



VIEWPOINT



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The Rising Threat of Islamic Fundamentalism

by

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Nations outside the Muslim sphere have tended to ignore the growing disruptive threat of Islamic fundamentalism. But it came very much to the forefront in the recent episode when Israel deported some 415 alleged Islamic activists to Lebanon and jailed about 1,000 more. The fundamentalists view this as a victory rather than a defeat because it has stirred a sense of real movement in the fundamentalist group that was not as strong before. The bombing of the World Trade Center in New York appears to be a recent example.

The group most directly involved, the Hamas, have been in the forefront of igniting Islamic fervor. With their smaller counterparts, the Islamic Jihad (Holy War), they have been at the base of most of the terrorist activities. The name Hamas is an acronym, meaning "zeal," for the Islamic Resistance Movement. The organization really began to function in February 1988, two months after the beginning of the intifada (uprising), the guerrilla confrontation with Israel, in which the Hamas play an important role.

While the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is committed to searching for accommodation with Israel, Hama will settle for nothing less than the destruction of the Jewish state, followed by the establishment of an Islamic Palestine as a precursor to a greater Pan-Arab Union.

What has escaped many Westerners is the fact that we are not talking about small, localized groups. Islam spreads across the whole littoral of the Mediterranean and through the Middle East, and now will include the six newly liberated former Islamic Soviet Republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. (See Map on page 6.) Additional Muslim countries in other parts of the globe have less affinity with the groups under discussion here.

With the exception of Israel (but not the occupied territories) all Middle Eastern countries rule in an autocratic fashion. Leaders come to power, often through violence, without the consent of the governed. Lacking popular legitimacy, they use rhetoric to appeal to the concepts of Pan-Arabism and Islam in an attempt to gain domestic and region-wide support.

At the moment, Islamic fundamentalism represents the most effective of the organized challengers of the entrenched ruling elite. Their ability to articulate popular discontent in the form of religious and cultural idioms has a powerful appeal to the populace. In the freely contested parliamentary elections in Jordan and Algeria in 1991 and 1992, the fundamentalists demonstrated a surprising ability to win majority endorsement.

If we are to digest the implications of the growing fervor of Islamic fundamentalism, we need to understand what it is.

It is obvious that the growth of Islamic fundamentalism throughout North Africa and the Middle East will be a strong political voice in the years just ahead. Islam in Arabic means “submission” and provides the opportunity for political manipulation on a large scale using the current interpretation of the tenets of Islam as the pressure point. Muslims draw their identity, habits and attitude largely from Islam.

For fourteen centuries, the faith of Islam has been shaping the lives of nations and peoples that form a mosaic of nationalities, races, languages, regions and cultures. With some 800 million adherents, Islam is the world’s second largest religion after Christianity.

Political differences within the modern Islamic world are extensive, as evidenced by the varying ideological commitments of Muslim governments — the conservative monarchy of Saudi Arabia, the revolutionary Islamic fundamentalism of Iran, the secular socialism of the Ba’athist regimes of Syria and Iraq, the disestablishment of Islam by the westernizing government of Turkey. Divergent ideologies within Islamic nations have threatened to destabilize many Muslim governments.

On the theological level, Muslims also differ over interpretation of the Koran and the teachings of Muhammad. Seventy sects and offshoots have arisen because of doctrinal differences, which in some cases have proved irreconcilable. As in other religions, some sects of the Islamic faith are intolerant of others. About 90 percent of all Muslims are Sunni — considered the Orthodox Sect. Of the dissident sects of Islam, the largest and most important are the Shiites. Shiism refers to “partisans of Ali.”

When the Prophet Muhammad died in the late sixth century A.D., without making any provision for a successor, his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib, claimed to be the prophet’s successor. But a majority of Muhammad’s followers rallied around Abu Bakr, reputed to be the first person outside the prophet’s immediate family to be converted to Islam.

Appointed to succeed the prophet as leader of the Muslim community, Abu Bakr became the first of four Caliphs — meaning successors of Muhammed.

Shiism is the state religion of Iran, the only Muslim country with an overwhelming Shiite majority. Shiism has its own dissidents who became Isma’elis, Alawite and Druzes.

In the eighth century a mystical movement called Sufism developed in protest against formalization and legalization of conventional Islam. Sufism has had great influence, both within the

Islamic world and beyond it. Many Sufi orders exist centered around different rites. Although both Sunni and Shiite fundamentalists reject it, Sufism has a wide appeal among those who view Islam as a religious experience rather than a basis for political action.

The Islamic doctrine has four sources: the Koran, the Hadeth-Sunnah, Consensus and Inference by analogy.

