

Radicalism and Islamic Terror: Historical Background

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Islamic fundamentalism is part of a worldwide phenomenon of an activist and often belligerent response to perceived threats from modernity and globalization – originating in the West – to the religious and cultural identity of various societies. In addition, the resort to religious activism was and remains a response to the severe socioeconomic upheavals these societies have experienced as a result of modernization, especially among those who were not fortunate enough to enjoy its benefits. The Islamic State is the most extreme and violent manifestation of Islamic fundamentalism in the modern era.

Distress and concern over the loss of religious and cultural identity have been especially strong in Muslim societies and particularly in the Arab Middle East since the middle of the nineteenth century. They are rooted in the deep gulf between the Islamic self-perception of the proper status of Islam, deemed as superior to all other civilizations, on the one hand, and the political, economic and technological inferiority of the Muslim world in the modern era compared to the West, on the other. This gulf is especially blatant given the fact that unlike Judaism and Christianity, Islam as a religion and civilization was immensely successful at the outset. It outshone Europe and its achievements were not far less impressive than those of India and China. This historical accomplishment nourished the belief that Islam's success in this world was one of the proofs of its theological veracity. Therefore, the weakness and inferiority of Muslim societies in the modern era and the dominance of Western civilization aroused both psychological and theological distress due to the difficulty in bridging the gap between belief and reality.

One of the main responses to the crisis was reformist Salafism identified with Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), the Grand Mufti of Egypt. The basic premise of this movement was the prevalent belief that Islam at the time of its “righteous forefathers” (*al-salaf al-salih*), i.e., the era of the prophet Muhammad and the next three generations, was at the peak of its glory and must therefore serve as a model for Muslims for all generations. To this, ‘Abduh added the assertion that Islam was from its outset a rational religion that advanced and developed thanks to its ability to adapt to circumstances while retaining its core and essence. However, Islam lost that ability in its third century of existence because of reprehensible collaboration in systems run by tyrannical rulers, corrupt clergymen, and Turkish military commanders who retained their pagan customs. His solution to the problem was to rejuvenate Islamic law by applying *ijtihad*, i.e., independent reasoning and rational tools to reinterpret religious law in order to provide religious answers to legal and ethical questions and problems that emerged in the modern era, while taking into consideration the needs of the new era and the best interests of the public (*masalha*). In practice, ‘Abduh proposed to integrate a range of methods and ideas borrowed from Western culture into Islam in a controlled fashion, in order for Islam to adapt to the modern age while maintaining its identity.¹

Muhammad Rashid Ridda (d. 1935), ‘Abduh’s disciple, followed this path, but the post-World War I upheavals radically changed his attitude and the orientation of Salafism as a whole. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the last Muslim empire in history; the West’s conquest of most Islamic countries and the Middle East in particular; the abolition in 1924 by Kemal Ataturk of the caliphate, the symbol of cultural and political unity of the Islamic world; and the rise of secular nationalism profoundly affected Ridda and his followers and generated a sense of intense crisis. They found it impossible to separate Europe’s culture from its imperialism. In fact, Western culture itself suffered from an acute crisis due to the horrific death toll of the Great War, after which the values that it espoused seemed more hollow than ever. Ridda’s conclusion was to continue to support the modernization of Islam but to oppose unequivocally any attempt to adopt Western values.²

In many ways Ridda’s ideas continue the writings of the great Islamic jurist Taqi a-Din Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328) and the teachings of Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), the founder of the conservative Wahhabi branch of Islam. Both espoused a rigid purist line in their scholarship and

advocated the practice of violence against anyone who deviated from pure Islam. But unlike prior religious purism, generated when religion dominated the cultural and intellectual arena, contemporary Islamic fundamentalism is a response to modernity and secularism, which are viewed as endangering the very existence of Islam.

Ridda was a theoretician who preached through the journal *al-Manar*, which was published in Cairo and disseminated among most if not all Muslim communities in the world. But the person most responsible for the transition from theory to practice was Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), who in 1928 founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and shaped its philosophy and mode of operation. Born into a rural religious family and having received a modern education, Banna was himself a product of modernization. He was sent to work as a teacher in Ismailiya, where most of the residents were recent arrivals from village communities who had no social frameworks to replace what they had lost when they moved to the city. By contrast, the urban elite consisted of a large European community that dictated the city's Westernized life style. Banna did not differ from his intellectual predecessors in diagnosing the problem: for hundreds of years, Islam had absorbed foreign influences that had distorted its original message and corrupted the Muslims. In addition, Islam became stagnant and was unable to provide answers to religious and social problems rooted in modernization and cultural Westernization, and the result was a chasm driven between the believers and religion.

