

# THE ROOTS OF MODERN ISLAMISM

By **Bram Hubbell**

The phrase "radical Islam" is frequently heard on news broadcasts and is found in newspaper articles to refer to a wide variety of individuals and groups found across the Middle East and the Muslim world who support **Islamism** or **political Islam**. In using the term, journalists are often projecting an image of a type of Islam that is somehow incompatible with, and possibly even a challenge to, Western or modern society. Comments about **jihad** and **sharia** are frequently included in these stories to highlight the allegedly extremist nature of some of these movements. Among Islamists, there are some whom we can comfortably call radicals, but for many the term is more misleading than useful since it often obscures the reasons for supporting Islamism or the varied nature of it.

During the second half of the twentieth century a distinct interpretation of Islam has developed that sees a more prominent role for Islam in culture, economics, law, politics, and society. Social scientists frequently refer to this movement as Islamism or political Islam. As Islamism has been gaining adherents across the Muslim world, followers of other religious traditions have also been reevaluating own religious beliefs and their relationship to society at large. We sometimes refer to these groups as religious fundamentalists, because they all seem to emphasize a return to

## Chapter Glossary

**Fundamentalism:** Belief that the sacred text(s) of a religion cannot be questioned and should be interpreted literally to guide sociocultural, economic, & political life.

**Hadith:** A collection of traditions collected after the death of Muhammad with accounts of his daily practice (Sunna)

**Islamism:** Belief that the sacred texts of Islam (Qur'an, hadith) should be interpreted literally and guide social, cultural, economic, and political life

**Jahiliyya:** The period of "ignorance" in the Arab world prior to Muhammad receiving the Qur'anic revelation from Allah; used by some Islamists to refer to any society in which the precepts of Islam are not fully implemented.

**Jihad:** The struggle of Muslims to maintain their religion. Can be interpreted as the smaller and more personal struggle that Muslims endure to practice their faith, but it can also be interpreted as the greater struggle or the process of making a society Islamic.

**Qur'an:** The recording of the recitation of God's word to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. Most Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the literal word of God, rather than being divinely inspired as many other sacred texts are.

**Sharia:** Islamic law based on the teachings in the Qur'an and the Hadith; there are multiple collections and competing schools of interpretation.

their holy scriptures and a greater reliance on these texts as a way to live in the world today. The term **fundamentalism** is specific to the United States, where it first developed in the early twentieth century. The term has been used more broadly in recent years to talk about Hindus who believe in Hindutva, Hasidic Jews, and Muslims supporting groups such as ISIS. While most these groups would probably reject the term fundamentalist, there is a common trend around the world today of rejecting secular world views in favor of a public life guided by religious principles.

In the case of the Middle East, Islamism refers to idea of using the **Qur'an** and the **Hadith** as a basis for guiding one's life. While there are certainly political ramifications, such as the use of sharia law, there are also many personal elements. Muslims who choose to closely follow these texts also apply them to how they dress, what they eat, when they pray, and how they engage in the local and global economy. Given the wide range of ways that the tenets of Islam can influence people's lives, the term Islamism is preferable to political Islam. Islamism, an ideology based on the principles of Islam, encompasses a greater variety of activity than political Islam, a term which suggests just the relationship between politics and Islam.

During the late nineteenth century, many individuals across the Ottoman Empire began to advocate for the inclusion of Islamic principles in the shaping of the state. The most well known of these, Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876-1908), was known for restoring the title of Caliph to the Ottoman Sultan and promoting the Hijaz railroad to link the holy cities of Medina and Mecca to the rest of the empire and facilitate the hajj. Many of the policies of Abdulhamid encouraged the idea that Islam and politics were intertwined in the Ottoman Empire.

The broader modern Islamism first developed in the Middle East in Egypt during the 1920s. The British had granted Egypt a form of limited independence in 1922 and modern Egyptian political parties emerged during the decade advocating different visions for the Egyptian state. At the end of the decade, a Muslim school teacher, Hassan al-Banna, founded the Muslim Brotherhood in the Suez Canal city of Isma'iliyya. Instead of focusing on the same political issues that Egypt's political parties were addressing, al-Banna presented a more personalized response to the challenges posed by Western culture and the establishment of an Egyptian state. He and the early



Hassan Al-Banna, founder of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

members of the Muslim Brotherhood founded schools and clinics to provide services to Muslim Egyptians. For them, this assistance to Egyptians was a way of embodying *zakat*, one of the pillars of Islam. *Zakat* is often referred to as alms-giving, but it more broadly represents how all Muslims should help other Muslims address inequalities and injustices in their societies.

