



Political Islam: Image and Reality

Mohammed Ayoub

Three, often unstated, assumptions have inspired much of the discussion in the West regarding political Islam over the last decade and a half—especially since 9/11. These are: one, that political Islam, like Islam itself, is monolithic; two, that political Islam is inherently violent; and, three, that the intermingling of religion and politics is unique to Islam. These assumptions are false. Moreover, although an argument can be made that there are a number of varieties of transnational political Islam, such transnational manifestations form a very small part of the activity referred to as political Islam.¹ There is, however, one widely shared ingredient in the mix referred to as political Islam that may be responsible for projecting a monolithic image to Western audiences; I will return to this point later in this essay.

We must begin with a definition of the term “political Islam,” or “Islamism,” that is, Islam as political ideology rather than as a religious or theological construct. At the most basic level, adherents of political Islam believe that “Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world and implemented in some fashion.”² However, this generalization does not get us very far in explaining the political activity undertaken in the name of Islam. A more analytically useful definition is that provided by the political scientist Guilian Denoeux, who writes of Islamism as “a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives. It

provides political responses to today’s societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition.”³

The reappropriation of the past, the “invention of tradition” in terms of a romanticized notion of a largely mythical golden age, lies at the heart of this instrumentalization of Islam.⁴ It is the invention of tradition that provides the tools for de-historicizing Islam and separating it from the various contexts in which it has flourished over the past fourteen hundred years. This decontextualizing of Islam allows Islamists in theory to ignore the social, economic, and political milieus within which Muslim communities exist. It provides Islamists a powerful ideological tool that they can use to “purge” Muslim societies of the “impurities” and “accretions” that are the inevitable accompaniments of the historical process, but which they see as the reason for Muslim decline.

However, context has a way of reasserting itself over abstract theory when attempts are made to put theory into practice. This is exactly what has happened with Islamism. In practice, no two Islamisms are alike because they are determined by the contexts within which they operate. What works in Egypt will not work in Indonesia. What works in Saudi Arabia will not work in Turkey. Anyone familiar with the diversity of the Muslim world—its socioeconomic characteristics, cultures, political systems, and trajectories of intellectual development—is bound to realize that the political manifestations of Islam, like the practice of

Islam itself, are to a great extent context specific, the result of the interpenetration of religious precepts and local culture, including political culture.⁵

It is true that there is an Islamic vocabulary that transcends political boundaries. However, this vocabulary is normally employed to serve specific objectives in discrete settings. Thus, although the Islamic idiom may appear to be the same everywhere to the uninitiated observer, it differs from setting to setting. As the anthropologist Dale Eickelman and the political scientist James Piscatori note, politics becomes “Muslim” by “the invocation of ideas and symbols, which Muslims in different contexts identify as ‘Islamic,’ in support of...organized claims and counterclaims.”⁶ Since such claims and counterclaims, and the contesting that accompanies them, are normally specific to a particular sovereign state, the political activity engendered by such claims—often carried out in the name of Islam—is generally confined within the boundaries of that state.

It becomes clear that the Islamist political imagination is largely determined by context when one looks at the political discourse and, more importantly, the activities of the various Islamist movements. *Jamaat-i-Islami* is as Pakistan-specific as the Islamic Salvation Front is Algeria-specific. The strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt and has branches in various Arab countries, differ from country to country. The Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian variants have adopted radically different political strategies in response to local challenges. Indeed, the parent organization in Egypt has itself mutated over time, its leadership in the early 1980s unequivocally rejecting the more radical and militant ideas associated with Sayyid Qutb, its chief ideologue of the 1960s.

A Modern Phenomenon

Political Islam is a modern phenomenon, with roots in the sociopolitical conditions

of Muslim countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a product of the Muslim peoples’ interaction—military, political, economic, cultural, and intellectual—with the West during the past two hundred years, a period when Western power has been in the ascendant and Muslims have become the objects, rather than the subjects, of history.

Modern Islamist political thinkers devised the term “Islamic state” in order to reconcile their romanticized vision of the Islamic polity with the existence of sovereign states on the European model that were products of the twin processes of colonization and decolonization.⁷ In practical terms, the Islamists’ preoccupation with the Islamic state has meant the attempt to Islamize existing Muslim states. Only a very small minority of Islamists thinks that merging the Muslim world into a single Islamic caliphate is a feasible proposition.⁸ Mostly, the search for the pristine Islamic state has led to the emergence of what the French scholar Olivier Roy has called “Islamonationalisms.”⁹

Many such Islamo-nationalist movements, from North Africa to Southeast Asia, were fashioned in the crucible of resistance to colonial domination. During the colonial period, the Islamist movements had to share the stage with secular nationalist forces that were in most cases the leading vehicles through which the anticolonial struggle was waged. However, Islamist resistance movements, like their Marxist counterparts, often departed from the exclusively political preoccupations of the more secular groups by devising strategies for social as well as political transformation. Unlike the Marxists, however, the Islamists were less interested in socioeconomic change than with moral and cultural transformation.

