events of 9/11, the study of political Islam emerged as a globally significant research field, presenting both political and cultural challenges. In this realm, political Islam was often conceptualized and understood through binary categories such as radical/moderate, orthodoxy/heterodoxy, religious/secular, private/public,
modernity/counter-modernity, rationality/irrationality, and violent/peaceful. These categories were used interchangeably with terms like fundamentalism, conservatism, terrorism, and violence (Ayoob 2004; Moaddel 2002; Denoeux 2002; Volpi 2011b; March 2015; Ismail 2003, 2004; Cesari 2018; Hurd 2008; Ayoob and Lussier 2020; Schwedler 2011). However, this imprecise and ambiguous approach rendered these terms catch-all phrases that failed to effectively explain the diverse array of social and political phenomena pertaining to Muslims and the Islamic world. Such a treatment and conceptualization of political Islam have significant ontological, epistemological, and normative implications, imposing considerable challenges on the study of politics and society concerning Muslims and the Islamic world. Therefore, the need for conceptual precision and a comprehensive evaluation of existing studies has become more evident than ever before.

The review of the existing literature on the quiddity of political Islam and Islamism reveals that the definitions of these concepts are dominated by indeterminacy, ambiguity, multiplicity, and contradiction. This indeterminacy arises from the epistemological, ontological, and normative assumptions of the dominant approaches in these studies. Consequently, the genealogy of currents, discourses, movements, traditions, governments, parties, identities, actions, communities, ideologies, and all social entities that bear the term Islam, Islamism, Islamic, Muslim, and Muslim politics on one side, and political Islam or Islamist politics on the other side, displays such a multiplicity and diversity that it fundamentally undermines the meaningful and effective use of these concepts (Varisco 2009; Zubaida 2009; Ayubi 1991; Martin and Barzegar 2009; Osman 2013). However, despite the inherent challenges, these concepts have been widely employed in the public sphere, academia, and politics to explain and conceptualize realities and developments in the Islamic world and Muslim societies (Arena 2017; Tausch 2021, 2023; Özçelik 2022; Cammett et al. 2020). Such conceptualizations have formed the basis for policymaking and the construction of social realities. The sheer volume of existing literature, which has witnessed a significant surge since the Iranian revolution of 1979 and particularly after the 9/11 attacks, underscores the pressing need for a comprehensive conceptual and epistemological inquiry into these concepts (Esposito and Shahin 2013; Hurd 2008; Schwedler 2011; Ismail 2003). While most existing studies primarily focus on determining the nature of political Islam, regarding it either as a given historical, religious, political, social, cultural, or other fixed and completed phenomenon, only a few have questioned the epistemological grounds for employing the concepts of political Islam and Islamism. It can be argued that the study of political Islam and Islamism, in general, has lacked rigorous epistemological investigation and inquiry, a deficiency that extends to even some of the most prominent works addressing the theoretical aspects of political Islam and Islamism. Consequently, these studies encounter significant methodological and epistemological challenges (for a recent example in this regard, see Cesari 2018, 2021).

The focus of this paper is not to delve into the nature, history, and diversity of political Islam or Islamism and the conditions that led to their emergence as a discourse or socio-political entity. Instead, it centers on examining the modes of conceptualization, meaningfulness, and influential definitions formulated by prominent scholars or academics in this field of study. The primary question at hand is why concepts such as Islamism, political Islam, Islamist politics, etc. have emerged and are utilized in the intellectual, academic, and public spheres. In other words, what necessitates the existence of a concept called political Islam or Islamism? What distinguishes the movements, ideologies, references, etc. that fall under the labels of political Islam and Islamism? If political Islam or Islamism can be viewed merely as variations of social movements, parties, ideologies, discourses, etc., is it truly essential to highlight them as distinct concepts under the name of political Islam or Islamism? If they are reactive in nature or rooted in specific social contexts, what sets them apart from other reactions or contexts? Moreover, which groups in what intellectual and academic fields, for what purpose, during which periods of time, and with what conceptual frameworks, categories, and ideas have conceptualized discursive or social realities using the concepts of political Islam and Islamism? Can the extensive literature on these ideas
Religions 2023, 14, 980

substantiate the formation of a distinct research paradigm and field known as political Islam within the academia of Western countries? Ultimately, what are the epistemological implications that arise from critically examining this literature in relation to the field of research on political Islam?

The primary objective of this paper is to engage in an epistemological interrogation into the definitions and conceptualizations of political Islam and its associated categories. The study assesses the diverse range of meanings ascribed to the term and classifies the prevailing definitions into three categories: foundationalist, non-foundationalist, and anti-foundationalist. Each category will be explored, highlighting its distinct characteristics and providing relevant examples. It will become evident that an overarching antinomy, namely, foundationalism/non(anti)-foundationalism, and three prevailing epistemic regimes—the modern, secular, and imperial epistemes—dominate the approaches used to conceptualize the political, cultural, and economic realities of Muslim societies. The implications and consequences of these epistemic regimes will be illuminated in relation to our understanding of the phenomenon known as political Islam. Consequently, this paper emphasizes the necessity of employing a specific conceptual framework to comprehend and conceptualize the realities associated with political Islam. Drawing upon the post-foundationalist approach (Jong 2023; Marchart 2007), it can be asserted that any conceptualization of phenomena categorized under political Islam merely represents momentary determinations of the ever-evolving phenomena. Consequently, undertaking an epistemological examination necessitates suspending the notions of universality, stability, and definitive categorization inherent in these conceptualizations and categories. Critiquing the universal concept of political Islam, the paper endeavors to argue that any conceptualization seeking to categorize concrete realities under political Islam must, on one hand, consider the historicity and singularity of these phenomena, and on the other hand, transcend towards a more universal conceptualization based on this historicity. Here, political Islam will be conceptualized in the post-foundationalist approach, engaging with the antinomy of universality/singularity. Initially, if Islam is regarded as the universal, the meaning of Islamicity and the method of its conceptual construction must be addressed. Subsequently, it should be clarified how phenomena classified under different determinations or configurations of Islamicity embody or represent distinct determinations of the concept of political Islam. Within this context, the feasibility of juxtaposing the ideas of discursive tradition (Asad 2009, 2015; Hurd 2008) and social configurations (Jong 2022, 2023) will be assessed to facilitate a more precise conceptualization of political Islam.

2. Conceptualizing Political Islam

The term “Political Islam” was coined within the humanities and social sciences to address the emerging intellectual and socio-political movements, practices, and overall phenomena in Muslim societies and communities over the past century (Kramer 1980; Denoeux 2002; March 2015; Ayoob 2004; Voll and Sonn 2010). Since the 1970s, a substantial body of scholarly and policy-focused literature on political Islam has emerged, specifically examining Islamist trends, movements, practices, organizations, agendas, and ideologies, which gained prominence in the 1980s and 1990s across various fields of the humanities and social sciences. Significant events, such as the Iranian Revolution (1979), the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989), the assassination of President Sadat (1981), the expansion of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, the Hama Uprising in Syria (1982), Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization program in Pakistan (1977–1988), and the World Trade Center bombing (1993), fueled growing interest in the political manifestations of Islam within both Muslim societies and other countries. As Ismail (2003) contends, these incidents were regarded as part of discursive phenomena known as “Islamic fundamentalism”, “Islamic revivalism”, and “Islamism”, later qualified by terms such as “radical”, “traditional”, “militant”, “conservative”, and the like. These descriptions, criteria, classifications, and categorizations were devised to explain diverse events involving individuals, groups, and organizations employing Islamic references to legitimate their actions. In general,
Religions 2023, 14, 980

concepts such as political Islam (Jeffery 1942; Kramer 1980), Islamist politics (Cammett and Luong 2014; Ismail 2003, 2004), Muslim politics (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996), Islamism (Dekmejian 1980), Islamic Fundamentalism (Arjomand 1995; Dekmejian 1995), Islamic revivalism or resurgence (Lewis 1976), and others were utilized to conceptualize Islam’s intersection with the public sphere and politics in Muslim societies, the inherent fusion of Islam and politics, new forms of identification, processes, and communities striving to establish Islam as an authoritative presence within the public or political realm through diverse frames of reference to Islamic tradition, movements or collective actions seeking to reconstruct society and politics based on their interpretation of Islam, ideologies or discourses that either justify or critique the existing order, Islamic currents or ideologies opposing modernity and the West, and more throughout the past five decades.

These developments coincided with the emergence of various epistemological and theoretical turns, including cultural, linguistic, transnational, colonial, etc., in the humanities and social sciences in Western academia in 1980s and 1990s. Notably, these shifts had significant implications for the study of political Islam, particularly through critiques of the secularism thesis and the role of religion in the public sphere (Casanova 1994). Numerous works in this period sought to investigate the transformation of religion in modern societies, primarily focusing on Christian societies, and its multifaceted influence on various facets of public life (Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007). These endeavors aimed to challenge the prevailing secularization thesis and recognize the enduring and pervasive presence of religion in modern societies and the entire world (Mahmood 2005, 2006; Hurd 2008; Asad 2003). Contrary to the dominant secularism thesis, these studies underscored the continuing vitality of religion, shaping social, cultural, and political dynamics, thereby contesting the notion that religion solely belongs in the private realm. They emphasized the need for a nuanced understanding of religion’s role in the public sphere (Habermas 2006). Moreover, these studies drew attention to the intricate interactions between religion and politics, highlighting the emergence of what Jose Casanova refers to as “public religions” (Casanova 1994). Public religions encompass religious traditions actively engaging with and exerting influence within the public sphere, participating in political debates, social movements, and the formation of public policies. By focusing on how religious actors and institutions navigate power dynamics and contribute to shaping socio-political landscapes, these studies expanded the exploration of religious politics (Barker 1989). Epistemologically, these studies had a profound impact on central questions, approaches, and categories within the field of political Islam.