The solution he offered was two-pronged: the modernization of Islam and the Islamization of modernity, i.e., the rejuvenation of Islam by means of *ijtihad* – while rejecting Western values and bringing believers back to the correct religious path – together with the imposition of Islamic values on modern reality. The great innovation lay in the method he proposed for bringing believers back to the religious way of life and the centrality of politics in his doctrine. Banna developed the *da'wa* strategy, which combined religious preaching with the construction of a network of welfare services that at the time the state was either incapable or unwilling to provide. In exchange for receiving services such as preschools, medical care, and charity, people were obligated to participate in the movement's religious activity and adopt an Islamic way of life. The Islamization of society was intended to be a bottom-up movement and culminate in the establishment of an Islamic regime (*nizam islami*). Banna explained that politics is an

essential component of Islam and that the establishment of a state that would function on the basis of *sharia* – Islamic religious law – was a key Islamic value. He rejected liberal democracy as a foreign idea whose aim was to split the believers to rival sects. Still, understanding the appeal of democracy, he spoke of an Islamic democracy as a model for the future in which only Islamic movements incorporating the Qur'an and *sharia* as the basis of their platforms would be able to participate. Banna attributed great importance to the idea of jihad, coining the phrase, "Allah is our goal, the Prophet is our leader, the Qur'an is our constitution, jihad is our way, and death for Allah is our most exalted wish." Nonetheless, he postponed the realization of jihad to a future time.³

At the outset, Banna rejected the use of political violence against Muslims, though by the end of World War II he authorized young activists who wanted to expedite the formation of the desired Islamic state to found secret terrorist cells within the Brotherhood. In 1946-1948 activists assassinated several pro-British politicians, and the Muslim Brotherhood sent volunteers to help the Palestinians in the war against the Zionists in 1948. The acts of terrorism led to the banning of the movement in 1948. In revenge, a Brotherhood member murdered Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Nuqrashi in December 1948, and in a countermove, the police killed Banna in February 1949.

Although it was outlawed, the Muslim Brotherhood continued to operate and even supported Abdel Nasser when he assumed power in the military coup on July 23, 1952, hoping to serve as his spiritual guide. But by 1954, a rift grew among them because of Nasser's authoritarianism, his refusal to allow the movement any influence, and his decision to form a secular regime. Following an assassination attempt on Nasser's life in 1954, the Egyptian regime banned it again. Nasser continued to persecute the Muslim Brotherhood until his death in 1970.

The Nasser regime's secular policy and the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood generated the Salafist jihadi stream in Islam. The founder of that stream was Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), a chief ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood until his arrest in 1964. Lying on his prison hospital bed after having suffered severe torture, he wrote his book *Milestones (Ma'alim fi al-Tariq)*, which is considered the Salafist manifesto. According to Qutb, human reality allows two possible situations: *hakimiyya*, which means God's sovereignty and the absolute rule of the laws of Islam, while anything less is a regression to *jahiliyya*, the era of barbarism and ignorance preceding Islam.

According to Qutb, Egypt and other Muslim countries had entered a new era of *jahiliyya*, because they had voluntarily subordinated themselves to human laws and ideas such as nationalism and socialism, and their inhabitants were Muslims in name alone. Qutb despaired of the Muslim Brotherhood's gradual Islamization of society from the ground up, saying that no modern Arab state would allow the true adherents of Islam to disseminate their teachings, either by applying rigid suppression or by indoctrinating the masses via the regime's schools and media. The only choice left to the true defenders of Islam was to withdraw from society into a self-imposed ghetto where they could live according to Islamic law and concurrently amass weapons and attract more supporters to the cause. Once they were strong enough, the true believers would seize the reins of government by force, whereupon they would use the means of the modern state to impose Islam on society. In order to justify the revolt against the rulers – an idea antithetical to Muslim tradition – Qutb cited Ibn Taymiyyah, who said that a ruler who does not obey the laws of Islam is a heretic against whom one must declare jihad.⁴

Qutb was executed in 1966, but while in prison he exerted great influence on young Islamic activists who were jailed with him and adopted his philosophy. Two events – the Six Day War in 1967 and Nasser's death in 1970 – invigorated Islamist movements and ideas. The defeat to Israel revealed the failure of Nasser's socialist pan-Arab vision, and Islam was seen as the best option for filling that ideological void. Islam was presented as an all-encompassing system offering solutions to problems in this world and the next, and as the only way of realizing Arab and Islamic revival and empowerment.