This emphasis on the cultivation of certain cultural traits and moral values that are supposedly in conformity with Islamic precepts continued in the postcolonial era. In several cases, Islam had already underpinned

the formation of national identity in reaction to colonization. This was the case with Pakistan. In Algeria, the colonial power had characterized the subject population as “Muslim” in order to deny it the epithet “Algerian,” which would have legitimized Algerians’ quest for self-determination.

In most cases, defining oneself as Muslim was not considered antithetical to the nationalist project since this described the vast majority of people. Paradoxically, this applied even to the secular republic of Turkey, despite the attempt on the part of the Kemalist elite to denigrate Islam. During the Turkish war of independence, Islamic identity was the primary vehicle for popular mobilization, and it became the principal defining element of the territorial contours of the Turkish Republic. Thus, had Turkey not been Muslim, it would not have been Turkey.¹⁰

The acceptance of Islam as integral to identity formation in most Muslim countries may have been inevitable, but it opened the gates to Islamist intrusion into the postcolonial political process. The attraction of political Islam increased as the governing elites failed to deliver on their promises of economic progress, political participation, and personal dignity to expectant populations emerging from colonial bondage. It is in this era, from the 1950s to the 1970s, that political Islam, as we know it today, came of age. Abul Ala Mawdudi in Pakistan and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, both advocates of the Islamic state and opponents of secular nationalism, became its foremost intellectual standard-bearers.

As their legitimacy declined, many postcolonial regimes in the Muslim world became increasingly authoritarian and repressive, eliminating, or at least severely weakening, much of the secular opposition. In so doing, however, they created the political space in which Islamist formations could entrench themselves. Their strategies for dealing with Islamist elements—co-optation, competition, and suppression—each

had major downsides. The attempt to co-opt Islamist elements only provided them with greater political and media opportunities. The attempt to compete with Islamists on their own terms by projecting the regime as equally committed to Islam, as the “believer president” Anwar Sadat did in Egypt, surrendered the rhetorical ground to Islamist elements who vigorously criticized the rulers for not living up to their own words. The attempt to suppress Islamist elements by coercion forced them underground and led to violent acts against the regime and its most visible symbols and supporters; it also meant that Islamists could claim the high moral ground as victims of human rights abuses.

Suppression of Islamist tendencies could never be fully effective. Unlike secularists, who could be neutralized by preventing them from speaking in public or spreading their message through the media, Islamists could not be effectively curbed because of the idiom available to them and the institutions they could exploit. Islamic religious vocabulary, like the vocabulary of most other religions, lends itself to political ends. At the same time, it can appear politically innocuous, rendering those who employ it immune to prosecution. Mosques and their affiliated institutions could be used to send out political messages dressed up in religious garb—the sermon as manifesto. While a great deal has been written about Saudi petrodollars paying for the construction of mosques promoting conservative Wahhabist ideas throughout the Muslim world, what has often gone unremarked is that the political content of the sermons presented in these institutions usually reflects local concerns rather than an international or Saudi Islamic agenda. This is true even in Pakistan, where Saudi-financed religious schools are often cited as a breeding ground for jihadists. It is a fact that the Saudis did finance many madrasas in Pakistan, especially on the Afghanistan border, in the 1980s and 1990s. However, it was

the local context—the lack of educational and economic opportunities, and the absence of social services—that led to the demand for madrassa education and Islamist charitable networks. It was this lack of opportunity, combined with the impact of the Afghan war, that created the jihadis now so reviled in the Western media.¹¹ Nor would neo-Wahhabi teachings have had much impact in Pakistan had it not been for local circumstances that made them attractive to certain constituencies opposed to the patrimonial and clientist Pakistani state and its great-power patrons.

The neo-Wahhabism of the Pakistani madrasas went far beyond the original thrust of Wahhabi teachings. To be fair to the Saudi rulers, they had envisioned Wahhabism as a socially conservative and politically quietist form of Islam. The idea was that the Wahhabis would help the House of Saud, as the “Keeper of the Holy Places,” retain power, while turning a blind eye to Saudi Arabia’s economic and security relationship with the “infidel” United States. The Saudi rulers were willing to give up control of culture and education to the Wahhabi religious establishment in return for the latter’s endorsement, by means of religious edicts, of Saudi policies in the political, security, and economic spheres.