The extensive utilization of concepts and notions related to political Islam in both political and academic domains over the past five decades suggests the emergence of a paradigm associated with this phenomenon. However, it is important to acknowledge that the diverse ontologies and epistemologies inherent in political Islam have yet to be thoroughly investigated. Regarding the ontological dimension, there remains a lack of well-defined and determined object of inquiry within the realm of political Islam. For instance, the concept encompasses a broad range of socio-political movements and practices that have emerged in Muslim societies over the span of a century, all characterized by an Islamic agenda or reference, such as the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt since 1928 and the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021, both considered examples of Islamist movements. As a result of this multiplicity and diversity of examples and social contexts, the concepts of political Islam and Islamism have become ambiguous and insufficiently precise (Varisco 2009; Osman 2013). Furthermore, the meaning and definition of the concept have been influenced by various theoretical and epistemological perspectives, further contributing to its vagueness and uncertainty (Martin and Barzegar 2009). This ambiguity and lack of clarity are evident in both components of the term “political Islam”, namely, “Islam” and “politics”. In other words, there is a lack of consensus regarding the definition of the categories of “Islam” and “politics” in the literature employing “political Islam” as an analytical tool (Zubaida 2009; Turam 2007). Additionally, many central controversies in the study of political Islam revolve around the intricate relationship between “religion” and
“politics”, a complex relationship that extends beyond specific religious contexts (Burrin 1997; Haynes 1997; Gentile 2005). Nevertheless, scholars specializing in the political studies of Islam argue that the contemporary world has witnessed specificities and implications in the relationship between “Islam and politics” that warrant a distinct theoretical and historical approach (An-Na’im 2008; Cesari 2018; Nasr 2001; Zubaida 2009; Hirschkind 2013).

Currently, there exists an extensive and diverse body of literature in various disciplines within the social and human sciences that seeks to comprehend the multifaceted aspects of actions, organizations, movements, and overall phenomena to which scholars attribute the terms “Islam”, “Islamic”, and “Islamist”. In doing so, the majority of scholars, whether explicitly or implicitly, reflexively or unreflexively, have presented definitions of political Islam or Islamism, which are grounded in presuppositions about the religion of Islam. Nevertheless, upon closer examination of these definitions and conceptualizations, it becomes apparent that they emerge within specific conceptual frameworks and theoretical perspectives, shaped by particular modes of economic, political, cultural, and historical inquiry. Artificial categorizations such as Islam, political Islam, Islamism, fundamentalism, post-Islamism, modern Islam, liberal Islam, moderate Islam, and others are primarily constructed based on a seemingly predetermined understanding of Islam, religion, politics, Muslim societies, the general relationship between religion and politics, and the specific relationship between Islam and politics (Gerges 1999; Baker 2003).

In numerous prevailing definitions, political Islam is often regarded as an epiphenomenon, something distinct and divergent from the secular and impartial public sphere. It is viewed as a return to pre-modern forms of Islamic political order, a representation of fundamental economic and political interests, an unprecedented incursion of non-modern and irrational religious manifestations into the secular public sphere, or even an invalid, fantastical, colonialist, and unreal category (Hurd 2008). Epistemologically, existing literature reveals the presence of three types of definitions for political Islam and Islamism. Through content analysis and the categorization of these definitions, drawing upon the epistemological notion of foundation (Sosa 1980, 1998), we can identify three broad categories: foundationalist definitions, non-foundationalist definitions, and anti-foundationalist definitions. Foundationalism, from an epistemological perspective, posits the existence of a complete, fixed, and independent foundation external to the phenomena or objects under investigation. It suggests that knowledge and understanding of these phenomena necessitate an understanding of this established foundation. In contrast, anti-foundationalism seeks to critique and reject foundations, while non-foundationalism denies the existence of any foundation (Herzog 1985; Marchart 2007; Jong 2023). Many definitions encompass multiple aspects and elements, with each part potentially falling into two or three categories. Furthermore, scholars have formulated diverse definitions of these concepts throughout different works and intellectual periods. Consequently, this discussion will examine prominent definitions within each category to elucidate their epistemological characteristics and classifications.

2.1. Foundationalist Definitions

In one of the most excellent studies about the quiddity of political Islam, Guilain Denoeux (2002) endeavors to examine and contemplate various categories and concepts associated with this field of study. According to him, Islamism is a term that “was coined during the 1970s to refer to the rise of movements and ideologies drawing on Islamic referents—terms, symbols, and events taken from the Islamic tradition—in order to articulate a distinctly political agenda.” (Denoeux 2002, p. 61) The Islamist project is characterized by a comprehensive understanding of the prevailing order, questioning it, and ultimately seeking to transform it. Denoeux (2002) posits that Islamists endeavor to highlight cultural, economic, and political challenges within Muslim societies and propose solutions to overcome them. Consequently, categories such as Islamic economy, Islamic culture, and Islamic governance are constructed. Denoeux describes Islamism as an instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups, and organizations pursuing political objectives. It offers
political responses to contemporary societal challenges by envisioning a future grounded in reappropriated and reinvented concepts drawn from the Islamic tradition (Denoeux 2002). According to this broad definition, Islamism does not possess an inherent and predetermined nature; rather, it is a movement or ideology determined by its references to Islamic traditions, while also entailing a political program. Thus, Islamism is reduced to a form of instrumentalizing Islam. Within this framework, various forms of political Islam can be discerned based on their understanding of the status quo, their critique thereof, and the horizons and alternatives they envisage for the future. A careful examination of this definition, akin to many other definitions of Islamism, reveals the vagueness with which these concepts are employed. Like other prevailing definitions of political Islam, the genesis of Islamism is traced back to the 1970s in this definition. In addition to this comprehensive definition, Denoeux identifies and defines a set of concepts and divisions that are vital for comprehending political Islam. These encompass Muslim and Islamic identities, Islamic fundamentalism, neo-fundamentalism, Salafism, Wahhabism, Islamism, modernity, radical Islam(s), jihadist Salafism, and moderate Islam(s).

In another comprehensive definition, Andrew March asserts that “political Islam should be understood in the broadest sense possible as the range of modern political movements, ideological trends, and state-directed policies concerned with giving Islam an authoritative status in political life.” (March 2015, p. 104) He considers 1928, the year of the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Isma‘iliyya, Egypt, as the beginning of political Islam. He presents four criteria for identifying and categorizing different types of Islamist currents and movements. According to March, Islamists vary in their adherence to traditionalism concerning religious authority and knowledge, their inclination toward political quietism or willingness to employ violence, their position vis-à-vis the ruling regime (whether in power or acting as an opposition force), and their relationship to the nation-state. In this definition, political Islam is not a discrete phenomenon in itself but rather a modern movement, ideology, or politics with a fundamental aim: to emphasize and advance Islam in political life. Like most other definitions, this definition places political Islam within a matrix of interconnected concepts and categories. The introduction of the four variables by March enhances the flexibility, inclusivity, and complexity of his definition. However, the concept of Islam in this definition remains somewhat vague and essentialist. Furthermore, March’s emphasis on the modernity of political Islam renders the accuracy and inclusiveness of his definition somewhat vulnerable. Additionally, the notion of political life is considered ahistorical in his analysis (March 2015). While conducting an excellent literature review of existing studies on political Islam based on the categories of modernity, secularism, the modern state, and democracy, his study lacks a cohesive conclusion regarding the essence of political Islam and its relationship to the proposed definition.

Similarly, some scholars employ the term “Islamist politics” to refer to the activities of organizations and movements that mobilize and engage in the political sphere while incorporating signs and symbols from Islamic traditions (Ismail 2003, p. 2). For Voll and Sonn (2010), the term political Islam generally encompasses “any interpretation of Islam that serves as a foundation for political identity and action, specifically referring to movements that represent modern political mobilization in the name of Islam, a trend that emerged in the late 20th century”. As highlighted by Salwa Ismail (2003), concepts such as Islamism encompass both Islamist politics and re-Islamization, which entails investing various domains of social life with signs and symbols associated with Islamic cultural traditions. This process is accompanied by various forms of social closure, group formations, and identifications that (re)construct repertoires and frames of reference based on Islamic traditions (Ismail 2003). In these definitions, political Islam is also defined in relation to other phenomena and is depicted as an ongoing process, wherein social and identity constructions are revitalized with reference to the Islamic tradition. The notion of being political is understood to pertain to both a sphere and a strategy.
This mode of defining political Islam, in which the quiddity of political Islam is either referenced, reduced, or attributed to something external to it—a third entity or category—and the knowledge of political Islam becomes contingent on this entity or category, result in what can be considered foundationalist definitions of political Islam (Herzog 1985; Marchart 2007). Within these definitions and explanations, a presumed fixed and complete foundation is posited outside of political Islam or Islamism (Jong 2023). Numerous influential definitions of political Islam fall into this category. Political Islam and Islamism, as evident in the aforementioned definitions and many others, are predicated on a central principle, often adopting essentialist approaches (such as Kepel 2002; Roy 1994; Fuller 2003; Lewis 1990), or in relation to another category such as movement (Tugal 2009; Bayat 2005; Ismail 2004; Ramadan 2008), ideology (Shepard 1987), nationalism (Mandaville 2003; Roy 2003; Zubaida 2004; Keddie 1969; Cesari 2018), the modern state (Zubaida 2009; An-Na`im 2008), religiosity (Mahmood 1994), modernity (Al-Azmeh 2009), violence (Bonino 2018), and so on. Additionally, they are frequently understood in the context of a particular interpretation of Islam, politics, and the interplay between them (Hurd 2008).

In general, the prevailing narrative within definitions of Islamism indicates that many scholars view Islamism as a belief system, an ideology, an interpretation, a comprehensive project, a collective, and a political movement driven by a primary objective: Islamization. This Islamization is either assumed as a general and imprecise notion or entails the implementation of Shari’a, along with the application and integration of Islamic values, symbols, and traditions into individual and social actions and structures. The scope of this Islamization can encompass various realms, ranging from personal life and the body to the family, workplace, social order, political sphere, state, and even the entire social system. Such a process may give rise to contestations, including conflicts between the secular and the religious, the private and public spheres, or opposition to official politics and even the global order (Shepard 1996; Burgat 1993; Berman 2003; Tibi 2012b).