The Koran is the primary source of Islamic teaching and doctrine. It is considered the word of God. It consists of 114 chapters, which Muslims believe were revealed to Muhammed piecemeal over a period of 20 years. Muhammed has no divine attributes but simply is considered to be God's messenger. It is therefore the Koran, not Muhammed, that is the cornerstone of Islam.

While the Koran contains a wide variety of devotional regulations as well as specific rules for everyday living, it does not address many problems. This lack of comprehensive guidance in the Koran has led Muslims to seek guidance elsewhere, primarily in the so-called Hadeth-Sunnah, weaving tradition and prophetic practice. Hadeth specifically refers to Muhammed's sayings, while Sunnah refers to actions or his attitude toward the actions of others.

The third source of Islamic doctrine is Consensus, which is practiced by leading Muslim scholars. Recognized as interpreters of Islamic doctrine when the Muslim community is faced with an issue for which the Koran or Hadeth-Sunnah has no provision, scholars may study how to deal with it. At least three scholars must agree to reach consensus on any issue.

The final source of Islamic doctrine is Inference by analogy. Essentially this is a process by which judges and scholars devise a solution to a new problem based on solutions or principles inferred from the three previous sources. It is much like the use of precedents in Anglo-Saxon legal tradition.

In many parts of the Islamic world there are signs of a religious consciousness following a return to Muslim puritanism. It has contributed to a political power struggle, xenophobia (particularly anti-Westernism) and calls for Pan-Islamic solidarity.

Here, in brief, is a rundown of a number of the countries involved and the events of their most recent past that touch on our subject:

West Bank and Gaza. The fundamentalist group Hamas, which rejects coexistence with Israel, is gaining ground from the Palestine Liberation Organization and winning the support of Palestinians fighting Israeli occupation.

Turkey. The Welfare Party, seeking closer ties with the Islamic world, fought the October 1991 election in alliance with two nationalist parties; the alliance won 17 percent of votes, but no seats. Several small fundamentalist groups engage in terrorism. The late President Turgut Ozal of Turkey once said on American television that the allies should go into Iraq and eliminate Saddam Hussein. This is not a view shared by many in the Middle East. They are more afraid of fundamentalism than they are of Hussein.

Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood has been outlawed and brutally repressed since the early 1980s, but is believed to have residual support.

Lebanon. Two Shia Muslim groups, Hizballah and Amal, are supported by Iran and Syria respectively. Hizballah is winning the competition between them.

Iraq. Underground Shia fundamentalist groups have strong support in southern Iraq, and played a big part in the rebellion after the Gulf War. The largest, Dawa, founded in 1968, has been severely repressed, with many leaders and militants executed.

Iran. Iran has been an Islamic republic since 1979. The government is dominated by a political elite of Shia clerics and allied laymen. Their hold on power is reinforced by arrests, executions and the suppression of free speech, Islamic law was introduced in 1983, but its implementation is half-hearted thanks to differences within the leadership. More than 100 offenses carry the death penalty. The Arab states that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) — Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates — collectively regard Iran as dominated by religious fanatics obsessed with spiritual and political imperialism, Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and home of its holiest sites, feels particularly threatened by the Islamic Republic. Iran is responsible for much of its own isolation because of its continuing commitment to the export of Islamic revolution. To this day, Iran supports antigovernment Islamic fundamentalist groups in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia and even on the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Afghanistan. Four Sunni fundamentalist parties — Hizb-i-Islami, Hizb-i-Islami-Khalis, Jamiat-i-Islami, Ittihad-i-Islami — and several smaller Shia groups oppose President Mohammad Najibullah. Their call for a strict Islamic republic is supported by a minority of Afghans.

Central Asia. Independent Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are going through an Islamic revival, with much mosque-building and religious observance. Iran and Saudi Arabia compete for influence. Some want an Islamic state like Iran; others prefer a secular state like Turkey. The fundamentalistic Islamic Renaissance Party has failed to create a single Islamic movement across Central Asia.

Pakistan. The Islamic Democratic Alliance (IDA), which links several Islamic and right-wing parties advocating more Islamization, formed the government after winning 105 seats in the 217-seat parliament in the October 1990 election. The IDA includes the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami, which seeks an Islamic state. Islamic law has operated since 1979, but Islamic punishments, apart from occasional floggings, are rarely carried out.

Saudi Arabia. Several underground radical groups oppose the fundamentalist Wahhabi regime. In November 1979 one group took the Grand Mosque in Mecca by force. Saudi judges impose Sharia punishments, public beheadings for theft, and amputation of hands.

Jordan. The Muslim Brotherhood, with 22 seats, is the largest single block in parliament. It was given five cabinet seats in January 1991, as the Gulf War approached, but lost them in June, as King Hussein planned peace talks with Israel, which the Brotherhood opposes.