This social contract between the House of Saud and the descendents of Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab worked well until the latter half of the 1970s, when it began to fray for a number of reasons. These included explosive population growth in the kingdom and the inflow of massive amounts of petrodollars, which changed societal expectations as well as creating resentment among the most conservative elements of Saudi society over the penetration of Western and consumerist mores. Equally important was the Saudi policy, adopted in the 1960s and determined by Riyadh’s rivalry with Cairo, of giving refuge to radical members of the Muslim Brotherhood then being hounded out of Nasser’s Egypt. Many

of these people, taking their cue from Sayyid Qutb, denounced the Arab nationalist regimes in Egypt and Syria as unbelievers (*takfir*), saying that they were not truly Islamic but lived in a state of ignorance (*jahiliyya*) that made them legitimate targets against whom holy war (*jihad*) could be waged.¹² This extremist philosophy in the socially and culturally conservative ethos of Saudi Arabia was a heady brew that appealed to three critical constituencies—the most socially conservative, the most disillusioned and disempowered, and the most idealist—and united them in a union potentially destabilizing for the Saudi regime. Wahhabism constructed from above was a pillar of the status quo. Wahhabism mobilized from below became the mortal enemy of the status quo.¹³

This discussion about Saudi Arabia reveals the context-specificity of radical neo-Wahhabism, which is more an outgrowth of the teachings of Sayyid Qutb and his even more extreme interpreters than of Wahhabist thought. It was the meeting of the twain—Wahhabi social and cultural conservatism, and Qutbist political radicalism—that produced the militant variety of political Islam that eventually came to be represented by al-Qaeda. Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda’s financier and figurehead, represented the Wahhabi strain in the organization; Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Qaeda’s chief ideologue, leading strategist, and intellectual powerhouse, represented its radical Qutbist heritage.

This Qutbist-Wahhabi alliance reached its culmination in Afghanistan. This was in large measure the result of the anarchical situation in that country during the 1990s. With the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, the Qutbist-Wahhabi radicals and al-Qaeda gained an ideal base of operations. As the ultraconservative Taliban gained control over the chaotic country, al-Qaeda was able to establish a state within a state. Al-Qaeda’s messianic mission may

have been couched in universalist terms, but divorced from its Afghan context it would have withered on the vine. Context mattered.

Playing by the Rules

It is important not to overemphasize the importance of the violent jihadi groups. Al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad and al-Gamaa al-Islamiya (Egypt), Laskar Jihad and Jema'ah Islamiyah (Southeast Asia), and Lashkar-i-Taiba and Jaish-i-Muhammad (Pakistan) form a very small minority among Islamist groups. September 11 may have brought them center stage in dramatic fashion, but they are not representative of the overwhelming majority of groups that carry out peaceful political activity in the name of Islam.

The major Islamist political formations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jamaat-i-Islami and Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam in Pakistan, Nahdat al-Ulama in Indonesia, the Parti Islam se-Malaysia, and Turkey's Islamist parties in their various incarnations have all by and large played according to the rules established by regimes normally unsympathetic to the Islamist cause. Several of them have performed credibly in elections despite the fact that the dice are usually loaded against them. Others have learned to function within the parameters set by authoritarian regimes. They lie low when suppressed, bounce back organizationally and politically when autocracies liberalize under domestic or international pressure, and in all cases try to keep their constituencies and organizations intact as far as possible.

The Muslim Brotherhood is a case in point. It has worked within the Egyptian system as well as around it. It has fielded candidates for parliamentary elections either as independents or under the banner of other parties. Several of these have been elected to successive National Assemblies. During periods of relative liberalization, the Muslim Brotherhood has won control of professional

associations, such as those representing lawyers, doctors, and journalists, and then ceded such control when the state has decided to crack down. But through all these ups and downs, it has maintained intact its base among a diverse constituency through non-governmental organizations, charitable endowments, social service networks, women's centers, and publishing enterprises. Most of the time, it has compromised with the regime on terms that limit its influence but permit it to continue to exist.¹⁴

During the past few years, the most politically ambitious elements within the Muslim Brotherhood, consisting largely of middle-class professionals impatient with being left out of open participation in electoral politics, have broken away from the parent organization and attempted to set up the so-called post-Islamist Wasat (Center) Party. Wasat distinguishes itself from the Muslim Brotherhood by emphasizing the civilizational and cultural aspects of Islam that permeate Egyptian society and deemphasizing Islam's religio-political dimension. It bears a close resemblance in this sense to the Justice and Development Party, which currently governs Turkey. Although the Mubarak regime has repeatedly refused to license Wasat as a political party, its founders operate their own nongovernmental organization, the Egypt Society for Culture and Dialogue. It is interesting to note that three Christians, including a leading Protestant intellectual, Rafiq Habib, figure among the 93 founding members of Wasat.¹⁵

Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) may also be termed a post-Islamist party. Having learned from their experiences of the 1990s that overtly Islamist parties would not be permitted by the Turkish military to participate in governing the country, the moderate and modernist elements within the Turkish Islamist movement came to the conclusion that they had to repackage themselves as "conservative democrats" by emphasizing the role of

tradition and culture, including religion, in Turkish society without challenging the secular basis of the Turkish state and abjuring the overt use of Islamic vocabulary for political purposes.¹⁶ They have depicted themselves as the Muslim counterpart of the Christian Democrats in Western Europe. While constitutional requirements as well as electoral calculations may have compelled the AKP to modify its Islamist agenda, the party's transformation and electoral victory has demonstrated that democracy has grown deep roots in Turkey.¹⁷

Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) in Pakistan, like the Islamist parties in Turkey, has from the beginning been committed to parliamentary government and the electoral process, in spite of the fact that its electoral performance has been far from stellar. Its lackluster performance at the polls is related in considerable measure to its elitist and intellectual approach to Islam, and to its reputation for cooperating with military regimes when this suits its Islamist agenda. The party's perceived deviance from both popular (Barelvi) Islam, which includes many Sufi elements, as well as from the more puritanical but traditionalist (Deobandi) variant of South Asian Islam has also made it a loner among Islamist political formations.¹⁸ However, in Pakistan's most recent national and provincial elections, held in October 2002, the JI and other Islamist parties formed a united front that did well in the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan, and succeeded in forming the provincial government in the former. But, it was not the JI but Jamaat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI), representing Deobandi mullahs with their substantial following among the Pashtuns, that formed the leading edge of this victory. It did so by capitalizing on the anti-American sentiment unleashed by the war against the Pashtun Taliban and Pakistan's participation in it. As Vali Nasr, a leading scholar of Islamism in Pakistan, has noted, while the JUI's electoral victory in the Northwest Frontier Province demonstrated that it had

successfully Islamized Pashtun nationalism, it also confirmed that the JUI and the larger Islamic alliance of which it is a part have concluded that "the future of Islamism... lies in mainstream electoral politics."¹⁹

The important point is that, for the most part, the Islamist parties in Pakistan have channeled their political activism through the democratic electoral process. While terrorist groups, with their ideological affinity to neo-Wahhabism, have engaged in periodic violence, they represent the fringe elements among the country's Islamist political formations. Very often they have been nurtured by the military's Inter-Services Intelligence organization to serve its objectives in the Indian-administered portion of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. Thus the Pakistani "deep state," rather than Islamist ideologues, bears the greater responsibility for the violence committed by these organizations.

As these examples make clear, it is the local context that has largely determined the development and transformation of Islamist movements within particular national milieus. Moreover, it is not true that Islamist political formations have been primarily violent in nature. The most long-standing and credible Islamist parties have normally worked within the legal frameworks in which they have found themselves.

Hezbollah and Hamas

There are two major instances in which Islamist political groupings clearly straddle the violent and nonviolent worlds: Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Israeli-occupied Palestine. However, the violence that both have engaged in is, once again, context specific.

Hezbollah came into being as a result of the Lebanese civil war that began in 1975, which pitted several Lebanese factions against each other in inter- and intraconfessional conflicts. Hezbollah, representing the poor and downtrodden Shia of southern Lebanon, was a latecomer to the scene; the

initial protagonists were mainly Maronite Christians, various Sunni factions, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Hezbollah gained considerable support following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and flourished during the two-decade-long Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, when it fought a guerrilla campaign against the occupation forces. While it was aided militarily and politically by Iran and Syria, such assistance should not be confused with the factors that led to its creation and the credibility it attained among Lebanon's Shia as the leading defender of the community's interests. The end of the civil war in 1990 led to Hezbollah's transformation from a radical, clandestine militia into a mainstream political party with a resistance wing. Hezbollah is now one of the two major Shia parties, the other being Amal, and it has become an important player in Lebanon's political game, thanks mainly to its vast network of social service organizations that cater to the needs of the most underprivileged and vulnerable among Lebanon's people.²⁰

The withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon in May 2000 added to Hezbollah's prestige as the only Arab force capable of compelling Israel to cede conquered Arab territory. Paradoxically, it also made Hezbollah largely redundant as a military force. Moreover, the compromises Hezbollah has had to make in order to participate in the parliamentary process have led the organization to dilute its founding vision of turning Lebanon into an Islamic polity on the order of Iran. Now, Hezbollah's leaders openly express their commitment to parliamentary politics and accept the reality of Lebanon as a multiconfessional polity, while stressing their special role as an Islamic (read: Shia) pressure group within that polity.²¹

The Hamas movement is the political wing of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood. Ironically, the Israelis were responsible for building up the Muslim Brotherhood

in occupied Palestine in the 1980s as an alternative to the secular, Fatah-dominated PLO, which was supported by most Palestinians. However, with the outbreak of the first Palestinian *intifada* in 1987, following two decades of Israeli occupation, the Muslim Brotherhood, which until then had been primarily engaged in social service, educational, and charitable activities, set up its political wing, Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, in order to participate in the uprising. As the Palestinian resistance became increasingly militant in the latter half of the 1990s, following the breakdown of the Norwegian-brokered and U.S.-endorsed Oslo peace process, Hamas gained increased public support, not least because it had declared its unequivocal opposition to the Oslo process from the beginning.²²

Hamas's popularity also resulted in substantial part from the PLO's conversion into the Palestinian Authority, and its role under the Oslo Accords as the buffer between the Israeli occupation authorities and the Palestinian population. This undercut the PLO's position at the head of the resistance movement because it was impossible for PLO leader Yassir Arafat to be both de Gaulle and Pétain at the same time. The corruption and inefficiency of the Palestinian Authority added to Hamas's appeal. Moreover, the Palestinian economy languished and the Palestinian Authority was unable to deliver needed social services. Hamas's network of charitable organizations moved in to fill the void, providing aid to the most disadvantaged segments of Palestinian society, especially in the overcrowded refugee camps and shanty towns of Gaza.²³