As evident in the majority of these definitions and conceptualizations, they often present a specific starting point, influential thinkers or ideologues with specific ideas, a special kind of encounter with time as well as scriptures, particular countries as catalysts for the emergence of these movements, and a list of contemporary or historical examples of Islamist movements, currents, or ideologies (Esposito and Shahin 2013; Euben and Zaman 2009; Hashemi 2021; Gürel 2015; Volpi 2011b). The classifications that attempt to create artificial divisions between Islam, political Islam, Islamism, and post-Islamism can also be characterized as foundationalist (Emmerson 2010; Bayat 2013; Tibi 2005, 2012b; Cesari 2021; Fuller 2003) because they rely on pre-existing and mainly essentialist conceptions and distinctions concerning Islam, the secular, and so forth.

Another notable feature of these definitions is the prevalence of a regime of differentiation. In foundationalist conceptualizations, political Islam and Islamism are defined in relation to established and predefined categories, often at the expense of concrete realities, as they prioritize intellectual and rigid categorical requirements (Mandaville 2014). This is a manifestation of essentialism that will be further examined in detail later in this section. Moreover, any definition or articulation within this framework necessitates an epistemological rejection of plurality, diversity, and the multifaceted nature of political Islamism and Islamist or Muslim groups (Varisco 2009). Definitions of Islamism, or Islamist groups and movements based on given categories and solid foundations, are always accompanied by various ontological, epistemological, and normative otherings. Even in scholarly works that advocate for anti-essentialism and strive to analyze Islamism in a relational manner, the prevailing regime of differentiation remains evident. For instance, Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Euben and Zaman 2009) aim to acknowledge the essence of Islamism in relation to other groups, including traditionalists (such as clerics), modernists, reformists, Salafis, and Sufis. However, their distinctions are formulated within the confines of foundationalism, strictly adhering to its prerequisites. These categorization frameworks often revolve around narratives of the beginning for the object of inquiry (Foucault 1966),
which is particularly discernible in definitions of political Islam. Therefore, this type of conceptualization is largely governed by a regime of foundationalist differentiation.

Based on the central foundations that are referred to in the foundationalist definition of political Islam, the following categories are obtained.

2.1.1. Political Islam, and Modernity

Many existing studies have defined political Islam in various ways in relation to "modernity", "modernization", and "the modern" (Al-Azmeh 2009; Ismail 2003; March 2015; Salvatore 1999). According to these scholars, Islamist movements and even the concept of political Islam emerge within the context of encountering modernity and the process of modernization in Muslim societies. They posit that different groups and social strata, influenced by their interpretations of modernity, adopt various positions and reactions (Moaddel 2005; Al-Azmeh 2009; Zubaida 2009; Samman 2011; Jung et al. 2014). These responses encompass a broad spectrum, ranging from reactionary and radical opposition to embracing an alternative form of modernity rooted in political Islam. Furthermore, political Islam is often conceptualized as an ideology or a modern movement that coexists with other contemporary movements and currents.

At one end of the spectrum, political Islam is often portrayed as an ideology opposed to modernity. It is viewed as a religious ideology that is not inherently modern but rather has been revived in various manifestations (Burgat 1993; Lawrence 1989; Lewis 1976, 2003). For some, this reaction represents a reactionary effort to counter modernity and return to or quest for Islamic authenticity through radical or revolutionary Islam, commonly referred to as Islamic fundamentalism (Arjomand 1988). In this pursuit, Islamists may employ modern tools and technology, as well as pursue either democratic or violent paths (Al-Azmeh 2009; Cesari 2021). Conversely, there are perspectives that link the West and Westernization inherently to modernity and perceive Islamism as a reaction against this conception of modernity (Lewis 1993; Tibi 1988). These readings, grounded in an essentialist understanding of both Islam and modernity (Lewis 1990, 2003; Tibi 1988), argue that political Islam emerges as a response to the profound crisis faced by Islam in the modern world. Some scholars also suggest that political Islam and Islamic fundamentalism emerge as reactions against modernization, with an emphasis on rediscovering a specific form of Islamic tradition within Muslim societies (Gellner 1981). On the contrary, in some studies, these concepts, either in terms of content or form, are reflected as modern categories and phenomena (Al-Azmeh 2009; Moaddel 2005). According to many scholars, political Islam and Islamism are seen as modern ideologies and movements, alongside other ideologies that oppose modernity (Lawrence 1989; Al-Azmeh 2009; Kian 1998; Kane 2003; Göle 1996; Cevik 2016; Sivan 1985; Char 2010). Simultaneously, for certain scholars, political Islam is viewed as a modern ideology articulated in response to the legitimacy crisis of the modern world, characterized by a crisis of meaning (Dekmejian 1980; Ayubi 1980, 1991; Euben 1999).

Writers such as Bassam Tibi (1988, 2005, 2009, 2012b), with an essentialist approach and an ideological understanding of Islam, place political Islam and Islamism within a modern context, while simultaneously contrasting them with modernity and the West. Tibi draws a clear distinction between the faith of Islam and the religionized politics of Islamism, where religious symbols are employed for political purposes. His intention is to demonstrate that “Islamism emanates from a political interpretation of Islam: it is based not on the religious faith of Islam but on an ideological use of religion within the political realm” (Tibi 2012b, vi). In a similar vein, the study by Beinin and Stork (1997), among others, consistently portrays political Islam as a contemporary social movement that emerged in response to the shortcomings of modern institutions, colonialism, and the failures of post-colonial nation-state building. Within the studies exploring the essence of political Islam in its relation to modernity, there are notable works that take a moderate and realistic standpoint, defining Islamism and political Islam as expressions of “alternative modernity”, “contested modernity”, and “multiple modernities” (Ghamari-Tabrizi 1998,
In doing so, these scholars deconstruct the dominant idea of modernity, which they view as Western, imperial, secular, and European, aiming to highlight the plurality of modernities and the multifaceted interactions between Islam and these modernities (Salvatore 2016). According to Wael Hallaq (2012) and Oliver Roy (1994), Islamism is primarily a result of the fusion of Islam and modernity. Sami Zubaida (2000) distinguishes three types of Islamism, including conservative Islam, radical Islam, and political Islam associated with modern projects such as nationalist and leftist endeavors that advocate for socio-political transformation based on Islamic principles. Some scholars consider political Islam as a product of the fusion between Islam and late modernity’s capitalism and globalization (Tripp 2006; Tugal 2009a; Atasoy 2009). Furthermore, Devji (2008) posits that Islamism is a global, transnational, and modern network that resembles faith-based humanitarian organizations.

2.1.2. Political Islam, and the Secular

The secular, secularism, and secularization have served as the epistemological foundations in the definition and examination of political Islam and Islamism in most studies. According to Olivier Roy (2006), principally one of the fundamental questions in the studies of political Islam is its compatibility with secularism. Existing research can be categorized along a spectrum, ranging from the inconsistent to the compatible nature of political Islam with secularism, and exploring the various forms of their interaction. Political Islam has been defined in many simplistic, stereotypical, and primitive ways as a revolt against secularism and a resurgence of Islam in the public sphere (Roy 2006; Arjomand 1995; Halliday 1979; Lawrence 1989; Burgat 1993). These definitions rely heavily on the epistemological premises of the secular episteme, specifically the separation of the political and the religious, and a special relationship between them (Sheedy 2021). Scholars such as Bernard Lewis (1993, 2003), Bassam Tibi (1988, 2009, 2012b), and Gilles Kepel (2002) emphasize the inherent incompatibility between political Islam and secularism, arguing that Islam institutionalizes a fundamental intermingling of the profane and the religious. Consequently, in many of these definitions, political Islam is conceived in contrast to the private religion and personal piety intended by secularism; therefore, Islamism becomes synonymous with religious fanaticism (Lynch 2000) and, on another level, with terrorism, fundamentalism, and totalitarianism (McAlister 2001; Bale 2009). Conversely, some scholars have approached political Islam with or against the presupposition of the inherent unity between religion and the secular in Islam, resulting in a form of Islamic exceptionalism in the study of political Islam (Hamid 2016). According to readings by Roy (2006), Lewis (1996), Tibi (2012a), Huntington (1996), and Kepel (1994), the emergence of political Islam is depicted as a manifestation of a clash of civilizations between the secular and modern Western civilization and Islamic civilization.

In this perspective, as Hirschkind (2013) elucidates, “the term ‘political Islam’ has been adopted by many scholars in order to identify this seemingly unprecedented irruption of Islamic religion into the secular domain of politics and thus to distinguish these practices from the forms of personal piety, belief, and ritual conventionally subsumed in Western scholarship under the unmarked category of ‘Islam’.” (Hirschkind 2013, p. 13). According to this view, political Islam is depicted as incompatible with the values of contemporary secular life, as well as with secular politics, science, and progress. It is seen as posing a threat of irrationality, harm, and radicalism, deviating from the conventional notion of keeping politics and religion separate. Political Islam rejects the privileged status assigned to the modern private sphere and challenges the secular democratic distinction between the public and private spheres. One of the consequences of this narrative is the question of political Islam's compatibility with democracy, which existing studies in this field have explored across a spectrum ranging from complete compatibility to incompatibility (Bayat 2016).