Despite the efforts of the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamism had only marginal success until the 1970s. For much of the middle of the twentieth century, secular nationalist ideologies associated with charismatic leaders, particularly Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Ataturk were more popular across the Middle East. These movements actively discouraged Islam as a public practice and promoted a far more secular vision of life. In some Middle Eastern states, such as Turkey, leaders went so far as to discourage hijab in public. Laws based on secular principles were the norm.

Even during this more secular period in the Middle East, some individuals continued to promote a more Islamist view of the modern world. The most well known of these was Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Qutb had been born in Upper Egypt, lived in Cairo during the 1920s and 1930s, and then traveled in the United States from 1948 to 1950. Having experienced the rapid changes of this period, Qutb returned to Egypt and began to develop a more Islamist view of the world. He was especially shocked by American culture and what he perceived as a lack of spirituality. Sometime in the early 1950s, Qutb joined the Muslim Brotherhood and quickly became an influential member of the organization.



Sayid Qutb on trial after being arrested in Abdel Nasser's Egypt in 1965. He was found guilty of the attempted assassination of Egypt's president Nasser and was sentenced to the death penalty, which was carried out in 1966.

At the time Qutb was becoming involved with the Muslim Brotherhood, the organization had cooperated and worked with the Free Officers Movement that overthrew the British-supported monarchy in Egypt in 1952. As Nasser extended his influence over the new Egyptian government, it became clear to Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood that Nasser was promoting a secular vision of Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood then attempted to assassinate Nasser in 1954, which resulted in the imprisonment of Qutb and many other members of the organization.

While in prison, Qutb wrote extensively, including *Milestones*, and developed many of the key ideas that have influenced modern Islamism. He viewed any society not

living according to the principles of Islam as similar to Arab society before Muhammad had received his revelations from God. For Muslims, this period of ignorance was known as *jahiliyya*, and Qutb redefined that concept to refer to any society in which Muslims could not live fully in accordance with Islamic principles. He also promoted an activist vision of jihad in which all Muslims should be

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consciously working to make society more Islamic through all means necessary.

Qutb and other Islamists’ ideas gained relatively few followers before 1970. For much of the 1950s and 1960s, Arab Nationalism was the dominant popular ideology, but in recent decades Islamism has gradually come to exert a significant influence across the Middle East. At the most basic level, the popularity of Arab Nationalism had begun to wane after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The success of the Israelis against Egyptians, Jordanians, and Syrians raised major questions about the viability of Arab Nationalism to confront the challenge of Israel. It also did not help that Arab Nationalist leaders, such as Nasser, had made many promises about improving the lives of Arabs. As it became increasingly clear that Arab Nationalism was

not going to fulfill these promises, people across the Middle East began to look to other social visions.

Arab Nationalism was also weakened by states, such as the United States and Saudi Arabia, which viewed it as a threat, and often gave support to Islamists as a counterweight. The secularism of Arab Nationalism challenged the Islamic ideals of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For the United States, the socialist tendencies and willingness of Arab Nationalist leaders to work with Communist states made Arab Nationalism seem a threat to capitalism. To confront these challenges, both the United States and Saudi Arabia, sometimes working together, promoted Islamism. In the late 1970s, the United States offered generous amounts of aid to President Sadat of Egypt in exchange for releasing many Islamists from prison, liberalizing the Egyptian economy, and making



Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meets with Mohamed Morsi, the first democratically elected President of Egypt and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, in July 2012, one year before his contentious the following summer.

Photo by the U.S. Department of State.



peace with Israel. In a similar fashion, the Israeli government in the 1970s and 1980s allowed Islamist organizations in Palestine to establish themselves in the local community as a way to undermine the influence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Saudi Arabia actively promoted Islamism across the Middle East and the broader Muslim world by funding mosques and schools that taught Islamist ideals.