Hamas also developed a military wing, especially in Gaza, which has carried out attacks against Jewish settlers, the occupying Israeli forces, and civilians within Israel. Since the onset of the second *intifada* in 2001, Hamas members have undertaken suicide missions both within Israel and in the occupied territories. However reprehensible they may be, such missions and other

violent activities conducted by Hamas, as well as other Palestinian groups, including offshoots of Fatah, cannot be divorced from the fact of Israeli occupation and the increasing economic and political desperation of Palestinians in the occupied territories.

The end of the Israeli occupation, if and when it comes about, will fundamentally change this action-reaction dynamic. Hamas, like Hezbollah, will be forced to turn itself principally into a political party in order to compete with other Palestinian factions, including Fatah. Its social services network and its relatively clean image among Palestinians with respect to corruption will stand it in good stead in the electoral politics of an independent Palestinian state. Its message of social transformation through Islam may also help; however, this is likely to have limited resonance except among its committed ideological supporters.

In the event of an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, and the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, it is likely that Hamas will jettison its maximalist goal of a united Palestine from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. The PLO did exactly this when presented with the opportunity to attain power in the occupied territories. The leaders of Hamas may be good Muslims, but they are equally good politicians and read the polls in the occupied territories that run heavily in favor of a two-state solution and reconciliation with Israel.²⁴ Moreover, Hamas's base is primarily in the occupied territories and not in the refugee camps outside Palestine that continue to be largely loyal to the PLO.

Finally, what distinguishes both Hamas and Hezbollah from al-Qaeda and other transnational Islamist organizations that carry out acts of indiscriminate violence is that their violent activity is restricted territorially and directed against specific targets that they consider to be obstructing their goals of achieving national independence or freeing occupied territory. Despite America's

strong support for Israel, Hamas and Hezbollah have desisted from attacking American targets during the past two decades. While this could change following Israel's targeted assassination of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the American refusal to condemn this action, and President Bush's endorsement of the Sharon plan to withdraw from Gaza but expand settlements in the West Bank, both organizations fall well within the logic of the state system. Neither harbors visions of international jihad. In this sense, Hezbollah and Hamas are more like the Irish Republican Army or the Basque separatist organization ETA than the al-Qaeda network.

The State and Religion under Islam

It is frequently assumed in much of the popular literature on the Muslim world—and even in academic discourse—that there is no separation between the religious and political spheres in Islam. This is a myth to which Islamist rhetoric has contributed in considerable measure. Consequently, an image has been created not merely of the indivisibility of religion and state, but of religious doctrine determining the political trajectory of Muslim states—including their inability to accept the notion of popular sovereignty or to implement democratic reforms. Nothing could be further from the truth.²⁵

Anyone familiar with the history of Muslim polities knows that in practice the religious and political spheres began to be clearly demarcated very soon after the death of the Prophet in 632 C.E. This was inevitable because, according to Muslim belief, revelation ended with the Prophet's death. His immediate temporal successors, the first four "righteously guided" caliphs, while respected for their piety and closeness to the Prophet, could not claim that their decrees were divinely ordained. Several of their actions and interpretations were openly challenged, and religious and/or political dissenters assassinated three of them. Civil

war often loomed on the horizon, and two major intra-Muslim battles were fought during the reign of the fourth caliph, Ali, largely as a result of intertribal rivalry. Intra-Muslim strife culminated in the massacre at Karbala in 680 C.E. of Ali's son, and the Prophet's grandson, Hussein, and his 70-odd companions by forces loyal to the newly established Umayyad dynasty. The religious schism between Sunni and Shia dates back to this supremely political event, a war for the throne.

Muslim leaders maintained the fiction of the indivisibility between religion and state primarily in order to legitimize dynastic rule and to hide the fact that the religious establishment was actually subservient to temporal authority. The criteria established by Muslim jurists to determine the legitimacy of temporal rule were minimal. The consensus was that so long as the ruler could defend the territories of Islam (*dar-al-Islam*) and did not prevent his Muslim subjects from practicing their religion, rebellion was forbidden. *Fitna* (dissension, anarchy) was thought to be worse than tyranny since it could threaten the integrity of the *umma* (community of believers). The lessons of internecine conflict during the early years of Islam were well learned. Political quietism was the rule in most Muslim polities most of the time from the eighth to the eighteenth centuries.²⁶

The distinction between temporal and religious affairs and the temporal authority's de facto primacy over the religious establishment continued throughout the reign of the three great Sunni dynasties—the Umayyad, the Abbasid, and the Ottoman. The Ottomans, from the seventeenth century onward, institutionalized this subservience by absorbing the religious functionaries into the imperial bureaucracy. The Sheikh-ul-Islam (Sheyhul Islam, in Turkish), the highest religious authority, was appointed by the sultan and held office at his pleasure. The Turkish Republic became heir to this Ottoman tradition and the Turkish

state has continued to exercise authority over a highly bureaucratized religious establishment through the Directorate of Religious Affairs, now in the name of secularism. The Arab successors to the Ottoman Empire also continued to uphold the tradition of political supremacy but have not been able to control religious institutions and discourse as effectively as Turkey has done.