The theories that present political Islam in contrast to secularism often presuppose a specific conception of secularism, disregarding the history and diversity of secularism, including the various forms it takes in Muslim countries. However, scholars such as
Elizabeth Shakman Hurd and Saba Mahmood argue that political Islam, as an alternative to secularism, raises critical questions about the principles and foundations of collective life, including secularist forms of collective existence that emerged from the religious wars of the 16th century in Europe (Hurd 2008; Mahmood 2005). Conversely, some scholars consider political Islam a modern phenomenon and a manifestation of secularity. They view it as incompatible and discordant with the authentic teachings of Islam, emphasizing that the political presence of Islam leads to the marginalization of religion and the expansion of secularism across different social domains (Ayoob and Lussier 2020; Hallaq 2012). However, other studies define political Islam as the outcome of various syntheses, relationships, and arrangements between the secular and Islam in the contemporary world. These relationships often challenge the dominant Western interpretation of secularism (Kian 1998; Agrama 2012; Dressler et al. 2019; Bangstad 2007; Göle 2015). According to Agrama (2012), a close look at several Islamist movements reveals that the boundary between the religious and the political is largely blurred at the empirical level. In a similar vein, Naser Ghobadzadeh (2014) introduces the notion of “religious secularity” to suspend the binary division between the secular and the religious, illustrating how Islamic sources are employed to articulate a robust religious justification for state secularism.

2.1.3. Political Islam and the State

The relationship between political Islam and “political power”, and more specifically with the category of “state”, has been a controversial topic in existing studies on political Islam (Turam 2007; Zubaida 2009; Feue 2018). Some scholars who argue that political Islam is a modern phenomenon emphasize that movements aiming to establish an “Islamic state” are inherently modern, as power and politics, in the form of the “nation-state”, are modern phenomena (Zubaida 2009; Jung et al. 2014). In this regard, some scholars such as Cesari (2018) strive to cunningly reduce the different forms of political Islam to different types of governmentality of the modern nation-state in terms of social contexts. Coming from another line of thought, some scholars refer to the long history of the idea of the state in Islam and insist that Islamist movements and currents are derived from these teachings. They argue that Islamic movements are inherently political, with an inherent inclination to seize state power and establish institutions. Political Islam is seen as a continuation of authentic Islam, emphasizing the fusion of religion and power in early Islamic society and the establishment of governance by the Prophet of Islam (Burgat 1993). On the contrary, some hold the idea that Islamist movements and currents do not necessarily seek to conquer political power or establish a “state”, but sometimes have a critical and reformative approach towards the state (Asad 2003) and may act in the form of political parties. In this view, by considering the plurality and diversity of power and its sources, concepts such as “social Islam”, (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2008) “civil Islam”, (Hefner 2000) and “Islamic liberation theology” (Demichelis 2014) are introduced in opposition to the category of political Islam.

In the extensive body of literature examining the relationship between Islamism and states, two major categories can be identified. Firstly, there are studies that argue that Islamist movements utilize Islamic religious sources as their ideological platform to mobilize the masses in political or military conflicts (Ayoob 2004; Ayoob and Lussier 2020; Ayubi 1991; Baker 2003; Burgat 1993; Dekmejian 1980; Esposito 1997; P. Mandaville 2014; Osman 2016). These studies emphasize the role of religious motivations in shaping the political aspirations and actions of Islamist groups. Secondly, certain studies shift the focus towards analyzing the provision of social services, organizational capacity, and ideological hegemony of Islamist groups as explanatory factors for their presence and activities, rather than solely focusing on their religious aspects (Cammett and Luong 2014; Ismail 2003). This alternative perspective considers Islamist movements as either oppositional political entities or groups in positions of power, representing two distinct facets of political Islam (March 2015; Hashemi 2021).
Scholars, such as Bernard Lewis, who adopt an Orientalist approach, Roy (1994) and An-Na‘im (2000, 2008) with a liberal perspective, and Wael Hallaq (2012) with an anti-Enlightenment stance, emphasize the incompatibility of Islam and Islamism with the modern nation-state. Conversely, scholars such as Kepel (2002) and An-Na‘im (1990) believe in Islamic reform in order to make Islam more compatible with the modern nation-state and democracy. Many studies on Islamic revivalism can be categorized accordingly. Within these studies, a recurrent narrative emerges regarding the rise of Islamism in the contemporary world: as a result of modernization, nation-state building, or colonialism, Muslim societies have been subjected to rule by modern totalitarian states. This dominance has sparked an Islamic revival in these societies, as any collective action in the public sphere necessitates confrontation with the state institutions (Asad 2003; Hirschkind 2013). The expanding presence of Islam in the public domain is also evident among Salafist currents, often depicted as predominantly apolitical (Chaplin 2021). Consequently, the primary objective of Islamist movements is to challenge and overthrow states they deem secular, colonial, Westernized, or corrupt. In this narrative, although early Islamists such as Sayyed Jamaleddin Asadabadi and some of his followers advocated for a socially emancipatory form of Islam (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2008), the contemporary emphasis lies in capturing state institutions as the initial step toward reconstructing society based on Islamic teachings or pursuing the idea of Ummah. Thus, Islamism is perceived as a political retrieval of the Islamic tradition, with the state serving as the pivotal instrument for implementing Shari‘a and granting authority to religious figures (Ramadan 2012). The relationship between the state and Muslim authorities is another crucial aspect examined in numerous studies on political Islam (Saat 2018; Pierret 2013; Mouline 2014).

2.1.4. Political Islam and the National

Not only the relationship of political Islam with the category of “state”, but also its connection to “nation” and “nationalism” is multifaceted and complex (Zubaida 2004; Roy 2003). For Mansoor Moaddel, Islamic nationalism and fundamentalism in Muslim society are the productions of the modernization process of these societies (Moaddel 2005). Some scholars examine the intertwining of “political Islam” with nationalism and the nation-building efforts following World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, perceiving political Islam in various forms as expressions of nationalism or more especially “religious nationalism” (Gürbüz 2016; Cesari 2017, 2021; Aghaie 2014). In these narratives, Islamism is likened to nationalist ideologies in both the struggle against colonialism or authoritarian states and the process of nation-building. Many of these studies explore the emergence, characteristics, and evolution of nationalist ideologies in Islamic countries, their relationship with political Islam, and their historical context, considering factors such as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of colonial states, the resistance against these regimes, and the subsequent establishment of post-colonial nation-states (Podeh 2011; Göçek 2002; White 2013; Tibi 1997). Throughout the transition from the Islamic caliphate to nation-states, these studies investigate the multifaceted relationship between Islamism and nationalism. On one hand, political Islam in some Islamic countries served as an ideology employed by secular regimes in power for mass mobilization in their internal and external struggles, often aligned with nationalism. This process involved the absorption of Islamic institutions and ideas by political and government institutions, contributing to the politicization of Islam (Ardiç 2012; Göçek 2011; Wyrtzen 2015; Podeh 2011; Starrett 1998; Zubaida 2003; Saeed 2016). On the other hand, many Islamist groups sought to mobilize the masses against colonial forces and authoritarian regimes in their countries by presenting Islam in the context of a nationalist ideology (Roy 2003; Addi 2017; Zubaida 2004; Keddie 1969). The nationalistic type of political Islam among these groups is distinguished based on being in power or being an opposition movement, a distinction that can manifest itself in official and unofficial political Islam (Elling 2013; Moallem 2005; Sayej 2018). In this context, the notion of Ummah as a central category and an imagined Islamic society has
been explored in various studies as a reference point to understand political Islam as a nationalist ideology (Merdjanova 2013; Mahomed 2022; Ba¸skan and Ta¸spınar 2021).

However, there are opposing views that challenge this perspective and argue that the rise of political Islam is a consequence and indication of the weakness and decline of the “nation-state” and national societies in the Middle East (Ehteshami et al. 2020; Ismail 2004). Some studies, in this regard, shift the focus away from political Islam as a nation-state and instead consider it within the framework of “transnationalism”, providing examples to support this notion (Mandaville 2003). Others have specifically examined the conflict between nationalism and Islamism as two modern ideologies (Samman 2011; Zubaida 2004). Additionally, there are studies that explore the relationship between Islam and Islamism in relation to sectarianism, identity formation, minority groups, and various other categories such as migration, the body, race, gender, and discrimination, emphasizing their role in shaping different communities and groups (Laurence 2012).

2.1.5. Political Islam, Islam, History and Teachings of Islam

Another basic question is whether political Islam is a new phenomenon affected by the colonial process and modernization of Muslim societies, or it is nothing more than the re-emergence and resurgence of old intellectual debates, traditional and old forms of religious government, or the issue of religion and state in Islamic teachings and holy texts. As previously mentioned, the multiple interpretations and understandings of “politics” and “Islam” have contributed to the ambiguity surrounding the concept of “political Islam”. In this way, through a unique reading of the early history of Islam and by highlighting a particular interpretation of Quranic teachings, some studies consider contemporary political Islam to be the continuation of the universal history of Islam, and in this regard, concepts and teachings such as “Jihad”, “Ijtihad”, “Amr bil Ma’roof wa Nahi ‘anil Munkar”, “Shari’a” “Caliphate”, “Shura”, etc. are proposed to take into account Islamist social-political movements and ideologies (Feldman 2008; Volpi 2011b; March 2013, 2015; An-Na’im 1990, 2000, 2008; Hallaq 2012; Ramadan 2008, 2012). These studies aim to demonstrate that many categories related to political Islam and the discourse on the relationship between politics and Islam or religion and the state (din wa dawla) have historical roots and are deeply entrenched in Islamic tradition and history (Abbasi 2020; Melvin-Koushki 2018; Yavari 2019; Lapidus 1975, 1996; Cook 2014). However, it is important to note that two different conceptions of Islamic notions, categories, and teachings exist—one within Islamic communities and among Muslims and Islamists, and the other within the field of Islamic studies and the scholarship on political Islam.

