

FACTORS THAT HAVE GIVEN RISE TO THE 'RESURGENCE' OF RADICAL ISLAMISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EAST

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Introduction

Radical Islam or Islamism, although it may stem from a need for identity or as a reaction to the West and secularisation, is for many a fight for power. This is not to say that all Islamists are power hungry and selfish, but that it has become a tool for those who are, 'exploiters and manipulators have always used religion self-righteously to further their own selfish ends.'¹

Tariq Ali also refers to the 'sincere people of religion as being in conflict with organised religion'² I think this is a fundamentally important point as I will try to illustrate. Islam is engrained in the psyche of the people of the Middle East; they live by it on a conscious and unconscious level. What radical Islam or Islamism has attempted to do is to institutionalise this religion, and have yet proved unsuccessful.

I shall also examine the concept that radical Islam does not have a uniformed process, there is no clear structure to speak of; as Abdel Salam Sidahmed said, 'An Islamic state is one ruled by Islamists'³ Each countries experience of radical Islam is different hence why the Iranian and Sudanese cases have not created a domino affect, 'the various manifestations of Islamism in action are very much contingent on certain historical conjunctures and political conditions.'⁴

Finally, examining Islamist groups when they actually gain political power finds them weak and lacking. It would appear that their political

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¹ Ali, T. (2002), *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*, New York: Verso, p. 303.

² *Ibid.* p. 6

³ Sidahmed, A. S. (1996), *Islamic Fundamentalism*, Colorado: Westview Press Inc, p. 196.

⁴ Halliday, F. & Alavi, H. (Eds.) 'State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan,' *The Iranian Revolution: Uneven Development and Religious Populism*, London: Macmillan Education, p.2.

agendas are insufficient, just as communism has failed as a political ideology. I will look in particular at the failure of the Islamic modal in Sudan. First, however, it is empirical that we understand exactly what is meant by the ideology of radical Islam.

Defining ideology and Islamism:

What do we mean when we say the ideology of radical Islam? The Oxford Dictionary defines ideology as being, 'a system of ideas at the basis of economic or political theory.' The Webster Dictionary defines it as being, 'ideas and objectives that influence a whole group.' By looking at these definitions I will use ideology as being created by a group of people in order to control the way that society works.

Where does an ideology stem from? It is created according to the circumstances which people find themselves in. We need to follow rules in order to live in a vibrant society; otherwise all we are left with is chaos. Consequently, what we are looking at with regard to the ideology of radical Islam or Islamism is how the principles of these ways of thinking are created by the society and how the rules of society are interpreted.

Islamism or radical Islam on the other hand is defines as, 'a political orientation based on a specific conservative religious view of Muslim fundamentalism. It is one that holds Islam as being not only a religion, but a system that governs the political, economic and social imperatives of the state.'⁵ Therefore Islamism is an ideology that a group of people have created to try and drive society to conform to its principles. Islamism does not originate in one time or place, nor was it developed by one group of people; it has developed through a series of historical processes which I will look at in detail.

Are all Muslims Islamists?

Unlike other contemporary religions, Islam is the religion of a text, the Qur'an. In Christianity, people's worship is based around Jesus and his role as the 'son of God'. The Qur'an encompasses all aspects of society and therefore, every Muslim, the world-over, is expected to live and abide by the book's teachings. Is it correct then to say that every Muslim is therefore a fundamentalist or a follower of radical Islam?

⁵ Wikipedia: Online encyclopaedia, <www.wikipedia.com>, at 24 December 2004.

The answer is of course, no! Islamists do not differ from 'regular' Muslims with regard to the five pillars of Islam. Every Muslim worldwide share their beliefs with regard to these basic pillars of the pronouncement of the shahada (the testimony that there is one God Allah and that Muhammed is his messenger), prayer, fasting, alms giving and performing the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) at least once in their life. What make the followers of radical Islam or Islamists different are their interpretations of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is composed of Surahs or chapters on all aspects of a Muslim's life, but these are not self-explanatory; they must be interpreted, tafsir. Clearly interpretations will vary according to society and time in history. In the last two centuries, it was very important to reinterpret the Qur'an because of the changed circumstances. Did this provide Islamists with the opportunity to interpret the Qur'an to conform to their beliefs? Surprisingly, apart from a limited number of authors, little has been written by leaders of Islamist movements. Martin Marty and R Appleby say that is because, 'as lay scholars of Islam, leaders of fundamentalist movements are not theologians but social thinkers and political activists.'⁶

Islamists have taken Ayahs or segments from the Qur'an and interpreted them in a way which serves their purpose. These segments are used to reinforce the political activism that drives Islamists and which separates them from 'regular' Muslims. For a 'regular' Muslim, Islam is part of life, they do not reflect on the fact that they are living an 'Islamic' life, they just live it. However, for an Islamist, Islam must be at the foundations of the structure of their society. 'Islamists consider that the society will be islamised only through social and political action: it is necessary to leave the mosque. The economy and social relationships are no longer perceived as subordinate activities that grow out of pious acts or the sharia, but are considered key areas.'⁷

Islamists do not believe that the people need to be lead by clerics; God is the ultimate ruler and therefore a Muslim is answerable only to God. The Islamists want, 'the restoration of a pure unsullied, and authentic form of religion, cleansed of historical accretions, distortions

⁶ Marty, M. and Appleby, R. (1990), *Fundamentalism Observed*, The Fundamentalism Project, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

⁷ Roy, O. (1994), *The Failure of Political Islam*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. p. 36.