Politics and Islam
Wednesdays, Autumn term
Dr Fred Anscombe

This module considers the motivations, tactics and goals of Islamic political movements from the mediaeval period to today. The primary focus will be on the Middle East, but comparisons with other areas of the Islamic world will form an important theme of discussion. The tensions and alliances between Islam and political authority from the era of the Prophet Muhammad to the establishment of independent, secular states in the twentieth century will be examined in the first half of the term. In this period the nineteenth century marked a turning point, a time of extraordinary pressure from Christian Europe that prompted a fundamental reconsideration of where Muslim society might have fallen into error to have become so vulnerable to non-Muslim domination. Following the creation of nation-states in the Middle East that were nominally secular or embraced non-religious principles of citizenship, this reconsideration fed into three streams of popular Islamic reformist thought that diverged noticeably, from ‘modernist’ approaches to progressively more radical movements that have campaigned for social and spiritual renewal in the face of opposition from authoritarian secular rulers. With this introduction to the historical development of Islam’s relationship to politics, students will be equipped to discuss reasonably such complex issues as the compatibility of Islam with democracy/civil society or the inevitability of violence in Islamic political movements, not just the simplistic “Why do they hate us…?” sort of questions. The module does not assume that students who enrol will enter with any significant knowledge of Islam or Middle Eastern history.

Preliminary bibliography:
Ayubi, Nazih Political Islam (1993)
Brown, Nathan, When Victory Is Not an Option: Islamist Movements in Arab Politics (2012)
Esposito, John Islam and Politics (1998)
Hourani, Albert, Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age (1962)
Humphreys, R. Stephen, Between Memory and Desire (1999)
Voll, John, Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World (1994)