Some studies in this line of thought aim to take into account political Islam and especially Islamic resurgence by emphasizing the universal history of Islam. Consequently, a universal and timeless depiction of Islam and its history is presented, with Islam being reduced to a set of religious principles and beliefs, including the notion of the unity of Islam and politics (Voll 1983, 1991, 1994; Esposito 1983, 1991). In a broader definition, for example, Frédéric Volpi (2011a), much like Graham Fuller (Fuller 2003), defines political Islam “primarily as a construct that refers to what individuals in a particular socio-historical context think about the political and the religious. More specifically, Islamism refers to the political dynamics generated by the activities of those people who believe that Islam as a body of faith has something crucial to say about how society should be organized, and who seek to implement this idea as a matter of priority” (Volpi 2011a, p. 1). Therefore, political Islam encompasses the specific views, means, and goals of Islamists movements in each case, allowing for critical analysis of the process. This definition aims to encompass the entire spectrum of Islamist expression, ranging from radical to moderate, violent to peaceful, democratic to authoritarian, and traditionalist to modernist. The term “Islamic fundamentalism” is reserved solely for those Islamists who adhere to a literal and narrow interpretation of the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet, claiming a monopoly on the exclusive and correct understanding of Islam, while demonstrating intolerance towards those with differing perspectives (Fuller 2003).
A dominant narrative can be observed in these studies, wherein the expansion of colonialism in Muslim societies has led to a resurgence of Islamic tradition among Islamist activists, drawing inspiration from early Islam (Burgat 1993). These movements place great emphasis on returning to the Sunnah, adhering to Shari’a, and reestablishing social and political order based on Islamic teachings. They perceive Islam as a comprehensive system capable of addressing human needs in all eras (Shepard 1987). Consequently, these movements are primarily religious in nature, with a strong focus on an idealized past. The social context merely serves as a temporary catalyst for their activities. According to this narrative, their return to Islamic principles is essentially a response against Western modernity and its central tenet, namely, secularism. By assigning a political aspect to Islam, in many definitions of this line of thought, scholars of political Islam often define it as a departure from the conventional state of Islam on one hand, and as a deviation of Islamic political society from established political theory and practice on the other (Lewis 2003; Ayubi 1991; Roy 1994; Barber 1996). As a result, these studies adopt an a priori and essentialist understanding of both Islam and politics (Salvatore 1999; Hefner 2005). Through the prioritization of presentism and empiricism, and by setting aside this historical-theoretical controversy surrounding the antiquity or novelty of political implications of Islam, a subset of scholarly investigations has persevered in their pursuit of studying political Islam (Bayat 2009, 2013; Ismail 2006).

Essentialism, as mentioned earlier, is prominently observed in many foundationalist definitions of political Islam and Islamism, which tend to ascribe fixed and inherent characteristics to these phenomena, disregarding their complexities and variations, and making them sense based on the given and completed foundations. These definitions, as shown, often rely on essentialist frameworks rooted in foundations such as modernity, the nation-state, the secular, and specific historical interpretations of Islam. For example, some definitions essentialize political Islam by reducing it to a singular set of principles or interpretations, disregarding the diverse historical, cultural, and contextual variations within Muslim societies. They may attribute a single, fixed understanding of Shari’a law or political governance to all Islamic political movements, neglecting the diverse historical, cultural, and contextual variations within Muslim societies. Moreover, certain definitions homogenize Islamist movements or currents by overlooking their internal differences, goals, strategies, and social foundations, resulting in a simplified understanding of their complexities and dynamics. This essentialist approach fails to recognize the agency and diverse motivations of individuals and groups within these movements. Additionally, as explored, some definitions essentialize the relationship between Islam and the state, framing political Islam solely as a reaction to Western modernity or as inherently incompatible with secular governance systems. These essentialist perspectives disregard the nuanced interactions, influences, and historical variations between Islamic societies and the notion of the nation-state. Furthermore, foundationalist definitions may oversimplify the historical teachings of Islam and impose static categories onto contemporary political expressions, overlooking the dynamic nature of interpretations and the evolving socio-political contexts in which political Islam and Islamism emerge. By recognizing these essentialist features within foundationalist definitions, scholars can strive for more nuanced and context-sensitive approaches as well as more efficient epistemological tools that capture the multifaceted nature of political Islam and Islamism.

2.2. Non-Foundationalist Definitions

Another dominant approach to conceptualizing political Islam revolves around non-foundationalist definitions. These definitions perceive political Islam and Islamism as either devoid of meaning and specific nature, or as temporary labels imposed on social phenomena, or simply as passive reactions emerging in response to particular historical and social contexts. Consequently, in these conceptualizations, political Islam lacks a solid, independent foundation. According to Salvatore (1999) and Varisco (2009), political Islam is a conceptual and symbolic construct that does not straightforwardly describe a
distinct phenomenon. Hence, political Islam, or Islamism, is not a unique and separate phenomenon with an autonomous identity and specific regulations. Within this type of definition, comprehending the notion of political Islam, which is groundless or lacks a tangible and well-grounded foundation, relies primarily on understanding the contextual factors or variables that have given rise to it. If any causal relationship is identified, it can only be understood in connection with its originating context. Consequently, this category does not possess a fixed and definitive foundation. Many definitions of political Islam and Islamism rooted in social, political, and economic approaches fall into this category.

Esposito (1997, p. 2) argues that “the failures of increasingly discredited secular forms of nationalism . . . strengthened new voices that appealed to an Islamic alternative.” This perspective portrays political Islam as a response to general modernity and specifically to unjust domestic economic and political circumstances. According to Bassam Tibi (2000, p. 857), the crucial issue regarding the relevance of politicized religion in international relations is the “revolt against the West” aimed at challenging the existing secular order. Graham Fuller (2002, p. 3) suggests that “most regimes see almost any form of political Islam as a threat, since it embodies a major challenge to their unpopular, failing, and illegitimate presidents-for-life or isolated monarchs.” Fred Halliday (2005, p. 122) attributes the rise of political Islam to a broader rejection of secular modernity associated with radical nationalist politics and the modernizing state. Owen (2004, p. 156) defines political Islam as a reaction to the “perceived failures of the secular developmentalist ideologies and strategies that had been used to legitimate most newly independent regimes.” In these definitions, political Islam is viewed as a secondary phenomenon that reflects underlying structural, material, psychological, or ideological foundations. Many Islamic movements or ideologies are seen as outcomes of socio-economic and political issues rooted in local contexts (Daniel 1962). Scholars, in this mode of conceptualization, take into account Islamism and Islamist movements in relation to the socio-psychological conditions of Islamists, their social and economic status, their ways of belonging and being, and their demographic and ethnic backgrounds, as well as the social transformations and contexts within their societies, such as industrialization, urbanization, economic crises, educational systems, social inequalities, discrimination, assimilation and integration challenges, and more. Ismail (2003) notes that these scholars use concepts such as uprootedness, disenchantment, and disintegration to explain the socio-psychological states that underlie individuals’ decisions to join Islamist groups and become active participants. Additionally, some researchers aim to demonstrate that certain groups are more susceptible to Islamism than others. Hence, political Islam and Islamism are portrayed as reactions, whether semi-active or passive, against secularism, societal decay, and moral decline, as well as responses to the crises faced by secular states and their inefficiencies (Dekmejian 1980). These responses are rooted in specific political and economic conditions within Muslim countries (Moaddel 2002, 2005), involving disillusioned middle classes, marginalized individuals, unassimilated immigrants, subaltern groups, anti-colonialist forces, and devout moralists, among others.

2.3. Anti-Foundationalist Definitions

The third category of definitions, which directly opposes foundationalist definitions, is known as anti-foundationalist definitions. These definitions are primarily constructed through the subversion, suspension, or deconstruction of foundations. Instead of focusing on the quiddity and character of political Islam, scholars in this perspective mainly examine what it is not or the conditions that contribute to its construction. In anti-foundationalism, the main concern is deconstructing and criticizing any ground for political Islam and Islamism. Within these definitions, the emergence of the notion of political Islam is understood in relation to Western regimes of truth and the secular understanding of religion (Mahmood 2005, 2006; Chatterjee 2006; Asad 2003, 2006; Hurd 2008). Therefore, the concept of political Islam and its related notions and terms are considered false, imaginative, innovative, Western, elitist, academic, etc., concepts, that are formulated based on the interests of the colonial, secularistic regime of power. It is argued that these ideas and concepts can be
suspended and deconstructed through genealogical, anthropological, or radical historicist approaches, allowing for an exploration of the active regimes of power/knowledge behind them (Bangstad 2009; Asad 1993, 2011a, 2011b; Scott 2007; Mahmood 2006, 2008, 2013). Cultural, historical, anthropological, and philosophical perspectives are primarily employed in these critiques, highlighting a negative reaction against dominant foundationalist definitions and perpetually engaging in a critique of essentialism (Enayat 2017). But in their critique of foundationalism, they paradoxically aim to undermine the very foundations in accordance with the requirements and principles of fundamentalism, somehow acting in a state of having or not having a foundation (Fairlamb 1994). Therefore, they always advance their criticism with the premise of the existence of foundations and in relation to them. In the critique of essentialism, anti-foundationalist critiques of political Islam may venture into a kind of groundless nihilism, a bottomless ground in which, normatively, the most radical and violent types of Islamists, such as Al-Qaeda and Talibان, are seen as equal to secularism or modernity in a post-secular era (Enayat 2017). Even the violence of these groups is attributed largely to the secularism or the requirements of nation-states that they perceive as Western and modern.

In their deconstructions, these scholars aim to underscore the historical origins of these concepts, which emerged within specific intellectual and social contexts in the post-Enlightenment West (Hirschkind 2013; Asad 1993, 2003; Mahmood 2006). The primary focus of these intellectual trends is to examine the conditions through which political Islam is understood, defined, and analyzed in the social sciences. They seek to demonstrate how assumptions regarding the nature of religion and its relationship to politics shape the types of questions and expected answers regarding political Islam. Within certain anti-foundationalist definitions, it is argued that secularist dispositions, practices, and interpretations, at a broader level, serve as the semantic ground for categories such as political Islam, fundamentalism, and Islamism (Hurd 2008). According to these perspectives, the secularist epistemology, or the secular episteme, provides the conditions based on which significant divisions are drawn between the public and the private, the religious and the political, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and the sacred and the profane (Hurd 2008; Scott 2007; Mahmood 2006; Asad et al. 2013; Asad 2003). In other definitions within this approach, it is attempted to highlight the key role of regimes of power/knowledge and truth (especially imperialist, orientalist, colonialist and Western) (Brown 2013; Asad 2011b, 1993; Mahmood 2005; Chatterjee 2006; Mahmood 2006; Said 1995) as well as regimes of representation and otherings (Sayyid 2015; Said 1997) in the conceptualization of political Islam. Additionally, some studies highlight the significance of the modern nation-state and its totalitarian governance (van der Veer 1994; Hirschkind 2013; Asad 2003) as the epistemological basis for political Islam. Overall, it is argued that political Islam and its related categories, along with their definitions, primarily emerge as a consequence of the dominance of national, colonial, imperial, and secular epistemologies or epistemes.

