

# Islamism revisited

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There is a political and security crisis surrounding what is referred to as Islamism, a crisis whose antecedents long precede 9/11. Over the past 25 years, there have been different emphases on how to explain and combat Islamism. Analysts and policy-makers in the 1980s and 1990s spoke of the root causes of Islamic militancy as being economic malaise and marginalization. More recently there has been a focus on political reform as a means of undermining the appeal of radicalism. Increasingly today, the ideological and religious aspects of Islamism need to be addressed because they have become features of a wider political and security debate. Whether in connection with Al-Qaeda terrorism, political reform in the Muslim world, the nuclear issue in Iran or areas of crisis such as Palestine or Lebanon, it has become commonplace to find that ideology and religion are used by opposing parties as sources of legitimization, inspiration and enmity.

The situation is further complicated today by the growing antagonism towards and fear of Islam in the West because of terrorist attacks which in turn impinge on attitudes towards immigration, religion and culture. The boundaries of the *umma* or community of the faithful have stretched beyond Muslim states to European cities. The *umma* potentially exists wherever there are Muslim communities. The shared sense of belonging to a common faith increases in an environment where the sense of integration into the surrounding community is unclear and where discrimination may be apparent. The greater the rejection of the values of society, whether in the West or even in a Muslim state, the greater the consolidation of the moral force of Islam as a cultural identity and value-system.

Following the bombings in London on 7 July 2005 it became more apparent that some young people were asserting religious commitment as a way of expressing ethnicity. The links between Muslims across the globe and their perception that Muslims are vulnerable have led many in very different parts of the world to merge their own local predicaments into the wider Muslim one, having identified culturally, either primarily or partially, with a broadly defined Islam. This trend has drawn Muslims into supporting causes beyond the borders of the countries where they live. As far as European Muslims are concerned, although European states offer them legal and human rights protections that are absent in the Muslim states of their family origin, there remain the problems of integration and assimilation into

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their adopted countries as well as the issue of foreign policies perceived by many in Muslim communities as unjust towards causes involving their coreligionists.

Within Muslim states themselves, the twentieth century saw a search for independence and empowerment through religious assertion that is still as manifest as ever today. It can be seen equally among Sunni and Shi'a, despite their theological differences and the current sectarian violence in Iraq.

### **Recent historical influences on Islamist responses**

Historically, colonial occupation and foreign encroachment gave rise to militant responses in defence of the *umma* which took the form of the dominant political and legal discourse prevalent through much of the nineteenth century: that of religion. One of the main ramifications of the colonial experience and the emergence of the nation-state has been the greater penetration of secular values into Muslim societies. For the Islamists, it is secularism, not religion, that is the deviation from the norm. Thus, what is viewed as a 'return to the fundamentals of religion' is seen by many as a return to the norm.

The modern state in the Muslim world, particularly in the Middle East, is perceived by Islamists, both moderate and radical, as having failed to deliver, in so far as it has left peoples and polities economically backward, politically weak and subject to unjust government. This sentiment is shared even by those who have grown up under, for example, the Saudi system which is governed by Shari'a law. Saudi Arabia is judged by many of its Islamist detractors as failing to be 'genuinely' Islamic and, particularly in the realm of politics, as governed by non-Islamic principles. Islam is not held accountable in the same way that secularism is, largely because faith dictates that Islam cannot fail; only Muslims can. The interplay of faith and politics is particularly intense at this level since among both activists and the wider Muslim public there is a shared belief in the supremacy of *al-din* (the religion). This means that in Muslim societies presented with a choice between a political and social agenda based on 'the word of God' and a more liberal and secular agenda, many, maybe even the majority, are likely to opt for the former. Essentially, faith remains a central criterion of reference, despite the inroads made by secularism, westernization and, more recently, globalization.