**“[Al-Qaeda’s and ISIS’] use of violence contrasts with the peaceful and reformist methods that many Islamist organizations use.”**

Beginning in the 1970s, the United States and other capitalist states supported neoliberal economic policy around the world. As with Egypt in 1978, the United States encouraged the increasing liberalization of national economies, which meant that the interventionist economic policies of Arab Nationalism were gradually weakened. As a result, states across the Middle East were opened up to a far greater variety of Western-made products and provided fewer resources to improve people’s standards of living. Islamist organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or Hamas in Gaza, began to fill the void. By building clinics and schools, they began to provide the basic services that states had formerly supplied. This community outreach helped Islamist organizations connect to people.

Another reason for the spread of Islamism was its indigenous appeal. Unlike many other ideologies, such as Communism or Arab Nationalism, which were rooted in Western ideologies and culture, Muslims often saw Islamism as a more authentic and local ideology. Seeming more authentic and homegrown was especially beneficial to the spread of Islamism at the same time as the United States was seen as increasingly pursuing its own agenda in the region. American support for authoritarian leaders such as President Mubarak in Egypt, and for Israel, undermined the appeal of Western ideologies and benefitted Islamism.

Islamism has also spread across the Middle East because of its adaptability. Organizations such as al-Qaeda or ISIS (which attract a disproportionate share of media attention due to their violent tactics) represent a type of universalism that attempts to reach all Muslims regardless of nationality. Most Islamist organizations are not universalist, but instead focus on Muslims from one national background. Hamas reaches out to Palestinian Muslims, Hezbollah to Lebanese Muslims, and the Muslim Brotherhood to Egyptian



An Arabic graffiti tag spells out Hamas, the Islamist party that provides many social services to Palestinians. Hamas won a decisive victory in parliamentary elections in 2006, and are currently the dominant governing power in the Gaza Strip.



Following Turkey's Justice and Development party electoral victory in 2007, posters all over the country stated "Thank you, Turkey." While still influential, the party recently lost its parliamentary majority in 2015.

Hosni Mubarak's ouster.

Muslims. One of the key features of Islamism is its ability to be either broad and universalist or more narrowly focused on a single nationality.

Islamism has also shown its adaptability through the range of tactics used to spread its message. Al-Qaeda and ISIS were able to garner lots of media attention because of their use of violent and revolutionary tactics. The 9/11 attacks or ISIS's capture of cities in Syria and Iraq reflect one way in which Islamism has spread. This use of violence contrasts with the peaceful and reformist methods that many Islamist organizations use. For example, the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, which developed out of earlier Islamist parties, has won multiple parliamentary elections in Turkey since its founding in 2001. Additionally, Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood won the democratic Egyptian presidential elections in 2012 following

Photo by Ekim Caglar

These contrasts—universalist/nationalist and revolutionary/reformist—highlight the varied nature of Islamism. Many Islamist organizations also do not fit neatly into these dichotomies. Hamas, for example, not only has participated in Palestinian elections, but has also made use of violent tactics against Israeli civilians to advance its goal of an independent Palestinian state. The ways in which many Islamist organizations work within established nationalist frameworks or participate in elections for representative governments suggest that Islamism is not inherently anti-Western or anti-modern. Instead of representing a challenge to western and modern ideas about state and society, Islamism can also be understood to reflect a way of adapting Islamic culture and values to modern society.

## Teaching Tool

### An Excerpt from Sayyid Qutb's *Milestones*, 1964

*Qutb was a key figure in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s. He was imprisoned and executed for his involvement in a plot to assassinate Nasser.*

“If the actual life of human beings is found to be different from this declaration of freedom, then it becomes incumbent upon Islam to enter the field with preaching as well as the movement, and to strike hard at all those political powers which force people to bow before them and which rule over them, unmindful of the commandments of God, and which prevent people from listening to the preaching and accepting the belief if they wish to do so. After annihilating the tyrannical force, whether it be in a political or a racial form, or in the form of class distinctions within the same race, Islam establishes a new social, economic and political system, in which the concept of the freedom of man is applied in practice.

It is not the intention of Islam to force its beliefs on people, but Islam is not merely “belief.” As we have pointed out, Islam is a declaration of the freedom of man from servitude to other men. Thus it strives from the beginning to abolish all those systems and governments which are based on the rule of man over men and the servitude of one human being to another. When Islam releases people from this political pressure and presents to them its spiritual message, appealing to their reason, it gives them complete freedom to accept or not to accept its beliefs. However, this freedom does not mean that they can make their desires their gods, or that they can choose to remain in the servitude of other human beings, making some men lords over others. Whatever system is to be established in the world ought to be on the authority of God, deriving its laws from Him alone. Then every individual is free, under the protection of this universal system, to adopt any belief he wishes to adopt. This is the only way in which “the religion” can be purified for God alone. The word “religion” includes more than belief; “religion” actually means a way of life, and in Islam this is based on belief. But in an Islamic system there is room for all kinds of people to follow their own beliefs, while obeying the laws of the country which are themselves based on the Divine authority.