Their various genealogies of the national, the secular, and the colonial can direct us to the way of constructing the category of political Islam. These reconstructions take different forms and methods. The deconstruction of the category of political Islam and its prevailing discourses primarily involves addressing, deconstructing, and reconstructing categories such as gender, body, rationality, the private and public, the public sphere, nation, state, freedom, individuality, and more, in relation to the aforementioned epistemes (Brown 2013; Scott 2007; Asad 1993, 2011a, 2011b; Mahmood 2005; Asad et al. 2013). The aim is to uncover the regimes of power that underlie these categories, often drawing on a post-colonial approach (Sayyid 2022; Enayat 2017). By referencing local or historical counterexamples in Muslim societies, these scholars seek to invalidate and undermine the meaning and existence of these categories. The provincialization of these categories and their de(re)construction based on the requirements of Western modernity, which has been rendered trans-historical and universal through colonial systems of governance and their power/truth regimes, represents a prevalent trend in defining political Islam (Chakrabarty 2007; Mahmood 2006; Asad 2003; Hurd 2008). They argue that, from an ontological per-
spective, the realities within Islam and the Muslim world are distinct, but the Western epistemic regime has hindered their accurate understanding and accessibility. Therefore, by suspending and deconstructing these concepts and categories, while also drawing on Islamic traditions and principles, we may gain insights into the diverse forms of Islam, including political Islam (Asad 2009, 2015). One of the outcomes of these deconstructionist studies is the prominence of anthropology and the examination of social phenomena as singular and unique, with limited universality. However, these studies typically commence their investigations with the categories of the dominant epistemology they aim to deconstruct. Another aspect of these critiques involves decentralizing the modern interpretation of secularism. Overall, most of these studies adopt a critical approach, highlighting the epistemological and historical biases present in the study of political Islam. The main concern of these studies is to demonstrate the conceptual inadequacy of political Islam, the multiplicity and variety of phenomena related to Islam, and the intricate relationship between Islam and politics.

Despite the existence of substantial criticisms regarding some trends in anti-foundationalism (See Enayat 2017; Schielke 2007, 2022; Schwedler 2011), it is crucial to acknowledge the significant epistemological critique advanced by certain scholars within this discourse concerning the enduring impact of Orientalism. This critique holds particular significance when considering the critical analysis of studies focused on political Islam. In general, it can be argued that the scholarship of political Islam has been significantly influenced by the orientalist heritage and more particularly imperial epistememe, which has imposed dominant questions, categories, and definitions. Orientalism, rooted in Western colonial and imperial contexts as well as epistememe, has shaped the framing and understanding of Islam and Muslim societies. This influence is evident in various ways, including the essentialization of categories and their foundations. The imperial epistememe, as many studies in non-foundationalism reveal, has contributed to the tendency to treat concepts such as “Islam”, “Muslims”, and “Political Islam” as monolithic and homogenous, overlooking the diversity, variations, and complexities within Muslim-majority societies. This simplification inhibits a nuanced analysis by failing to recognize the uncompleted and multifaceted nature of different Islamist movements and their ideologies (Hroub 2010; Salama 2011; Said 1995).

Moreover, orientalist-influenced scholarship often relies on binary frameworks that dichotomize various aspects related to Political Islam. These binary divisions, such as East/West, religious/secular, traditional/modern, violent/non-violent, orthodoxy/heterodoxy, conservative/liberal, and irrational/rational, oversimplify the complex realities and limit a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. By perpetuating these binary frameworks, the imperial epistememe shapes the questions asked and the interpretations made in the study of Political Islam, hindering a nuanced exploration of the diverse contexts, motivations, and goals of Islamist groups. Additionally, the orientalist heritage perpetuates hegemonic narratives that position the West as the normative standard against which Islam and Political Islam are measured. The West is considered secularistic and Islam is depicted as non-secularistic in nature. This indicates the fusion of imperial and secular epistememes that dominated the theology and history of religion in Christian Europe. This blend itself has been one of the main factors in the problematization of political Islam in the West. This Eurocentric bias also creates a power imbalance and reinforces the portrayal of Western values, institutions, and systems as superior, while Islamic practices and political aspirations are often depicted as deviant, religious, or regressive. Such narratives marginalize local perspectives, experiences, and knowledge, limiting the comprehensive understanding of political Islam by neglecting indigenous theories, agency, traditions, and contextual factors (Halliday 1995; Allawi 2009; Ramadan 2004).

3. Political Islam as Social Configurations

Upon reviewing the definitions in the three aforementioned categories, it becomes evident that the essence of “political Islam”, from an epistemological standpoint, is either reduced to an external and predetermined foundation, or attributed to a groundless rep-
presentation of external conditions and contexts, or approached through a deconstructive and anti-foundationalist lens. Epistemologically, the prevailing definitions of political Islam and its associated concepts can be reconsidered and situated within the antinomy of foundationalism/anti-/non-foundationalism (Jong 2023; Marchart 2007). Foundationalism posits that given, a priori, determined, and completed categories serve as the basis for recognizing and defining phenomena. Consequently, the conceptualization of political Islam often entails a profound essentialism that overlooks the plurality, indeterminacy, and fluidity of external concrete phenomena—a disregarding that itself becomes the basis for a regime of differentiation. On the other hand, non-foundationalism or anti-foundationalism renders scientific, rational, and conceptual knowledge of social phenomena unattainable, portraying everything we encounter as relative, baseless, singular, and transient. It postpones the acknowledgment of a distinct and independent phenomenon known as political Islam. Many anti-/non-foundationalist approaches tend to adopt culturalism, radical empiricism, or historicism, ultimately culminating in groundless nihilism (Marchart 2007).

Singular phenomena are investigated merely as case studies and, to some extent, through comparative methods, yet they remain predominantly grounded in the dominant and preconceived categories within the existing tradition of political Islam. However, social practices and realities are actively constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed at a concrete level within Islamic communities or societies—a continuous process characterized by multiple, hybrid, and fluid characteristics (Foroutan 2013; Schielke 2007, 2022).

However, what is obvious in these definitions, on the one hand, is that something outside and in front of different scholars in various disciplines and countries has been objectively and theoretically problematic, which has encouraged them to think about and conceptualize political Islam (Özçelik 2022; Tausch 2023). Exploring this intention itself can be the subject of epistemological investigation. For many, the unexpected presence of Islam in the public sphere and the distinctive practices of Islamist groups and movements have been the most important drivers of this unusual and peculiar concern. But what does this unusualness and peculiarity signify, and to what condition does it allude? As we discovered in anti-foundationalist definitions, this issue has been partly caused by the dominance of secular, national, imperial, and modern epistemes. It implies that the order of things deviated from the anticipated and “normal” state according to secular, national, and even traditional arrangements within Muslim societies. Even this problematic state can be observed among the social actors and ordinary people within Muslim societies and communities (Falco and Rotondi 2016a, 2016b; Cammett et al. 2020). On the other hand, numerous studies on political Islam, by emphasizing the plurality, singularity, complexity, and elusiveness of social and political phenomena associated with the public manifestations of Islam, seek to critique existing definitions and propose alternative concepts and conceptualizations to overcome these inadequate and ineffective frameworks (Osman 2013, 2016; Schwedler 2011). This represents another aspect of the problematic nature of political Islam in contemporary academia.

Drawing upon the aforementioned discussion, a pivotal question arises in the process of conceptualization of political Islam: “How can we appropriately conceptualize social and political phenomena in Islamic and Muslim societies without succumbing to the epistemological antinomy of foundationalism/anti(non)-foundationalism, while also acknowledging their historicity, plurality, singularity, and ultimately integrating their universal essence, commonly referred to as ‘Islamicity’ and one of its articulations, i.e., political Islam?” From an epistemological standpoint, the present paper contends that a significant ramification of critiquing and suspending the antinomy in the field of political Islam is the focalization of Islamicity and its central position in determining the configurations that are classified under the category of political Islam. While it is plausible to fundamentally question the prioritization of Islam as a category in the study of social phenomena in Muslim societies (Schielke 2007), it is imperative to acknowledge that any conceptualization of political Islam and Islamism inherently engenders an epistemological struggle with the notion of Islamicity.
To begin with, it should be noted that the aforementioned predicament has permeated at a high level in various modes of conceptualization in the humanities and social sciences (Marchart 2007; Laclau 1991). Therefore, the criticism of the antinomy brings significant consequences for the entire social sciences, including the political studies of Islam. From an epistemological point of view, one of the reasons for the emergence of the antinomy of foundationalism/anti- or non-foundationalism, according to Foucault (1966, 2002), is the dominance of the modern episteme in modern humanities and social sciences. In the modern episteme, social phenomena are considered equal to or based on given, determined, external, a priori, homogeneous, regulated, standardized, self-contained, universal, objective categories. They are believed to possess a history of beginnings and evolution, a history that is mostly teleological. As if there is a given and independent object outside the mind of the researcher, and the main task of the social researcher is to identify the characteristics, components, and regularity of this phenomenon and their relationships with other phenomena, just like natural science researchers. This independence and externality, on the other hand, cause each phenomenon to become significant in relation to or in opposition to other phenomena.