The history of the link between religion and state in the Muslim parts of South and Southeast Asia is more complex, but it may be said that the greater prevalence of Sufi and syncretic forms of Islam have led to an autonomous religious sphere apart from the state. In the case of the Indian subcontinent, the presence of a large non-Muslim majority over whom Muslim potentates ruled for several centuries created a very special situation. In such a context, statesmanship demanded creative compromises that turned Mughal emperors into near deities for their Hindu subjects and the Hindu Rajputs into the sword arm of the nominally Muslim empire. Islam could act as a periodic brake on this process, but it was certainly never in the driver's seat. Attempts to apply puritanical Islamic precepts to matters of state usually turned out to be extremely shortsighted and counterproductive because they alienated large segments of the Hindu military and civilian elites, and eventually contributed in the eighteenth century to the collapse of an empire already suffering from overstretch.

Muslim polities are heirs to the twin traditions of the separation of the political and the religious arenas and, where the two intersect, to the supremacy of the political over the religious sphere. Even in Saudi Arabia, considered to be the most fundamentalist of Muslim societies, the balance between the House of Saud and the Wahhabi religious establishment has historically tilted decisively in favor of the former. Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud's suppression of the Ikhwan revolt during the early years of the kingdom firmly established the primacy of state over

mosque. Even today, the religious establishment, as distinct from the Islamist radicals, plays a subservient role to the House of Saud.²⁷

Islam as a Marker of Political Identity

One could argue that religion as marker of political identity is a different matter and that, at first glance, Islam has a distinct record that inextricably links the religious to the political, that it is possible to politicize Islam much more easily than other religions. On closer scrutiny, however, it is clear that even in this respect there is nothing unique about Islam. Zionism, as ideology and political project, can aptly be termed “political Judaism.” Zionists were responsible for settling European Jews in Palestine, establishing the Jewish state in Israel, and defining the political identity of Israeli Jews and many others around the world. Jewish fundamentalists form the hard core of the Jewish settler movement in occupied Palestine, denying Palestinians any rights over their homeland and firmly opposing any territorial compromise that could resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²⁸

During the era of European colonization of the globe, the cross invariably accompanied the flag. Thus the political and the religious are inextricably linked in the narrative of colonial domination. The growing power of the Christian right in American politics, particularly the 40-million strong Evangelical movement, with its apocalyptic vision of “Rapture” and the “Second Coming,” is changing the political culture of the United States slowly but surely. Evangelicals’ support for the return of Jews to the Holy Land—although for all the wrong, one could even say genocidal, reasons—has serious implications for American policy toward the Middle East.²⁹ The references by both Al Gore and George W. Bush to Jesus Christ as the primary source of their political wisdom during the 2000 presidential campaign can be adduced as further evidence that political

Christianity, both as ideological inspiration and as identity marker, is resurgent today even in this avowedly secular, though predominantly Christian, country.

Examples abound from non-Judeo-Christian traditions as well. Hindu nationalism in India is but political Hinduism in whose name mosques are demolished, shrines desecrated, and thousands of Muslims massacred—as happened in Gujarat two years ago. Any one even superficially acquainted with the politics of Sri Lanka would recognize the importance of the Buddhist Sangha (monastic order) and, therefore, of political Buddhism in defining the national identity of that country. The Sangha’s militancy, combined with the competitive chauvinism of the Sinhalese political parties, contributed in no small measure to the polarization of Buddhist Sinhalese and predominantly Hindu Tamils that led to the outbreak of an ongoing civil war in 1983.

The Uniqueness of Political Islam

If all religions are equally naked in this Turkish bath (to quote an Urdu proverb), why is Islam singled out in the West as uniquely supportive of the mixing of religion and politics? The answer is relatively simple. Most other religio-political movements either emanate from Western societies or, like the Hindu manifestation of politicized religion, do not challenge Western hegemony, but seek rather to accommodate themselves to it. However, Islamists stubbornly refuse to accept the current distribution of power in the international system as either legitimate or permanent. Islamist movements, including the vast majority that work peacefully within existing political systems, continue in multifarious ways to challenge not only the domestic status quo but the international status quo as well. Since the latter often props up the former, the two are closely intertwined from the Islamist perspective. This is particularly true of Islamist movements active in the greater Middle East, from Mo-

rocco to Pakistan. Moreover, the support extended to oppressive and authoritarian regimes by Western powers, especially the United States, makes it easier for the anger against domestic rulers to be channeled against the United States. The most virulent anti-American feelings at the popular level are expressed in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan, whose regimes are close allies of the United States.³⁰