A search for empowerment and justice lies at the heart of the Islamists' agenda. This is apparent first on the domestic level, where authoritarian systems of government have allowed little room for dissent. Second, in the same way that minorities demand their rights in order to alleviate persecution and inequality at home, so Islamists seek to improve their status within the international order, both within the framework established after the Second World War and more recently in response to globalization; a minority reject this order altogether, but even these pursue a similar goal of empowerment. This applies to both states, such as Iran, and radical non-state actors. Terrorism came to be justified by some as a weapon of the weak, attractive in the face of a lack of political and military power and an

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increasingly collective sense among different Muslim communities of being the target of aggression, whether in Palestine, Bosnia or Kashmir.<sup>1</sup>

Conditions of conflict and political and economic decline have given rise to radical responses from different political and ideological camps. The Islamist response and radicalization need to be understood within the contemporary nationalist, socialist and secular experience, and increasingly the immigrant one for Muslims living in the West. The resort to terrorism defines an era in the Middle East that began with the secular Palestinian terrorists in the 1970s and continues today with those inspired by Al-Qaeda. The roots of contemporary radicalism lie more in the secular tradition and experience than in the realms of religion and its legacy, which now offer so many new trajectories in regard to legitimate political action and the resort to violence.

There is a shared anger and sense of humiliation across different ideological and political groups in the Muslim world. Islamism has harnessed these feelings and provided more effective networks and a more expressive language of resistance than other ideological currents at this historical juncture. Islamist groups continue to gain ground, partly because of an increase in religiosity and faith in Muslim societies and partly because of politics. With the growing Islamization of Muslim societies culturally, the ground is being prepared for a greater acceptance among many for an Islamization of the state as well.

The end of the nineteenth century witnessed jihad against colonialism, while the twentieth century, which saw the birth of the nation-state in much of the Muslim world, also saw the rise of Islamist groups whose struggles were mainly directed against their own regimes on the basis of ideology and against authoritarianism. By the end of the twentieth century some Islamist groups were tending to look further afield, in response to the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979 and the greater US engagement in the Muslim world after the end of the Cold War, which was to be followed by its more direct military involvement in the Gulf War, heralding for some the new jihad. The two parallel struggles, on the local and the global levels, witnessed the rise of two main ideological tendencies: one that promoted a non-violent path to Islamization, which has tended to be more dominant on the local level, and the other that espoused more radical and violent means, which is mainly engaged today against US policies globally.<sup>2</sup> Authoritarianism and foreign engagement have continued to be key drivers in shaping opposition groups in the Muslim world. The primary ideological make-up and goals of this opposition have fluctuated between secular nationalism and Islamism; at present, the latter dominates.

<sup>1</sup> Maha Azzam, 'The weapon of the weak', *World Today* 59: 8–9, 2003, pp. 10–11.

<sup>2</sup> For a wide-ranging study that follows the paths of transnational activists through a number of processes between the local and the global, see Sidney Tarrow, *The new transnational activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

## The rise of independent interpretations

For Islamists, the heritage and legacy of Islam offer a strong sense of lost power and greatness. The understanding of that past rests on a knowledge base that is strongly textual and legalistic and therefore requires both linguistic and legal training to determine its meaning. However, as with all histories, it is often reinterpreted and reshaped by contemporary political and social pressures.

On the theological level, a major challenge has occurred to traditional Islam in the justification of the resort to violence by those who are not always adequately trained in or knowledgeable about Islamic law. In some ways this is in tune with the more democratic and individualistic era of the second half of the twentieth century, although it was already happening under dictatorship and was understood and presented within an Islamic formula. In terms of the current Islamist movement this trend became particularly evident in the 1970s, although its roots go back to the beginnings of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1929 and the unfolding of a movement that combined Islamic education, political action and resistance to foreign occupation independently of the traditional institutions of religion, and formulated a revolutionary Islamist ideology.<sup>3</sup>

The debate over the legitimacy of political activism against an unjust ruler is an old one in the world of Islam. Its contemporary manifestation reflects popular resentment at the power of the repressive state as well as the state's failure to implement Islamic law and uphold Islamic principles. The fusion of the two concerns is nowhere more clearly expressed than in the writings of Sayyid Qutb during the 1950s and 1960s.

The power and tyranny of the Nasserist state and its security apparatus were represented by Qutb as the embodiment of pre-Islamic *jahili* society. Islam's principles of brotherhood and social justice were posited as an antidote to dictatorship, persecution and materialism.<sup>4</sup> This vision could easily be applied to authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East. Therefore, Qutb's writing and his 'martyrdom' at the hands of the state have influenced Muslims worldwide. His commentary on and interpretation of the Qur'an as a political manifesto laid an important textual foundation for modern political action in the name of Islam from the second half of the twentieth century.

