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An-Na’im’s Islam and the Secular State problematizes, conceptualizes and contextualizes one of the most controversial issues in the Muslim political thought. It proposes that “state is a political and not a religious institution in the historical experience and current reality of Islamic societies” (1). The book substantiates the arguments of other reformist Muslims. Ali Abd al-Raziq (1888–1966), for instance, in his classic book on Islam and the Foundations of Authority: A study of the Caliphate and Government in Islam (1925), argued Quran does not offer any system of government and post-prophet political systems had no basis in the principles of the Shari’a. Likewise, in The Second Message of Islam (1987), An-Na’im’s teacher and mentor, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha (1909–1985), proposed a radical shift in the Islamic thought by returning to the original message of Islam, meaning justice and equality.

In the same reformist tradition, Islam and the Secular State challenges the concept of the Islamic state and the shari’a as state law. It proposes that “in order to be a Muslim by conviction and free choice, which is the only way one can be a Muslim, I need a secular state” (1).

In Chapter 1 the author argues that Muslims need a secular state, “and not society,” because “the claim of so-called Islamic state to coercively enforce Shari’a” repudiates the role of Islam in shaping the “ethical norms” in society (1). The “institutional separation of Islam and the state,” he argues, “is necessary for shari’a to have its proper positive and enlightening role.” However, he makes it clear that the separation of Islam and politics is “neither necessary nor desirable” (4). In the secular state policies can still be stemmed from religious beliefs (7). More importantly, “whatever the state enforces in the name of Shari’a will necessarily be secular and the product of coercive power and not superior Islamic authority” (5). Islamic state is an oxymoron; it is a “post-colonial” invention.

Chapter 2 historicizes An-Na’im’s proposal that “secular state is more consistent with Islamic history than is the Islamic state (45). Chapter 3 proposes a practical approach to secularism in the Muslim context. While Islam and politics are interrelated, state remains a neutral secular entity in accordance with three principles of “constitutionalism, human rights and citizenship”
(84, 137–138). Chapters 4, 5, and 6 contextualize different experiences of secularism in three cases: they examine “state secularism and communal violence” in India, “contradictions of authoritarian secularism” in Turkey, and “realities of diversity and prospects of pluralism” in Indonesia. All the three cases, he argues, support his call for “making the distinction between state and politics,” whereby the inevitable interaction of Islam and politics is regulated to “safeguard the institutional separation of Islam and state” (222). More importantly, “the persistent crisis of Turkish secularism” supports his call for “negotiating the role of shari’a in public life, instead of trying to impose a categorical resolution” (222). The conclusion highlights the major arguments of the book: first, it proposes an alternative vision of secularism, which regulates the role of Islam in politics, does not relegate Islam to the purely private life but separate Islam from the state (267). Second, Muslims need “a secular state” to follow the shari’a principles out of their own “genuine conviction and free choice” (268). Third, the secular state defined in the book is more consistent with both principles of the Shari’a and the history of Muslim societies than “the false and counterproductive assertion of a so-called Islamic state” (268). Fourth, the state is a “political institution,” so any claim to establish an Islamic state or that “the state is Shari’a is in fact a false claim” (280). Fifth, the secular state “can serve the ideals of an Islamic society for social justice, peace, goodness, and virtue by enabling and facilitating their realization through civic discourse” (293).

An-Na’im’s book is important, timely and influential for the following reasons: It shows that the concept of Islamic state is a post-colonial invention proposed by the Islamists in response and reaction to the colonial modernity and the autocratic, top-down secularization. It highlights the distinction between normative and institutional level of analysis in relationship between religion and politics and religion and state. It underlines that genuine religious piety is only possible under conditions of separation between religion and state. And it demonstrates that context is crucial in the discussion of religion, state and secularism. This book should be read in the current context of (post)-Arab Spring and the rise of Islamist/post-Islamist politics in the Middle East.