One of the most important solutions to overcome this cognitive bias, which has a direct consequence for the antinomy of foundationalism/anti-/non-foundationalism, is the approach of post-foundationalism (Jong 2023; Marchart 2007; Butler et al. 2000; Spivak 1993). Post-foundationalism suspends the requisites of the modern episteme, as well as the notions of determinacy, certainty, and homogeneity in categories and depicted social realities. Instead, it views the objects of inquiry as indeterminate, fluid, and uneven entities. In this approach, rather than complete and external foundations or pure groundlessness, the process of grounding prevails, where scholars grasp social phenomena during their temporary moments of actualization and primarily in terms of their partial foundations (Marchart 2007).

In this encounter, the notion of the social and society as given and complete units, which are the primary objects of modern social science, is suspended (Laclau 1991). It signifies that the social and other social phenomena are regarded as ongoing processes that actualize in specific moments, within particular social-historical contexts, and based on partial foundations. This actualization is also determined at a specific moment in the form of categories, orders of category, regimes of boundaries, discursive articulations, and generally in the form of “social configuration” (Jong 2023). Accordingly, all social phenomena are considered contingent, meaning that each phenomenon actualizes under specific conditions and relies on partial and temporary foundations. The task of every social science is to identify the conditions that make the phenomenon possible, as well as its internal and external relations and characteristics. Contingency also encompasses various impossibilities, as determining one social configuration necessitates the non-determination of several other configurations. Constructed categories, relations, and their context hold meaning solely in relation to that specific social configuration and its distinct ground. For instance, the Islamic Republic of Iran, a longstanding representation of political Islam, is not a fixed and given phenomenon with a universal periodization and characteristics rooted in an Islamic Shiite fundamentalism. Instead, it is a collection of indeterminate and fluid configurations that have crystallized in a relational manner (both internally and externally) as temporary arrangements, characterized by specific categories and orders of category within particular time and space.

In this mode of conceptualization, the prevailing categories and divisions within the social sciences are suspended, allowing for the extraction of features, meanings, and relations of social phenomena from specific configurations through posterior and empirical analysis. As a result, it is not possible to assume a priori divisions and boundaries such as the private and the public, the religious and the secular, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, piety and non-piety, nation, religion, transnational, ethnic, and others, when examining social configurations. These divisions and boundaries are contingent and relational, contingent upon specific configurations (for more details about the idea of configuration see: Jong 2022,
In the post-foundationalist approach, which centers social configurations as the primary focus of social inquiry, many categories and requirements stemming from the secular episteme that heavily influences the study of political Islam are deferred. The relationship between the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane, and their respective meanings are all conditioned by specific configurations, with their meanings existing solely within those configurations and for the actors involved. But the question that is epistemologically raised here is: “What determines the Islamic or Islamist nature of a given configuration and places it under the category of political Islam?” According to the post-foundationalist approach, as noted, any analysis of political Islam should commence with the reconstruction of the category of Islam as a homogeneous, universal, determined, given, and trans-historical concept, considering it as a human and historical phenomenon (Ahmed 2016). By deconstructing Islam and other essentialist and foundationalist categories such as Muslim society, political Islam, Islamism, Islamist politics, and more, a fundamental question emerges once again: How can we approach and arrange the diversity and indeterminacy of Muslim communities, practices, and configurations in terms of an inclusive and effective concept that incorporates the notion of being Islamic (Ahmed 2016), Islamic-ness (Schielke 2022), or Islamicity?

To deal with this question, a revision of the idea of Islam as a discursive tradition, which is formulated by Talal Asad (2009, 2015), is really helpful and enlightening. By drawing on a revision of this concept, it is possible to grasp both the historicity and singularity of Islamic configurations and their universality. According to Asad, “an Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present. Clearly, not everything Muslims say and do belongs to an Islamic discursive tradition. Nor is an Islamic tradition in this sense necessarily imitative of what was done in the past” (Asad 2009, p. 20). Drawing on this conception and following Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2008), it can be indicated that political Islam is itself “a discursive tradition that connects variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledge” (Asad 2009, p. 10). In this regard, political Islam and Islamism are not old ideologies or teachings that are now being revived, but instead they are new ideologies in the ongoing process of inventing. Here, these concepts denote a diverse, contested, and changing set of languages and articulations of religion and politics including a general mobilization of people around cultural, economic, political, and social issues that are presented, reconstructed, and interpreted through an Islamic idiom. Therefore, Islam, political Islam, and Islamism are suspended as given and completed categories, and the process of their construction, including the competition and contest over both the interpretation of symbols and control of the institutions, that produce and sustain them, takes precedence over their given nature. Considering political Islam as discursive traditions generated in a dynamic and historical relationship between Islam and politics reveals that it is a set of social realities or configurations constructed by Islamists, configurations that are not “the expression of deeper structural, psychological, and/or material interests or simply an oppositional discourse reflecting economic and political malaise or the pathological side effect of antiquated religious commitments or irrational theocracy that are fundamentally incompatible with modernity, secularism, or democracy” (Hurd 2008, p. 130). As Hurd concludes, political Islam “is a diverse and multifaceted set of discursive traditions in which moral and political order is negotiated and continuously renegotiated in contemporary Muslim-majority societies. Like secularism, it is a powerful tradition of argumentation and a resource for collective legitimation. It is neither merely an oppositional discourse nor a nostalgic one, though elements of both may be present” (Hurd 2008, pp. 129–30).

Promoting the concept of the discursive tradition, as formulated and employed by Talal Asad and other scholars, within the framework of a post-foundationalist approach necessitates substantial adjustments and revisions. Samuli Schielke endeavors to demonstrate (Schielke 2007, 2022), through his critique of the concept of the discursive tradition, that this
idea possesses certain characteristics that can be classified as anti-foundationalist in certain respects and foundationalist in others. Schielke (2007) argues that the excessive emphasis on religious and faith-related characteristics, such as piety, ethics, and rituals, within the discursive tradition, coupled with its juxtaposition against secularism and liberalism, leads to the selective highlighting of certain Islamic phenomena as the exclusive representation of Islamic reality. This approach overlooks the diverse and fluid nature of phenomena in Muslim societies. Additionally, the construction of the discursive tradition increasingly centers on power dynamics, which exposes it to foundationalism. Schielke (2007, 2022) also contends that Asad’s interpretation of the discursive tradition, with its emphasis on the past, perpetuates notions of homogeneity and continuity rather than acknowledging discontinuity and ambiguity. This tradition seems to be tradition-as-heritage rather than tradition-as-genealogy (Schielke 2007). Even the anti-foundationalist perspectives within this intellectual tradition, aiming to emphasize discontinuities, carry an underlying assumption of continuity. Schielke’s critique underscores the need for any empirical study of Islamic phenomena, where Islamic-ness is a posteriori category, to consider ambiguity, indeterminacy, and fluidity as central assumptions (Schielke 2007, 2022). Placing the discursive tradition alongside the notion of social configurations can facilitate the integration of this concept into a post-foundationalist approach and rectify its inherent limitations. While Islamic-ness or Islamicity possesses religious and universal aspects at certain levels, these dimensions are continually interpreted and reconstructed within various social configurations by diverse actors, taking different forms and pursuing distinct objectives. Consequently, Islamic-ness (Schielle 2022), being Islamic (Ahmed 2016), or Islamicity, similar to political identity, undergoes a process of constant construction and reconstruction.

By juxtaposing this post-metaphysical conception of Islam and political Islam with the idea of configuration, it can be argued that configurations are deemed Islamic or Islamist when their categories, order of categories, regime of boundaries, discursive articulations, and regimes of reference are constructed according to a certain understanding of the Islamic tradition, encompassing both the past and the future, within an ongoing interaction between politics and Islam. Within this context, different frames of reference to the depicted Islamic tradition emerge, shaping the construction of configurations that identify them as either Islamic or non-Islamic. Consequently, Islam as a discursive tradition is not solely a religious and trans-historical doctrine with a universal history; rather, it encompasses a range of configurations that strive to shape themselves in diverse relationships and forms across different temporal and spatial contexts in accordance with their understanding of what is deemed Islamic. As discursive traditions, Islam is historically expansive and socially embodied, extending across communities and generations of individuals. It is crucial to acknowledge that the actors who construct these configurations are situated within specific historical contexts (Ismail 2003). Meanings, practices, and habitus are determined in relation to material settings such as institutional relations, social positions, interests, and the actors’ positions of power. In this way, configurations, their constructed categories and orders of categories, their discursive articulations, and the regimes of reference employed within these configurations all become contingent and historical. Each Islamic configuration is primarily constructed through an ongoing contestation related to the perceived interests of its actors and their conceptions of the Islamic tradition, both past and future. The primary consequence of this ongoing process is the formation of the core categories within a particular configuration. These categories hold meaning at various levels, arranged semantically alongside and in opposition to one another, and are articulated through discursive practices and diverse regimes of reference. Subsequently, these categories and order of categories serve as the foundation for different forms of social closures, characterized by distinct regimes of boundaries and senses of belonging. These elements relationally determine the nature and characteristics of a configuration and construct it as a nationalist, Islamist, religious, ethnic, etc. configuration (Jong 2023).

Building upon this perspective, as proposed by Salwa Ismail (2003), “the scripture should
not be used to attribute homogeneity to Muslim societies since its interpretation is subject to contestation. The diversity of interpretations, and their contextualization within specific knowledge/power dynamics, present us with a multitude of discourses that must be considered in light of the power positions at stake (Ismail 2003, p. 17).