Anyone who understands this particular character of this religion will also understand the place of *Jiaad bis saif* (striving through sword), which is to clear the way for striving through preaching in the application of the Islamic movement. He will understand that Islam is not a “defensive movement” in the narrow sense which today is technically called a “defensive war.” This narrow meaning is ascribed to it by those who are under the pressure of circumstances and are defeated by the wily attacks of the orientalist, who distort the concept of Islamic Jihad. It was a movement to wipe out tyranny and to introduce true freedom to mankind, using resources according to the actual human situation, and it had definite stages, for each of which it utilized new methods.

If we insist on calling Islamic Jihad a defensive movement, then we must change the meaning of the word “defense” and mean by it “the defense of man” against all those elements which limit his freedom. These elements take the form of beliefs and concepts, as well of political systems, based

on economic, racial or class distinctions. When Islam first came into existence, the world was full of such systems, and the present-day Jahiliyyah also has various kinds of such systems.

When we take this broad meaning of the word “defense,” we understand the true character of Islam, and that it is a universal proclamation of the freedom of man from servitude to other men, the establishment of the sovereignty of God and His Lordship throughout the world, the end of man’s arrogance and selfishness, and the implementation of the rule of the Divine Shari’ah in human affairs.

As to persons who attempt to defend the concept of Islamic Jihad by interpreting it in the narrow sense of the current concept of defensive war, and who do research to prove that the battles fought in Islamic Jihad were all for the defense of the homeland of Islam—some of them considering the homeland of Islam to be just the Arabian peninsula—against the aggression of neighboring powers, they lack understanding of the nature of Islam and its primary aim. Such an attempt is nothing but a product of a mind defeated by the present difficult conditions and by the attacks of the treacherous orientalist on the Islamic Jihad.”

## Discussion Questions

1. What does Qutb think should be the nature of humans’ relationship to their governments?
2. How does Qutb understand the role of jihad?
3. What does he mean when he contrasts the narrow and the broad meanings of jihad?
4. How would Qutb’s understanding of jihad affect the relationship between Islam and political structures? Social structures? Economic structures?



## Teaching Tool

### Excerpt from Yusuf al-Qaradawi's "Islam and Democracy," from *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 2009

*Al-Qaradawi was born in Egypt in 1926, but he now lives in Qatar. Al-Qaradawi hosts a popular show about Islam on Al-Jazeera and maintains the website IslamOnline.*

“What I want to focus on here is what I alluded to at the beginning, namely, the essence of democracy. This is, most definitely, in agreement with the essence of Islam, provided we go back to the original sources – the Qur'an, the sunna, and the actions of the Rightly Guided caliphs – and derive it from them rather than from the history of unjust leaders and evil kings; from the fatwas of damned scholars of the throne, or from those who are sincere but hasty [in judgment] and lack any firm foundation in knowledge.

The assertion that democracy signifies the rule of the people by the people, and that this entails a rejection of the principle that sovereignty belongs to God, is not an acceptable view. For the principle of popular rule, which is the foundation of democracy, stands in opposition not to God's rule – the basis of Islamic law – but rather to the rule of the individual, which is the basis of dictatorship. A call for democracy does not necessitate a rejection of God's sovereignty over human beings. Indeed, this does not even occur to most people calling for democracy. What they do seek [in calling for democracy] is rather the rejection of dictatorship, a refusal to accept oppressive and tyrannical rulers – the sort characterized in hadith reports as “the lethal ruler” and “coercive government.” Indeed, all they mean by democracy is that the people elect their rulers as they please, that they hold them accountable for their actions, that they refuse their orders when these violate the nation's constitution – that is, in Islamic terms, when the rulers command that which is sinful – and that the people have the right to remove the rulers when they deviate and act unjustly and when they don't listen to advice or warning.”