While Qutb's writings set a textual precedent for an independent interpretation of the Qur'an by a non '*alim* (or theologian), a less renowned and far less educated activist than Qutb, Abd al-Salam Faraj of al-Takfir wa'l-Hijra, argued in the 1970s in his pamphlet *Al-farida al-gha'iba* that authority (*hakimmiyya*) lay only with God.<sup>5</sup> However, in the 1970s and 1980s militant Islamists still felt it necessary to resort to *fatwas* of sheikhs and earlier Islamic sources, including the works of Ibn

<sup>3</sup> For a study of the Muslim Brotherhood see Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See William E. Shepard's commentary and translation of Sayyid Qutb's *Social justice in Islam: Sayyid Qutb and Islamic activism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Abd al-Salam Faraj, *Al-Farida al-Gha'iba* (The missing duty), first published as an underground pamphlet in Egypt in 1981, later openly in Amman in 1982.

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Taymiyya,<sup>6</sup> to justify political activism against their regimes, and indeed sought interpretations of the Qur'an by theological authorities that would support such action. The theological opinion and authority of Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman (a minor theologian, but one with a PhD from the mainstream al-Azhar university) was sought out by the plotters in justifying Sadat's assassination, as it was alleged to have been in the attempted bombing of the World Trade Center.

A key turning point came with Ayman Al-Zawahiri's essay justifying collateral damage after the bombing of the Egyptian Embassy in Islamabad in 1995. This essay formed the basis of the theological argument he developed to counter mainstream Islamic prohibition on both suicide bombings and the infliction of collateral damage and which he continued to develop for the 9/11 attacks and for subsequent Islamist terrorist attacks.<sup>7</sup> Much of the current theological counter-attack from mainstream Muslim theologians is based on the argument that such reinterpretation is invalid because it does not follow the traditional route of a debate among a peer group of academically proficient professional theologians. Al-Qaeda's influence on the radicalization of Islamist political action has therefore occurred on two levels: first, in terms of tactics, specifically the use of terror in order to inflict maximum collateral damage; and second, through Zawahiri's theory, in carrying out an assault on traditional Islam, specifically by asserting the right of any individual to reinterpret religious doctrine in accordance with his own conscience and without regard to academic training or scholastic precedent. At the same time, there is a parallel assault on traditional Islam by modernizers who, like Zawahiri, also want to reinterpret Islam, but for different ends.

Since 9/11 Al-Qaeda cells have placed less emphasis on the need for justification on Islamic grounds for acts of terrorism. It may be that once the precedent is set, the need for justification becomes less pressing for those resorting to terrorism. For example, Zawahiri's statements tend to be a response to points of crisis in the Muslim world and the videotaped recordings of the 7 July bombers draw on the connection with Iraq and western policies, rather than stressing a religiously based justification for action. This may be because the terrorists want to concentrate on the political content of their message, particularly when addressing the outside world.

One of the main areas of confusion when looking at the modern Islamist movement surrounds the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and its influence on terrorists. In general, western opinion of Wahhabism is influenced by that school of thought's extreme puritanism and rejection of westernization. The argument has therefore been made that radical Islamism is somehow the result of Wahhabi influence, most famously through the *madrasas* of Pakistan.<sup>8</sup> It may be true that many of those who are drawn to the radical fringes of the Islamist movement come

<sup>6</sup> Muslim theologian, 1263–1328, who lived through the Mongol invasion. He remained a secondary historical figure until the modern Islamist movement discovered and promoted his writings, in part because of their puritanical literalist nature, and in part because of his willingness to oppose the majority theological view in times of political crisis.

<sup>7</sup> *Shifa' sudur al-mu'minin: risala 'an ba'd ma'ani al-jihad fi 'amaliyyat Islamabad*, published as no. 11 of the series of publications of Al-Mujahideen in Egypt, March 1996.

<sup>8</sup> *Strengthening education in the Muslim world*, USAID issue paper 2, June 2003.

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from Wahhabi backgrounds, but it is equally true that many do not. Moreover, Wahhabism, as a school of thought and as practised by the majority of its followers, precisely because of its extreme conservative nature, completely rejects the 'reformation' launched by Zawahiri with its subsequent sanctioning of suicide bombings. Indeed, the Wahhabi muftis of Saudi Arabia were among the first unequivocally to condemn suicide bombings in the West Bank and Israel on purely theological grounds, despite their well-documented enmity towards Israel.<sup>9</sup>

It is mainly the political situation that creates the impetus for a rereading of the tradition, whether Wahhabi or any other. Likewise, the ensuing backlash has also come from various tendencies and groups.