The category of hijab, for instance, is neither a universal category in political Islam nor a mere religious Islamic principle. Basically, the problematic nature of the hijab is determined in a specific configuration along with other categories and in specific historical and contextual relations, as well as with other configurations. Furthermore, the religious dimension of this category is contingent upon the type of regime that refers to the Islamic tradition. Therefore, for the Islamist regime of Iran or the Taliban in Afghanistan, the category of hijab has had different determinations and meanings across various configurations and time periods. Conversely, within other configurations and in conjunction with different categories, the same category holds a distinct significance for Muslim immigrants in Canada or Europe. Thus, the category of hijab can find an Islamist interpretation in a special configuration, an Islamist interpretation that itself is relationally meaningful to that configuration. In another configuration, the hijab can be reconstructed in the context of immigration and identity politics, thus leading to its portrayal as a problematic issue. Whether hijab is considered a modern phenomenon or not, its association with secularism or nationalism, and even its perceived lack of foundation, all trace back to the configuration in which this category is constructed.

Whether a configuration is Islamic or not, and its characteristics of Islamicity are determined in terms of that configuration’s type of categories, their orders, and its specific regimes of references and discourses that refer to the Islamic tradition or incorporate different aspects and elements of this tradition. In other words, it is in the dynamic process of constructing configurations and their components that being Islamic is determined a posteriori. According to Ayubi (1991, p. 230), “aside from a moral code and a few ‘fixations’ related to dress, penalties, and halal/haram foods, drinks, and social practices, there is no well-defined comprehensive social-political-economic program that can be described as ‘Islamic.’” In this regard, as Asad (2009) puts it, claims to orthodoxy embody the power to authorize practices and ideas as Islamic. The processes, regimes, and techniques through which this power or authority is employed, as well as the conditions that endure and structure it, are aspects of the historicity and singularity of orthodoxy. These configurations may be built in the form of movements in which the type of categories, their order, and the way of referring to and using Islamic signs and symbols are such that they justify violent strategies against their depicted non-Islamic enemy with the aim of political hegemony. An Islamist configuration may be constructed on the basis of economic categories and order of categories but deploy the pious Islamic referential regime. By scrutinizing the grammar of these configurations, one can discern their formation processes, the types of Islam they represent, their strategies, and the various regimes of othering at play. An important consequence of this type of approach is that there are no inherent meanings to the holy text, Islamic tradition, or teachings. Sharing or using similar frames of reference, then, does not lead to agreement on substantive meaning or constructive content. As Ismail lays out, “a clear case of the invocation of particular repertoires without agreement on content is the call for the application of the Shari’ a” (Ismail 2003, p. 17).

The relations within and between these configurations are extremely critical to grasping the quiddity of the configurations. They occupy distinct positions in relation to one another and embody different power dynamics and forms of resistance. Islamic configurations exist in various horizontal relationships with other Islamic and non-Islamic configurations, as well as with structural and contextual conditions. Additionally, they can be analyzed in historical vertical relationships. By identifying and revisiting these relationships using the idea of family resemblance (Jong 2023; Ahmed 2016), the universality of Islamic configurations and their relationships, categories, and reference systems can be discerned. Hence, the Islamic and political nature of a configuration exhibits varying degrees of universality, which can be comprehended through comparative studies. Relying
on Eickelman and Piscatori (1996, p. 4), it can be argued that political Islam and Islam in general “relate to a widely shared, although not doctrinally defined, tradition of ideas and practice”. However, in Asad’s reading of the discursive tradition, the distinction between political and non-political is suspended because these traditions are constructed in a constant conflict between historical actors through various relations of power.

Finally, it can be asserted that Islamic configurations are constructed through the practices of Muslim actors, and even non-Muslim actors, who hold a particular understanding of the Islamic tradition, and the Islamic past and future within regimes of Islamic reference. This construction occurs through mutual interactions and involves the continuous adaptation of Islamic characteristics according to the configuration’s needs, internal and external relationships, and modes of expression. Moreover, within and among these configurations, Islamicity carries distinct meanings and determinants within specific temporal and spatial contexts. Therefore, scholars of political Islam should transcend prevailing categories in Islamic studies and prioritize the contingent nature of Islamic configurations. They should examine the conditions of their possibility at the moment of their actualization and strive to analyze the underlying principles that shape these configurations. These configurations emerge at various scales, ranging from local to national and transnational, with varying degrees of continuity and stability, all based on incomplete and partial foundations. Understanding these foundations becomes possible through a comprehensive analysis of configuration grammar. Consequently, as new relationships, categories, order of categories, or actors emerge, these configurations may undergo processes of deconstruction and reconstruction. Only after thorough investigation can the Islamic nature of a configuration be determined, and some may be categorized as Islamist or fall under the umbrella of political Islam. If the grammar of a configuration, or its regime of reference to the Islamic tradition, or even its formation and foundation, has different political, normative, and positive consequences, it can be categorized under these concepts. Political Islam and Islamism are configurations with specific articulation of Islamicity. However, this categorization and conceptualization process is entirely empirical and based on posterior knowledge. Similarly, being Islamist and political Islam must be examined through the relationships and family resemblances between configurations. It is through this posterior understanding that the meaning and implications of Islamicity in a particular configuration can be elucidated, allowing for discussions of political Islam and Islamism with a certain degree of universality.

4. Conclusions

Despite the prevalent usage of terms such as political Islam, Islamism, Islamic fundamentalism, Islamic exceptionalism, radical Islam, moderate Islam, and others in academia, the public sphere, think tanks, policy centers, and even among the general population, it is noteworthy that individuals commonly referred to as Islamists often do not identify themselves as such and do not perceive their ideology as synonymous with or representative of political Islam. In a unique and rare example, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s supreme leader, in a speech on TV on the occasion of Eid Mu’ba’at on 11 March 2021, claimed that:

“Political Islam is what has been achieved and realized in Iran’s Islamic system… Political Islam is identical to the same Islam that has been able to create various institutions, economic, social, political, military, etc. systems by forming a government, and construct a religious and Islamic identity for a nation; This is what [can be said] about religion. Therefore, the Qur’an’s definition of religion is something like this; This cannot be reduced to small works, to a mere [and personal] act of worship. Therefore, the mission [of the prophets] is a great movement that provides the comprehensive and emancipating plan for mankind and prepares them for a great movement.” (Khamenei 2021) (Authors’ translation)

He strives to justify his understanding of political Islam by referring to and interpreting some principles of Islamic teachings and Quranic verses. He begins his narrative with
what is the mission of the prophets. According to him, mission means the guidance of mankind through the Prophet, which is created by the arousal of human beings and their guidance towards happiness and perfection. He introduces the goals of the mission, including monotheism (tawhid), human refinement, the establishment of justice, etc. But the realization and achievement of these divine goals, which have wide social aspects, in his words, are not accessible by following advice (Nasiha), and personal piety and worship, but through: 1. extensive planning for social order; and 2. political power. According to Ali Khamenei, every mission is the establishment of a kind of political system in which only some prophets have succeeded. In this political system, ways of governing are teased out from the holy text and led by the prophet. He also provides a conception of prophets: prophets are managers and commanders who are obliged to implement and realize religious and divine governance in society, which is manifested in the message of their mission and the holy text. According to him, this is exactly the comprehensive definition of religion, which, in contrast to individual religion, has specific plans for all social dimensions of human beings. He considers the Islamic Republic of Iran to be the continuation and fulfillment of this mission, which was realized after fourteen centuries by Ayatollah Khomeini and then by himself, and has provided the opportunity for human liberation on earth again, a realization that has many enemies both in Iran and in the world (Khamenei 2021).

As is clear, this reading of political Islam and the regime of reference to Islamic tradition shares many similarities with the prevailing definitions of this concept put forth by its early ideologues, such as Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati, as well as contemporary scholars in academia and politics. Now, should we consider this definition of political Islam as the ‘true’ definition of political Islam, or should we put what has happened and actualized in Iran under the rule of this Islamist regime for more than four decades under the categories of Islamism and political Islam? Definitions of political Islam are basically conceptualized and understood in relation to these ideals or some general trends in Muslim societies and are based on general epistemological assumptions in the modern social sciences. It can be argued that the notions of political Islam and Islamism are formulated in a complementary relationship between the ideals of Islamists and the dominant conceptualizations in academia and politics, notions that are at a considerable distance from indeterminate, complex, multi-dimensional, and highly intertwined concrete realities. Overcoming this complicated and problematic situation requires a kind of epistemological suspension in the social sciences. Rather than imagining a given reality as Islamism and comprehending it through predetermined categories, the foremost concern should be to examine the conditions that make the emergence of phenomena with political and religious implications possible. Furthermore, relationally, it should be determined why a phenomenon possesses a different meaning or form of Islamicity that distinguishes it from other phenomena—a distinction that can be grasped based on the contingency of that phenomenon on the one hand and its partial and ongoing foundation on the other hand. Many of the categories and features that are attributed to political Islam and Islamism are particular characteristics that hold true for certain configurations at their specific moments of actualization and for a certain period. By exploring the internal and external relations of social configurations in a posteriori and empirical manner, it becomes possible to comprehend certain phenomena that, in accordance with their unique characteristics and grammars, may fall under the constructed categories of political Islam and Islamism.

Author Contributions: All authors contributed equally to this manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The article processing charge was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation)—491192747 and the Open Access Publication Fund of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.
Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


An-Na’im, Abdullahi Ahmed. 2000. Sharīa and Positive Legislation: Is an Islamic State Possible or Viable? *Yearbook of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law* 5: 29–42. [CrossRef]


Demichelis, Marco. 2014. Islamic Liberation Theology. An Inter-Religious Reflection between Gustavo Gutierrez, Farid Esack and Hamid Dabashi. Oriente Moderno 94: 125–47. [CrossRef]
Enayat, Hadi. 2017. Islam and Secularism in Post-Colonial Thought. Cham: Springer International Publishing. [CrossRef]


Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. 1998. Islamism and the Quest for Alternative Modernities. Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, USA.


Mahomed, Nadeem. 2022. The Elusive Ummah: Between the Political, Sectarianism, and Authority. *ReOrient* 7: 27–45. [CrossRef]


March, Andrew F. 2013. Genealogies of Sovereignty in Islamic Political Theology. *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 80: 293–320. [CrossRef]


Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.