Yusuf Al Qaradawi the Egyptian theologian, in Doha in 2006. Qaradawi's program, *Sharia and Life*, broadcasts on *Al-Jazeera* to an estimated audience of 60 million viewers.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is al-Qaradawi's basic view about the relationship between Islam and democracy?
2. What does he mean by democracy?
3. How do Qaradawi's views about Islam and government compare with the views of Qutb?

## Teaching Tool

### Excerpt from the World Islamic Front's "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders," 1988.

*The World Islamic Front was the organization made up of Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and a number of other Islamists.*

"The Arabian Peninsula has never - since Allah made it flat, created its desert, and encircled it with seas - been stormed by any forces like the crusader armies spreading in it like locusts, eating its riches and wiping out its plantations. All this is happening at a time in which nations are attacking Muslims like people fighting over a plate of food. In the light of the grave situation and the lack of support, we and you are obliged to discuss current events, and we should all agree on how to settle the matter.

No one argues today about three facts that are known to everyone; we will list them, in order to remind everyone:

First, for over seven years the United States has been occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula, plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, terrorizing its neighbors, and turning its bases in the Peninsula into a spearhead through which to fight the neighboring Muslim peoples.

If some people have in the past argued about the fact of the occupation, all the people of the Peninsula have now acknowledged it. The best proof of this is the Americans' continuing aggression against the Iraqi people using the Peninsula as a staging post, even though all its rulers are against their territories being used to that end, but they are helpless.

Second, despite the great devastation inflicted on the Iraqi people by the crusader-Zionist alliance, and despite the huge number of those killed, which has exceeded 1 million... despite all this, the Americans are once again trying to repeat the horrific massacres, as though they are not content with the protracted blockade imposed after the ferocious war or the fragmentation and devastation.

So here they come to annihilate what is left of this people and to humiliate their Muslim neighbors.



Osama bin Laden sits with his adviser and translator Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri during an interview with Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir. November 2001, Kabul.

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Photo by Hamid Mir.

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Third, if the Americans' aims behind these wars are religious and economic, the aim is also to serve the Jews' petty state and divert attention from its occupation of Jerusalem and murder of Muslims there. The best proof of this is their eagerness to destroy Iraq, the strongest neighboring Arab state, and their endeavor to fragment all the states of the region such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan into paper statelets and through their disunion and weakness to guarantee Israel's survival and the continuation of the brutal crusade occupation of the Peninsula.

All these crimes and sins committed by the Americans are a clear declaration of war on Allah, his messenger, and Muslims. And ulema have throughout Islamic history unanimously agreed that the jihad is an individual duty if the enemy destroys the Muslim countries. This was revealed by Imam Bin-Qadamah in "Al- Mughni," Imam al-Kisa'i in "Al-Bada'i," al-Qurtubi in his interpretation, and the shaykh of al-Islam in his books, where he said: "As for the fighting to repulse [an enemy], it is aimed at defending sanctity and religion, and it is a duty as agreed [by the ulema]. Nothing is more sacred than belief except repulsing an enemy who is attacking religion and life."

We - with Allah's help - call on every Muslim who believes in Allah and wishes to be rewarded to comply with Allah's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it. We also call on Muslim ulema, leaders, youths, and soldiers to launch the raid on Satan's U.S. troops and the devil's supporters allying with them, and to displace those who are behind them so that they may learn a lesson."

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the three "facts" that bin Laden and World Islamic Front cite as evidence of attacks against Muslims?
2. What do you notice about the nature of these events? Are these events more about politics or religion?
3. In response to these events, what does the World Islamic Front advocate all Muslims to do?
4. How do they justify their suggested response?
5. In looking at the nature of the events being discussed in the text compared to the language being used to describe the events themselves and the peoples involved, do you notice any patterns in how language is being used?

### Note to teachers:

The three "facts" are all aspects of the United States' political and military foreign policy in the Middle East. Despite the political nature of these events, the World Islamic Front frequently uses religious language to describe the events and the peoples involved (e.g., calling Americans "Crusaders.") The use of religious language reflects the broader shift to Islamism and is a way to rally support from Muslims around the world rather than just those Muslims being affected by these specific events. Another pattern is that the language in the source is inflammatory and emotional. Instead of saying that the United States has military bases in Saudi Arabia, the United States is "occupying the lands of Islam." The attacks against Iraqis in the 1990s are described as "massacres." This emotionally charged language presents the Americans as aggressors and Muslims as victims.

## Sources and for Further Reading

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## Common Core/Standards

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