### Defending the faith

An increasing number of Muslims believe that the faith needs to be defended against the modern interpretations justifying violence and terrorism. This trend has given rise to an internal and crucial debate within the Muslim world.<sup>10</sup> The backlash comes from a variety of quarters and in a variety of forms: there are the regimes that want to protect their own positions and quell the security threat; the *ulema*, who are divided between those who serve the regimes and those who genuinely believe that terrorism is contrary to Islamic teachings; and the Muslim public, divided between those who condemn such actions and those who view attacks on the United States and Israel as justified and are therefore ambivalent about violence against them.<sup>11</sup> For Muslims in the West the backlash is about defending their faith as well as protecting the position and gains they have made within their societies, despite the anger many of them feel at their countries' foreign policies.<sup>12</sup>

The backlash has also resulted from a change in public opinion following the loss of Muslim lives. The widespread anti-American mood in Saudi Arabia and a general disaffection with the ruling family had created a sense of lethargy when it came to taking a position on the terrorist threat. This began to change after the attacks on the residential compounds in Riyadh in 2003, in which Saudis also lost their lives. Similarly, in Jordan, where support for the insurgents in Iraq was widespread, opinion quickly shifted with the attack on an Amman hotel in 2005 whose victims included a Jordanian wedding party. In Britain the 7 July bombings

<sup>9</sup> See *Peacewatch* 323 (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policies, 2001) on the Saudi mufti's condemnation of suicide bombings in April 2001, although the author seems unaware of the mufti's longstanding theological opinion. Indeed, there was at least one meeting in Saudi Arabia involving several senior Muslim theologians in the late 1990s to try to arrive at a unified opinion, and while some, including Qaradawi, wanted to allow suicide attacks in the Occupied Territories, the Saudi and Azhar theologians could not agree. As a result the meetings did not issue a unified *fatwa*.

<sup>10</sup> See Raymond William Baker, *Islam without fear* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Joseph Lombard, ed., *Islam, fundamentalism, and the betrayal of tradition (essays by western Muslim scholars)* (Canada: World Wisdom, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> For some Islamic statements against terrorism, see <http://www.cair-ny.org>, accessed 6 October 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Khurshid Ahmed, the chairman of the British Muslim Forum, has said: 'No one has said that British foreign policy is singularly responsible for what is happening at the moment . . . What we are saying is that there is a massive amount of disquiet about British foreign policy . . . and some of our young people have the perception that this foreign policy is directed against the Muslim world and therefore needs to be looked at. And all we are asking for is a review, and—if necessary—a change': <http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 14 Aug. 2006.

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forced the Muslim community in that country and its leaders to make statements condemning such terrorist action.

Although in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist incident there tends to be some rallying around the regime, as has been the case in Jordan, it is nevertheless unlikely that the regimes in the region will be able to stem anti-government criticism and the growing demand for greater participation by a combination of exploiting public anger and drawing on theological argument against violence. While the appeal of violence may well wane as the public at large expresses disapproval, the criticism of the current political system in much of the Middle East and its alliance with the United States will remain central to the political debate, and US withdrawal from the region will remain an important goal of the struggle. What is being argued over politically among the majority in the Muslim world is not the critical and even antagonistic view towards the United States and its allies, but rather political reform, economic conditions and Islamist goals.

The traditional prominence of *ulema* in Muslim societies is being tested in the extent to which the public will listen to and acquiesce in the pronouncements of men of learning over this issue of reinterpretation of religion for the sake of politics. How far are the *ulema* devalued in the eyes of many unless they say something politically radical? Although they cannot be seen as serving the interests of a regime, a number of them, most notably in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, have been used to influence the radicals held in prison and have encouraged them to recant.<sup>13</sup> The *ulema* still have considerable standing and influence at different levels of society, from media sheikhs to men of learning to the popular village *'alim*, and their message has resonance—indeed, with the Islamization of culture in these countries, their opinion matters increasingly; however, like all public figures, their popularity ultimately relies on how far they reflect public opinion.<sup>14</sup>

One of the significant developments that may occur in the coming years is the forging of an implicit alliance between a democratically elected Islamist party and traditional religious institutions and figures (such as between the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Al-Azhar,<sup>15</sup> if the former were to ever form a government), in part aimed at rebutting the radicals' interpretation of Islam. The religious establishment already lends legitimacy and support to Muslim governments, but in the event of an Islamist government there might be even more common ground between them over the process of Islamization.