It is the Muslims' collective memory of subjugation and the current perception of weakness in relation to the West that provides the common denominator among the many divergent manifestations of political Islam. This is the shared ingredient that I referred to at the beginning of this essay that may be responsible for nurturing a misleadingly monolithic image of Islam in the West. It is partly as a result of their search for an explanation for past humiliations and a remedy for the present plight of Muslims that Islamists, from Morocco to Indonesia, advocate a return to the imagined pristine purity of early Islam and cling to a romanticized notion of a golden age. Most Islamists believe that if Muslims could return to the model of the imagined golden age of the early years of Islam they would be able to transform their relationship with the West into one of equality rather than subordination. The common denominator among Islamists, therefore, is the quest for dignity, a variable often ignored by contemporary political analysts in the West.

This Islamist emphasis on the restoration of dignity strikes a sympathetic chord even among the large majority of Muslims who cannot be characterized as Islamists. It resonates with Muslims of all social and economic strata because of the injustices that they continue to suffer at the hands of the West or its surrogates. Since the United States is the leader of the West, the Muslim sense of outrage usually takes the form of anti-Americanism. For most Muslims, this antipathy toward America is

not based on opposition to American values but is grounded in opposition to aspects of American foreign policy, especially with respect to the Middle East.

Many of these concerns relating to dignity come together on the issue of Palestine, which has become the Muslim grievance par excellence. Most politically conscious Muslims believe that all Muslims are potential "Palestinians," the ultimate outsiders, who can be dispossessed and dishonored with impunity, and the justice of whose cause will always be dismissed by the West, and particularly by the United States, as irrational fanaticism. The occupation of Iraq has further fueled Muslim anger against the United States since it is seen as a ploy both to control the oil wealth of the Middle East and to consolidate Israeli hegemony in the region.³¹ The Islamists manipulate this general sense of disenchantment and anger to advance their own agendas against American-supported regimes in the Muslim world.

It is the disillusionment with American foreign policy in the context of past humiliations and the current sense of powerlessness that makes resistance to Western domination come alive in the Muslim political imagination. It is in this climate of despair and impotence that extremists find willing recruits for their terrorist plots. Extremist groups, which arrogate to themselves the right to speak in the name of Islam, justify terrorism as the only way to overcome the asymmetry in power between "Muslims" and the "West." By promoting terrorism under a perverted definition of "jihad," extremists succeed in making political Islam appear monolithic and supremely dangerous in the eyes of the West.

While the threat from political Islam to the West has been accentuated, and its antagonistic image reinforced, by the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Western perceptions of this threat predate the events of 2001. Influential Western analysts, such as Bernard

Lewis and Samuel Huntington, were writing about the “roots of Muslim rage” and the “clash of civilizations” long before the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.³²

In Western perceptions, political Islam is unique not because it uses religion for political purposes in order to create national identity or transform society. It is seen as uniquely threatening because it can also be used as an instrument to challenge, sometimes by violent means, the West’s continued global dominance. It is this dimension of political Islam that makes it appear threatening to the dominant powers in the international system.

This Western perception does not, however, negate the fact that political Islam is a multifaceted phenomenon and is in almost all instances context specific, circumscribed by the borders of individual states. The overwhelming majority of Islamist political activity is conducted through peaceful means within constitutional limits, even where governments are unsympathetic to the Islamists’ cause. Transnational extremist activities, including acts of terrorism, are the exception, not the rule, when it comes to political action undertaken in the name of Islam. ●

Notes

An earlier version of this essay formed the basis of a paper for a conference, “Beyond Radical Islam?” jointly sponsored by the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington, D.C., and the Le Frak Forum, Department of Political Science, Michigan State University, April 16–18, 2004.

1. I do not discuss Iran in this essay. Although the Iranian case bears out several of my conclusions, postrevolutionary Iran’s unique and complex experience requires independent treatment.

2. Graham Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), p. xi.

3. Guilain Deneoux, “The Forgotten Swamp: Navigating Political Islam,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 9 (June 2002), p. 61.

4. The term “invention of tradition” is borrowed from Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

5. “[I]t is intellectually imprudent and historically misguided to discuss the relationships between Islam and politics as if there were one Islam, timeless and eternal” (Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, trans. Carol Volk [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996], p. vii).

6. Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 4.

7. For a discussion of the concept of the Islamic state in Mawdudi’s writings, see Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), chap. 5. Mawdudi was a major influence on Sayyid Qutb as well.

8. The Hizb-ut-Tahrir seems to be the only Islamist organization that advocates the reestablishment of the caliphate. However, its reach is very limited. Although primarily active in Central Asia, it is headquartered in London. For details about the organization’s ideology, program, and activities, see <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english>.