The Islamists' ideas were expressed in general terms and did not go into details, which would have exposed their impracticality, and their vagueness enhanced their popular appeal. The Islamic solution was presented as authentic, rooted in local culture and most suitable to local conditions, unlike imported solutions like liberalism or socialism whose foreign sources were presented as the key to their failure in the region. The Islamic way was presented as one that had gained great success in the past, but unlike other alternatives, which had all failed, had not been tried in the present.⁵ In the 1970s, the failure of Arab socialism to extricate Arab countries from their backwardness was glaring; especially acute was its failure to provide employment for hundreds of thousands of young high school and university graduates. The Islamic movements' slogan – “Islam is the solution” – held tremendous lure,

particularly for young people whose chances for finding jobs and housing and even getting married were limited.

President Anwar el-Sadat, Nasser's successor, released thousands of Islamists from jail and allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to renew its activity, albeit with some restrictions. Sadat's policy of economic openness, which widened social gaps, increased the appeal of the Muslim Brotherhood's welfare system among broad segments of Egyptian society. At the same time, some of the newly released young activists established several organizations that strove to topple the Egyptian regime. Three were particularly important: al-Takfir wal-Hijra, headed by Shukri Mustafa, which was comprised of several dozen students and in 1977 kidnapped and killed a former minister in the Egyptian government; Jama'at al-Muslimin, led by Tah al-Samawi, whose members torched mosques they felt were insufficiently religious; and al-Jihad, headed by 'Abd al-Salam Faraj, whose members assassinated Sadat in October 1981.⁶ The Egyptian authorities eliminated all of these organizations, arrested hundreds of supporters, and executed dozens. But the phenomenon did not disappear.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was an important milestone in the development of Salafist movements. Until then, these groups focused on battling the near enemy, i.e., the rulers of their nations, based on the belief that these rulers were a threat to the Muslim community from within and were preventing it from realizing its religious and political goals. But the Soviet invasion produced a change in priorities and a new focus on the distant enemy threatening Islam from without. Consequently, thousands of young men from the Middle East flocked to Afghanistan to take part in the jihad and, for the first time in history, created an Islamic version of the international brigades. Among those who came to Afghanistan was Osama Bin Laden from Saudi Arabia, who stood out as a gifted organizer, and the Palestinian radical theorist 'Abdullah 'Azzam; the meeting between the two resulted in the establishment of the Office for Mujahidin Services, which recruited Muslim volunteers, and later, the founding of al-Qaeda.

'Azzam promoted jihad to the second most important religious duty in Islam after the belief in the unity of God; it was, he said, the personal obligation incumbent upon every Muslim. But unlike other thinkers and probably because he was Palestinian, he focused on the obligation to restore to Islamic rule all lands conquered by Islam's external enemies – from Palestine through Kosovo to Sicily and Spain – solely through jihad. He

explained that warriors of Islam must establish priorities; accordingly, they were to focus on one arena as the primary aim for jihad but would choose another arena as their secondary target. After liberating the primary target and establishing an Islamic emirate there, they would go onto the secondary target, at which point they would pick a tertiary target, and so on. Thus jihad would continue until the liberation of all Islamic lands and the establishment of the caliphate, which would stretch from Indonesia in the east to Morocco and Spain in the west. Although he was a Palestinian, ‘Azzam maintained that Afghanistan should be the primary jihad target rather than Palestine, because the prospects of victory were greater and because Palestinian society had undergone a process of Westernization and corruption through contact with Israel, whereas Afghan society remained truer to Islam, and it would therefore be easier to establish the utopian Islamic state there first. It was essential to wage jihad on the land where conflict prevailed between oppressed Muslims and their non-Muslim rulers (e.g., the Philippines) simultaneously and to the degree possible in the Islamic lands destined to be liberated (e.g., Egypt and Algeria) until the liberation of all Islamic lands.⁷