<sup>13</sup> On Judge Humud al-Hattar's successful religious dialogue with Al-Qaeda supporters in Yemen, see *Terrorism Monitor* 3: 4, 24 Feb. 2005, <http://jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article>, accessed 6 October 2006.

<sup>14</sup> The extent of the popularity of the TV programmes of Sheikh Sha'rawi attest to the Islamization of culture. It is also the case that Sha'rawi and others like him helped promote this process through their media appearances. One of today's most popular tele-preachers is Amr Khaled, whose promotion of an Islamic life style has found growing support among the young and privileged segments of the middle classes, particularly in Egypt, as well as elsewhere in the Arab world: [www.amrkhaled.net](http://www.amrkhaled.net), accessed 15 September 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Azhar: a university in Cairo which was established in AD 971, and which has developed into the main theological centre for Sunni Islam.

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### The democratic route

From Algeria to Yemen, mainstream Islamist groups have emphasized the importance of working within their own national boundaries in order to achieve change. They argue that this makes sense given that they are more familiar with their own domestic conditions than with circumstances elsewhere, and are more likely to achieve results within their own state. They are largely driven by nationalist sentiments, although regional and international issues are intertwined with criticism of their national regimes.

Political reform tends to shift the emphasis back from the global to the nation-state itself. Groups with grass-roots support in Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Kuwait and Turkey have sought to extend their influence through social, welfare and educational means, and in so doing have greatly increased their popularity and ultimately their political reach.<sup>16</sup> For Islamist parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the Justice and Development party in Morocco, the focus has been domestic and gradualist and the reform of the political system has opened up the possibility of the Islamization process translating into political reality.<sup>17</sup> Islamist successes in elections mean these groups now represent an important bloc in national assemblies and parliaments in various countries of the Middle East and are a serious irritant to governments. In Egypt, for example, the Brotherhood has made great strides in the most recent elections (December 2005), gaining 87 seats in parliament on 19 per cent of the vote, and is transforming itself into a serious political party. The Brotherhood's gradualist approach and charitable work have won hearts and minds, while the moderate stance of its leadership, expressed in the statement of the late General Guide Hassan al-Hudaybi that they are preachers not judges (*nahnu du'at laisa qud'at*), has resonated widely and won converts. This is a route that appeals because it offers an ideological alternative, is opposed to corruption and is non-violent.

If moderate Islamists are allowed to campaign freely as political parties and to express themselves more openly in the media, then their espousal of non-violent politics is likely to draw greater numbers to them. It is the extent to which moderate Islamist parties can combine a non-violent stance with a politically and socially radical agenda that will determine the extent to which they can draw support from the young and disenfranchised and ultimately win them over before the radicals do.

This is a difficult balancing act to perform, since Islamist groups and parties that are opposed to the use of violence also have to win over the moderate constituencies within their own societies, particularly the middle classes and the professionals. In most countries of the region (Morocco, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi

<sup>16</sup> Janine A. Clark, *Islam, charity and activism: middle-class networks and social welfare in Egypt, Jordan and Yemen* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> For an interesting study which argues that it is the mainstream Islamist organizations, not the radical ones, that will have the greatest impact on the future political evolution of the Middle East and which explores areas of ambiguity in these movements, see Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy and Marina Ottaway, *Islamist movements and the democratic processes in the Arab world: exploring gray zones*, Carnegie Paper 67 (Washington DC: Carnegie Foundation, March 2006).

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Arabia) those Islamist groups working within the system are likely to channel their energies towards success with the middle ground, for two main reasons. First, the rift between the moderates and the radicals is already deep. The radicals see the moderates as having sold out and many moderates, although they can understand the resort to violence by some radicals, are opposed to their tactics on religious grounds. The rift, for example, between the Muslim Brotherhood and the more extreme Egyptian Islamist groups began in the 1970s and was a bitter one.<sup>18</sup> Second, although both camps want to see a change of regime, their tactics are too divergent to allow them to work together to this end.