Sudan. A military junta under Lieutenant General Omar Hassan Ahmed al-Bashir came to power in 1989 and is increasingly dominated by the fundamentalist National Islamic Front led by Hassan al-Turabi. The junta has links with Iran, which has sent 2,000 Revolutionary Guards to Sudan. A new penal code based on Sharia law was introduced in 1990, except in three Christian southern provinces, and came into full force this year. Radical groups collect money in Saudi Arabia for jihad (holy wars) against the south.

Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928, has come through periods of militancy and persecution. It is still barred from operating as a political party, but fought the 1987 election in alliance with two secular parties, winning 37 seats. Radical groups, such as Jihad (which assassinated Sadat), operate underground. There are frequent clashes with the police; hundreds of militants were arrested this year.

Libya. Unstructured Islamic groups are the greatest internal threat to the regime, clashing frequently with security forces. Several hundred militants are in prison.

Tunisia. Members of the al-Nahda (Renaissance) party competed in the April 1989 election as independents. Since early 1990 the party, never legal, has been repressed, its newspaper closed, and militants arrested after clashes with police and the discovery of alleged plans for “Islamic revolution.” The leadership split in 1991.

Algeria. The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), legalized in 1989, won 55 percent of the vote in the June 1989 regional election, and 49 percent in the first round of the general election in December 1991. The government cancelled the second round. Most FIS leaders were jailed. The party was banned formally in March 1992 and local councils under the control of the FIS dissolved. A deep desire for change among Algeria’s restless young population has locked the government and an underground Islamic movement into a cycle of violence that could bring an end to the long rule of the secular, socialist movement that won the country’s independence. As army and police antiterrorists hit back at fundamentalist activists in reprisal for growing attacks against security officers many Algerians say they fear civil war and chaos, which would lead inevitably to an Islamic Republic, are at hand. The Islamic Salvation Front had won support by pledging to provide the distributive welfare and social justice that the National Front has long promised but failed to deliver. Authorities are tightening the noose around the movement, and estimates of Islamic Front members imprisoned go as high as 10,000.

Morocco. Islamic groups were prominent in antigovernment protests in 1990 and 1991. The largest, Justice and Welfare (never legalized), was ordered to disband in 1990. Its leader is under house arrest and some members are in prison. The party has gone underground with other clandestine, more radical groups, such as Islamic Youth.

So the fundamentalist movement is a matter of the moment and not to be ignored. As Manour Fahrengh, revolutionary Iran’s first ambassador to the United Nations, has written: “Islamic fundamentalism may be appealing when they are in the opposition, but in Iran where they have been in power for 14 years, popular resentment against them is deep and widespread”.

RELIGIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Country	Sunni	Shiite	Other
Afghanistan	84%	15%	1% other
Algeria	99%*	N/A	(*state religion) 1% Christian and Jewish
Azerbaijan	N/A	N/A	87% Muslim, 6% Russian Orthodox
Bahrain	70%	30%	
Egypt	94%	N/A	6% Coptic Christian and other
Iran	4%	95%	2% Christian, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Baha'i
Iraq	32%	65%	3% Christian
Israel	N/A	N/A	83% Jewish, 17% non-Jewish (mostly Muslim)
Jordan	92%	N/A	8% Christian
Kazakhstan	N/A	N/A	47% Muslim, other N/A
Kuwait	45%	30%	15% Christian, Hindu, Barsi, 10% other Muslim
Kyrgyzstan	N/A	N/A	70% Muslim, other N/A
Lebanon	N/A	N/A	75% Muslim (5 sects, primarily Sunni), 25% Christian
Libya	97%	N/A	
Morocco	N/A	N/A	98% Muslim, 1.1% Christian, 0.2% Jewish
Oman	10%	10%	75% Muslim, Hindu
Pakistan	77%	20%	Christian, Hindu
Qatar	N/A	N/A	95% Muslim
Saudi Arabia	N/A	N/A	100% Muslim
Sudan	70%	N/A	25% indigenous, 5% Christian
Syria	74%	N/A	16% Alawite, Druze, other Muslim sects, 10% Christian & Jewish
Tajikistan	80%	5%	Other N/A
Tunisia	N/A	N/A	98% Muslim, 1% Christian, 1% Jewish
Turkey	98%	N/A	2% Christian and Jewish
Turkmenistan	N/A	N/A	85% Muslim, 10% Eastern Orthodox
UAE	80%	16%	4% Christian, Hindu
Uzbekistan	80%	N/A	20% Farsi and others
Yemen	60%	40%	

N/A - not available

Source: CIA World Fact Book 1992