‘Azzam laid the foundations for the establishment of al-Qaeda and was Bin Laden’s spiritual guide throughout the war in Afghanistan. Based on the notion *al-qaeda al-sulba* (“the solid base”) conjured by ‘Azzam, Bin Laden announced the formation of al-Qaeda in late November-early December 1989 in Peshawar, thus beginning a new chapter in the history of global terrorism. A key factor that hastened the establishment of al-Qaeda was the failure of the Salafist jihadist organizations in Egypt, Syria, and Algeria to topple the existing regimes. There were several reasons for this failure: the Arab regimes succeeded in applying the lessons of the revolution in Iran and applied brutal and sophisticated means of oppression to neutralize the Salafists. At the same time, the vicious terrorist means employed by the Salafists – including indiscriminate murder of innocent civilians, dismemberment of live people, and damage to the local economy – alienated many of their potential supporters, who preferred corrupt regimes to barbaric terrorists.⁸ The failure to topple the Arab regimes led Bin Laden to the observation that American support was the key to the survival of these regimes and hence to the conclusion that it was necessary to oust the United States from the region through terrorism. In other words, unlike other Salafist organizations, al-Qaeda focused its activity on the distant enemy and turned to international terrorism.

Al-Qaeda's terrorist activity against the United States, culminating in the 9/11 attacks in 2001, encouraged US President George W. Bush to invade Afghanistan that same year and Iraq in 2003. This move provided al-Qaeda with renewed momentum, and volunteers from all over the world rushed to Iraq to participate in the jihad. The first leader identified with al-Qaeda in Iraq was Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, a criminal from Jordan who was "born again" in prison and turned to jihad. Diverging opinions regarding the struggle's priorities developed between al-Zarqawi and Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's right hand man. Al-Zarqawi focused on terrorism and mass killings of Shiites, whom he called heretics and traitors to Islam, whereas Bin Laden preferred to focus on the fight against the United States. Al-Zarqawi was killed by US forces in 2006; his successors – Abu Ayub al-Masri (also known as Abu Hamza al-Muhajer) and Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi – were likewise killed by the Americans in April 2010. This time, the heir was Ibrahim 'Awwad Ibrahim 'Ali al-Badri, better known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who changed the name of the organization to the Islamic State in Iraq and, in its present incarnation, the Islamic State.

This brief overview of the history of Islamic fundamentalism shows an almost linear progression of radicalization and transition from rhetoric to violence. The process is rooted in several factors, the most important being the profound socioeconomic and political crisis of the Arab world, which created fertile ground for extremism and raised generations of desperate young people clinging to the radical message as a solution to the regional ills. Furthermore, the sense that their culture is threatened has intensified with globalization. In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood's failure to gain political influence via preaching and elections drove many Islamists to violence. Since the 1970s, the radicals shifted from battling Arab rulers to fighting the United States – the leader of the world of heresy – but turned inward with the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011.

Despite the common ideological base of Islamic organizations, radicalism usually leads to schisms and power struggles among leaders and groups claiming to lead and save the world of Islam. The combination of a radical ideology, which views the world in stark black and white terms, with the inherent difficulties of realizing their ideals has led these organizations to adopt murderous methods, most of whose victims are Arabs and Muslims whose conduct was not pure enough for the radicals. Not only has this

violence not resolved what ails Muslims in the modern era; but it has greatly exacerbated their plight.

Notes

- 1 Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1789-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 103-60.
- 2 Ibid, pp. 171-209.
- 3 Ephraim Barak, ed., *Islam Is Our Message and Jihad Is Our Path: Hassan al-Banna – Collected Letters* (Tel Aviv: Dayan Center for Middle East Studies, 2012), pp. 17-48.
- 4 Uriya Shavit, “Jihad and the New Jahaliya of Sayyid Qutub,” in *Jihad: Ideological Roots*, ed. Yosef Kostiner (Tel Aviv: Dayan Center for Middle East Studies, 2012), pp. 29-40.
- 5 Meir Litvak, “Introduction,” in *Islam and Democracy in the Arab World*, ed. Meir Litvak (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1997), p. 16.
- 6 David Sagiv, “The Ideology of Egyptian Jihadist Organizations,” *The New Middle East* 36 (2004): 132-47.
- 7 Asaf Maliach and Shaul Shay, *From Kabul to Jerusalem: al-Qaeda, Global Islamic Jihad, and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Tel Aviv: Matan, 2010).
- 8 Emmanuel Sivan, “Why Radical Muslims Aren’t Taking Over Governments,” *MERIA* 2, no. 2 (1998).