In the short to medium term, the battle against the United States and Israel is likely to be the constant in the struggle of both the moderates and the militants. It is also likely that there will continue to be a minority of militants who will see the moderates as compromising on one issue or another and will attempt to pursue their own agenda, encouraged by the fact that at the heart of the debate over political reform is a failure to acknowledge the right of those in Muslim societies to opt for an Islamist alternative. This failure was apparent in the cases of the FIS in Algeria in 1991 and of Hamas in 2006, where the 'will of the people' was not respected: in the former case it resulted in extreme violence, in the latter in economic pressure and increased suffering for the Palestinian population at large.

If the Islamists proceed to make gains through democratic channels, the main issue will not only be the enshrinement and legitimization of a democratically elected government but essentially the enshrinement of an Islamic one, which will probably be voted in and out of power by other Islamic parties.

### **Terrorism**

Some Islamist groups, having failed to realize their goals within the national context, switched their overall strategy to a more globally directed one. Most notable among the leading figures of such groups is Ayyman al-Zawahiri, who had initially concentrated his activities against the Sadat regime by attacking tourists visiting Egypt, although he was attracted from early on to Afghanistan. Others from around the globe, including Shaykh Mir Hamzah, secretary of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan, and Fazlur Rahman, *amir* of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh, would become signatories to the 'Jihad against Jews and Crusaders World Islamic Front statement' in 1998. The journey or escape of activists from their countries of origin to Afghanistan, Sudan, Chechnya and now Iraq was a radicalizing experience which would move them further away from their commitment to change in a single state to change for the *umma* at large. Regional crises would fuel the movement as a whole and create a new impetus for its activities and recruitment, but the agenda continued to be formulated around opposition to the United States and its allies regionally and globally.

The objective of Islamist terrorist attacks has therefore changed. In Egypt in the 1980s the jihadists aimed to cripple the government economically by attacking the

<sup>18</sup> As evidenced in Zawahiri's own analysis of this rift, *Al-hasad al-murr* (The bitter harvest) (n.p., 1991).

tourist sector. The attack was essentially local in nature and reach. Local attacks still occur, but the new breed of internationalist Islamist terrorists are engaged in a campaign of revenge for what they see as attacks on fellow Muslims, and with each new area of crisis—the most recent being the loss of life following the Israeli raids on Lebanon—the imperative for a terrorist response becomes greater. Their attacks are also mounted in revenge for what the perpetrators see as decades of humiliation at the hands of western powers and their allies, notably Israel. Their aim therefore is to inflict damage, to prove that the enemy is vulnerable to the jihadists. Furthermore, opposition to authoritarian regimes, even if they mend their ways, can also be a form of retribution, particularly where there are cases of torture and a sense of personal and collective humiliation.

International terrorism related to the Middle East is not, of course, new. Suicide bombing may have been developed as a new terror tactic in the region, but there is an echo of secular Palestinian groups targeting Israel at home and abroad using hijackings as a means of drawing attention to the plight of the Palestinians, as well as of the terrorist attacks on soft targets (for example, the murder of the Israeli athletes in Munich in 1972 or the atrocity at Kiryat Shimona in 1974). Islamist suicide bombers have acquired the extreme tactics of nationalist resistance movements and superimposed Islamic credentials on them.

The prominence of Al-Qaeda since 9/11 offered a minority among those discontented with the status quo, both in the Muslim world and in the West, the opportunity to express their own anger through a more clearly defined set of radical principles and tactics. The links between Islamist terrorism in the United States, Europe, South-East Asia and the Middle East are rooted in a shared anger and frustration that could be channelled through violent acts to inflict damage on a militarily and technologically superior enemy. Committed Muslims, both moderate and radical, tend to see connections between struggles as far apart as Palestine, Chechnya and the Philippines. Islam's emphasis on brotherhood and unity provides a basis for looking beyond the immediate boundaries of one nation-state. Also, like other revolutionary groups before them, the search for and connection with similar causes give both succour and strength to their own cause. In addition, the Internet enhances their potential and global reach.<sup>19</sup>

The difference in the situation after 9/11 lies not only in the magnitude of those attacks; it lies also in the fact that the new face of radical Islam was part of a new political grouping, Al-Qaeda, that had managed to distil the radicalism of various groups and individuals into a more aggressive assault and attract recruits globally. Various groups and individuals were propelled into action by the success of 9/11, willing to carry out acts of terror in the name of Al-Qaeda and to assume its name and tactics. The war in Iraq has provided both a territorial base for action and an active training ground. In addition, religion not only offers the activists a strong sense of being the elect carrying out a mission to save the *umma* as a whole, but also

<sup>19</sup> Gabriel Weimann, 'Terrorist dot com: using the internet for terrorist recruitment and mobilization', in James Forest, ed., *The making of a terrorist*, vol. 1 (New York: Praeger, 2006), pp. 53–66.