9. Roy, *Failure of Political Islam*, p. 26.

10. See Mohammed Ayoob, “Turkey’s Multiple Paradoxes,” *Orbis*, vol. 48 (summer 2004), pp. 451–63.

11. See Husain Haqqani, “Islam’s Medieval Outposts,” *Foreign Policy*, November–December 2002, pp. 58–64.

12. For analyses of Sayyid Qutb’s ideas, see Yvonne Haddad, “Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of Islamic Revival,” in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Charles Tripp, “Sayyid Qutb: The Political Vision,” in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, ed. Ali Rahnema (London: Zed Books, 1994).

13. See Eric Rouleau, “Trouble in the Kingdom,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 81 (July–August 2002), pp. 75–89.

14. See Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

15. See Joshua A. Stacher, “Post-Islamist Rumblings in Egypt: The Emergence of the Wasat

Party,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 56 (summer 2002), pp. 415–32.

16. For an authoritative exposition of what the term “conservative democrat” means in the Turkish context, see Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s speech to the American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC, on January 29, 2004, at www.aei.org/events/eventID.735/event_detail.asp.

17. For analyses of the AKP’s transformation, its victory in the November 2002 elections, and the impact of the latter on the Turkish political scene, see Soli Özel, “After the Tsunami,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 14 (April 2003), pp. 80–94; and Ziya Önis and E. Fuat Keyman, “A New Path Emerges,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 14 (April 2003), pp. 95–107.

18. See Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama’at-i-Islami of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

19. Vali Nasr, “Military Rule, Islamism and Democracy in Pakistan,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 58 (spring 2004), p. 205.

20. See Judith Palmer Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004).

21. Conversation with Hassan Ezzeddin, chief spokesman of Hezbollah and a member of its Supreme Council, Beirut, August 2003.

22. See Khalil Shikaki, “Palestinians Divided,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 81 (January-February 2002), pp. 89–105.

23. According to two Israeli analysts, “a close scrutiny of Hamas’s roots and its record...reveals that...it is essentially a social movement.... Hamas has directed its energies and resources primarily toward providing services to the community, especially responding to its immediate hardships and concerns.... Hamas is deeply rooted in the Palestinian society...and thus is aware of the society’s anxieties, sharing its concerns, expressing its aspirations, and tending to its needs and difficulties” (Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2000], p. vii).

24. The latest polls conducted in the West Bank and Gaza by the Palestine Center for Policy and Survey Research in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation indicate that “after reaching a peace agreement with Israel, 77% [of Palestinians]

would support reconciliation between the two peoples.” See Palestine Center for Policy and Survey Research, poll number 10, December 4–9, 2003, p. 4, at www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2003/p10epdf.pdf.

25. I have argued elsewhere that the Muslim world’s, and particularly the Middle East’s, poor democratic record can be better explained by variables other than Islam. See Mohammed Ayoob, “The Muslim World’s Poor Record of Modernization and Democratization: The Interplay of External and Internal Factors,” in *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, ed. Shireen Hunter and Huma Malik (New York: Praeger, forthcoming).

26. See L. Carl Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), esp. chaps. 3–7.

27. See John S. Habib, *Ibn Sa’ud’s Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the Creation of the Sa’udi Kingdom, 1910–1930* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978).

28. For one of the best accounts of Jewish fundamentalism in Israel and its role in promoting Jewish settlement of Palestinian lands and obstructing a peace settlement, see Ian S. Lustick, *For the Land and the Lord: Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1988).

29. For an incisive analysis of the nexus between fundamentalist Christians and their Jewish counterparts in the United States and Israel, and its impact on American foreign policy and the future of the Middle East, see Margot Patterson, “Will Fundamentalist Christians and Jews Ignite Apocalypse?” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 11, 2002, at http://www.natcath.com/NCR_online/archives/101102/101102a.htm. See also, David D. Kirkpatrick, “Wrath and Mercy: The Return of the Warrior Jesus,” *New York Times*, April 4, 2004.

30. That American standing in the Arab world has hit an all-time low is borne out by a survey commissioned by University of Maryland professor Shibley Telhami in five Arab states—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Lebanon—shortly before the beginning of the war against Iraq. The survey, conducted between February 19 and March 11, 2003, found that of those polled only 4 percent in Saudi Arabia, 6 percent in Morocco and Jordan, 13 percent in Egypt, and 32 percent in Lebanon (which has a significant Christian minority) had a favorable

opinion of the United States. A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in March 2004 in four Muslim countries—Turkey, Pakistan, Jordan, and Morocco—corroborates these findings with opinion favorable to the United States ranging from 5 percent in Jordan to 30 percent in Turkey. The Pew poll can be found at <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/206.pdf>.

31. Mohammed Ayoub, “The War Against Iraq: Normative and Strategic Implications,” in *The Wars*

on Terrorism and Iraq: Human Rights, Unilateralism and US Foreign Policy, ed. Margaret Crahan, John Goering, and Thomas G. Weiss (New York: Routledge, 2004), chap. 7.

32. See Bernard Lewis, “Roots of Muslim Rage,” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990, pp. 47–60; and Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72 (summer 1993), pp. 22–49.