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offers them martyrdom as a means to rewards in the hereafter.<sup>20</sup>

However, Al-Qaeda's battle cry remains as much tactical and strategic as it is inspirational, because suicide bombing has a high success rate. It has become apparent that there is no ceiling to radicalism. We have seen an escalation from local attacks to suicide bombings to 9/11 to the wanton sectarian violence in Iraq, and there is no reason as yet to expect a reversal. The success of suicide bombing in inflicting loss of life and damage has helped create an incentive for the would-be terrorist to engage in such methods; therefore with each 'success' there is the potential for a copy-cat mission.

There exists a fear among governments and policy-makers worldwide that Islamists in power will be an even greater risk to global security, insofar as they could reinforce many of the existing transnational links between various Islamist forces, but now with the power of the state behind them. However, the integration of Islamism into the body politic may on the contrary be a source of stability as more Islamist groups tie their long-term interests to at least some internationally accepted principles. In the case of Iran, whether in its support for Hizbullah or in its nuclear programme, it is the religious/ideological orientation that makes the challenge appear more threatening and also facilitates the consolidation of support against it, although Iran's policies are primarily an outcome of nationalist and regional ambitions and could presumably be pursued under a secular regime critical of the United States. Islamism in this context is used as a mobilizing political and social force, and is likely to become increasingly used as such in Muslim societies. This dimension needs to be separated from terrorism in the name of Islam.

### **The religious component**

To what extent is the Islamists' political struggle unique? Does calling it jihad simply delude both followers and detractors into a false sense of the exotic?

Of course, there is a uniqueness to the Islamist movement (in its many guises) because of its powerful and core religious components, just as other assertions of religiosity and ideology express their own unique reworkings and amalgams of tradition and modernity. Despite the inroads made by westernization throughout Muslim states since the nineteenth century through the penetration of ideas, education, law and military reforms, nevertheless, gradually over the past three to four decades there has been a continuing Islamization of society, with Islamists struggling to dominate many of those spheres. The process is in some ways similar to the rise of the religious right in the United States.<sup>21</sup>

The rise of Islamism in general and militant groups in particular has been explained as a result of the failure of governments to deliver on promises of development, and the lack of open political systems that left only the mosque

<sup>20</sup> On the appeal of religious ideology, see J. P. Larsson, 'The role of religious ideology in modern terrorist recruitment', in Forest, *The making of a terrorist*, vol. 1, pp. 197–216.

<sup>21</sup> For a view on evangelical influence on US foreign policy, see Walter Russel Mead, 'God's country?', *Foreign Affairs* 85: 5, Sept.–Oct. 2006, pp. 24–45.

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as a channel for voicing dissent. All these are sound factors, but still they do not fully explain the Islamist choice, which requires an adherence to particular social and religious norms and involves a commitment that goes beyond the political. It may well be that the shift to adherence to Islamic tenets and teachings is not such a difficult one for many to make in societies where religion continues to have an important part to play and where secular and western values are viewed as erroneous and corrupting.

Political and security concerns have spilled over into the religious and cultural spheres. Whereas in the past the United States showed little concern for the Islamic component in the character of friendly states such as Saudi Arabia, it has now become more critical of, for example, the education system and women's status in that society as part of a general drive to promote those values that it sees as countering radicalization and helping to create more western-friendly populations.

Despite the failure of political Islam to achieve power in many states, its grass-roots appeal has continued to grow and is unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future. For example, opponents of the Iranian regime have vigorously argued that there is diminishing support for it and an increasing move away from Islam. However, the most recent elections in Iran and the general mood of the country indicate a strong and continuing Islamist political and cultural assertion that is far from being rolled back. The Islamist assertion in Iran, as in Turkey (although manifested very differently) and elsewhere in the Muslim world, is religious and cultural—and this of course makes it all the more difficult to contend with in security terms.

## **The law**

The widest cultural divide that impinges on a political understanding of Islamism centres on the alternative legal code, the Shari'a. On one level the Shari'a simply offers a legal framework which is divinely inspired and which, its proponents claim, if upheld will counter the abuses committed by the state and its legal system. The issue here is not only secular versus religious; it is also a search for justice versus repression. Islamism and the implementation of the Shari'a are about religious belief, but they are also about respect for the rule of law and human rights. It is believed by proponents of the Shari'a that it offers security for Muslim citizens against the tyranny of the dictator at home—despite the contradictions in this argument if one were simply to point to a number of Muslim governments which violate human rights.

Opting for Islamic law rather than respect for the law per se is part of the assertion of a specific system of belief and values. Islam is already a main source of reference in the legal systems of the majority of the states of the Middle East, and it is likely that there will be continuing attempts by Islamist parties and others to proceed further with the implementation of Islamic legislation in a variety of spheres.

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### *Islamism revisited*

The functioning of the state on the basis of the Shari'a can be more symbolic than real: that is to say, a duality can exist between what is termed secular law and Islamic law so long as the former does not contradict the latter (and that duality can often be extended through interpretation). Here again the radical Islamists have if anything contributed to opening the door to greater reinterpretation, not less. They are being countered by traditionalists, who themselves are not a uniform camp, some being more conservative or more modernist than others. Whether any of these interpretations would accommodate western and secular values is another matter.

The conflict over the Shari'a is nowhere more keenly felt than in the realm of the social and cultural debate. Analysts have tended to agree that it is in the social realm that Islam has remained strongest, but it is also in this area that it has come under vigorous attack; and here too where there has probably been greater divergence and contradiction historically in terms of laws than is generally accepted.

To what extent does support for an Islamic political system develop from a desire primarily for an Islamic social order? Islamist parties and groups will find support from many who want to see Islamic family law and educational values enshrined in the law of the land and upheld by the state. This supersedes any external political concerns related to regional or international politics. As for the militant Islamist groups, they too believe that their interpretation of the social code can be protected only by an Islamic state.

## **Conclusion**

From the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the late 1920s to the more recent groups espousing violence, particular events and policies have had a direct bearing on Islamist responses. The colonial experience has been overtaken by Palestine and then by Afghanistan, Bosnia and Iraq. Clearly, some causes offer a more central and powerful source of mobilization than others. There are direct policies and consequences; the West, by ignoring the impact of authoritarian regimes and foreign interference (although it did not fail to see this in Eastern Europe during the Cold War), has helped fuel resentment among many Muslims.

However, despite the radicalization that is manifest among Muslim communities globally, something very significant is happening among these communities today which relates directly to a greater degree of Islamist entrenchment and confidence at the level of society and culture. The minority activists committed to violence are increasingly being seen as a threat by some of the most ardent and extremist Islamists who, while critical of the West and their own regimes, are committed to non-violent change. We are seeing the gradual formulation of a counterattack against the violent wing of the Islamist movement, emphasizing *daw'a* (preaching) rather than jihad.

If one of the main defining features of contemporary Islamism is a strong desire for empowerment and a more equal place in the international order, then the gaining of state power by the majority moderate Islamists could do much to

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weaken the radicals in the medium and long term. The aim of the Islamists, like that of others in Asia and Latin America, is to become a power bloc to be reckoned with in the international order.

The contention that there is a clash of civilizations or irreconcilable world-views may be the case at the extreme ends of the political and religious spectrum. However, behind the debate over a clash of civilizations is the more pertinent struggle for political reform in Muslim states as well as for a change in western policies towards the Muslim world and in the response to this call by the West, which continues to reject it or at best to encourage change in its own image.

The political and security debate needs to shift towards a rethinking of policies towards the Muslim world, which might include the acceptance of an alternative Islamist trend that reflects the beliefs of the majority in the region, critical of the West but non-violent in nature, in addition to counterterrorism strategies, because until this happens the political options that Islamists face will remain limited. The United States and its allies are perceived by many in the Muslim world as pursuing neo-colonial power relations. The radical Islamist struggle, violent and non-violent, is in part an attempt to reverse this relationship.