The Islamists Have it Wrong

by Abdul Hadi Palazzi
Middle East Quarterly
Summer 2001, pp. 3-12

Western observers, both among the general public and the media, commonly make the mistake of thinking that Islamism\(^1\) is the same as traditional Islam. Even Western researchers describe Islamism as a resurgence of traditional Islam. One researcher describes Islamists as people of the "anthropological tradition";\(^2\) in contrast, moderate Sunni Muslims are characterized as those whose faith is mitigated, influenced by syncretism, or diluted by a certain amount of secularization and Westernization.\(^3\)

But this turns reality upside-down. In fact, Islamists depart in important ways from the Islamic tradition. This is especially apparent in what concerns divine attributes, Islamic law, and Sufism. Indeed, some outstanding traditional Muslim scholars, such as Sheikh Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri\(^4\) and Sheikh Ahmad al-'Alawi,\(^5\) see Islamism as a symptom of secularization and as a reshaping of their religion into a modern, ideological totalitarianism.\(^6\) It is this view that I myself share, and shall present here.

Subordinating Religion to Politics

The distinction between traditional Islam and Islamism can be seen in many specifics. Tradition says that Islamic jurisprudence can today be practiced according to four legal schools, all of which are legitimate and authoritative; Islamists, by contrast, see the existence of these schools as an obstacle to their concept of Islamic unity. Tradition attributes to the ruler the right to appoint competent scholars as authorized interpreters of the Islamic law; Islamists do not recognize any authority apart from the leaders of their own groups. Tradition makes the authority of a scholar dependent on the possession of written documents of appointment (\textit{ijaza}) signed by his predecessor;\(^7\) Islamists regularly install people bereft of any theological or legal education into positions of Islamic authority. In most cases, then, Islamist leaders are lay persons with little background in Islamic studies.

Another point: Sunnis do not conceive of Islam as an organization dependent on a centralized leadership, Islamists, on the contrary, see their leading militants as the Islamic leadership; thereby cutting out the need to refer to traditional scholars for guidance. Sunni schools arise spontaneously from voluntary contributions and
answer local needs; when organizations are created it happens only for practical reasons, without any implication that the leaders of the organizations are ipso facto Islamic authorities. In contrast, Islamist schools result from funding from a centralized administration that pays activists in every part of the world.

Perhaps most important of all is the Islamists' subordination of religion to politics, our main topic here. Khalid Durán notes the distinction between traditional Islam and its political counterfeit by underlining their different understandings of the relationship between religion and politics:

Whether Islamists like the term fundamentalist or not, their understanding of religion resembles that of fundamentalists in other religions. This is not to say that Islamists are more religious or more genuinely Islamic than other Muslims . . . Islamism is a late 20th century totalitarianism. It follows in the wake of fascism and communism, picking up from those and seeking to refine their methods of domination . . .

Few Muslims would deny that political commitment is part of Islamic ethics, but most disagree with the Islamist insistence that there exists a clearly defined "Islamic system," different from all other political systems.  

Islamists draw on modern European models that posit a scientific revolutionary movement, an elitist scheme of ruling society by means of secret cults that act behind the scenes, and a manufacture of consensus by means of propaganda. They reject those aspects of the Islamic tradition that do not fit with this political outlook.

Theirs is, in fact, an extremist ideology; they consider their organizations and militants as custodians of the projects for Islamizing the world, and whoever criticizes them (be he a Muslim or a non-Muslim) is immediately accused of being anti-Islamic, "Islamophobic," and so forth. Unwilling to be ruled by non-Islamist Muslims, Islamists adopt an approach characterized by political supremacism. Their pious rhetoric does not hide the fact that they exploit the religious feelings of their followers to acquire mundane power and enhance their finances. They claim to be vanguard Muslims, integrating faith and politics, but their cardinal concern is holding power themselves and excluding others. Thus, the goal of these radicals is not genuinely religious but political and even totalitarian.

Like other totalitarian ideologies, contemporary Islamism is blindly utopian. It implies a wholesale denial of history; the Islamists' model of an ideal society is inspired by the idealized image of seventh-century Arabia and an ahistorical view of religion and human development. It is based on anachronistic thinking that rejects modern concepts of pluralism and tolerance. And it ignores a history of Islam that is rich in models of heterogeneous social organization and adaptation to the times.

Two Views of Politics in Islam

The traditional view understands the role of politics in terms of what the Qur'an teaches. It indicates that prophets were sent to humans to teach them truths about God, ethics, ways to achieve prosperity in this world, and beatitude in the hereafter, and to warn about the consequences of injustice and sinfulness. A prophet who is called to preach in a stateless milieu has to assume a role of political leadership; this mantle fell on Moses, as it did to Muhammad (peace be upon both
Islamic tradition teaches that when this happens, the two roles are combined by accident; political leadership is not a necessary element of the prophetic mission. By way of confirmation, note that the Qur'an uses different titles to describe the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) but none of them refers to his political function. Verses 33:45-46 say that he was sent as a witness (shahid), a bearer of glad tidings (mubashshir), a warner (nadhir), as someone who calls to God (da'î ila Allah), and as a shining light (siraj munir). Nowhere does it say he was sent as a political leader or a head of state. That the Prophet Muhammad actually had a political role resulted from the social conditions that prevailed in his time, but this was not a necessary part of his prophetic mission.

Islamists, however, have a very different interpretation. For them, building an Islamic state is the central achievement of the prophetic mission.\textsuperscript{10} Conflating the role of the Muslim scholar with that of a political leader, they hold that the spread of Islam cannot be separated from the creation of what they call the Islamic state. They argue that "Islam is both religion and government" (\textit{al-Islam din wa dawla});\textsuperscript{11} and this serves the basic description of their creed. They neglect to mention, however, that this expression is found in neither the Qur'an, the Hadith (sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad), or in any other of the authoritative Islamic sources. The slogan was in fact coined by Ibn Taymiya (1263–1328), an extremist scholar who became a staunch supporter of anthropomorphic theology and of extreme literalism in the understanding of the Qur'an, and was heartily criticized by most of the Sunni theologians and jurists of his time.\textsuperscript{12}

Two Views of Jihad

In similar fashion, the Islamists deform the meaning of jihad. In traditional Islam, military jihad and all other forms of material jihad constitute only the external aspect of jihad, while the inner dimension of jihad is the struggle that a Muslim undertakes to purify his soul from mundane desires, defects, and egotism. Jihad is not limited to the military arena but denotes striving hard toward a worthy goal. According to some sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), "the best jihad for women is performing a valid pilgrimage,"\textsuperscript{13} while "the jihad for someone who has elderly parents is taking care of them."\textsuperscript{14} According to a well-known tradition, after coming back from a military expedition, the Prophet Muhammad said, "We have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad" (\textit{raja'na min jihad al-asghar ila jihad al-akbar}). The Prophet was asked, "O, Messenger of Allah, what is the greater jihad?" He answered, "It is the jihad against one's soul."\textsuperscript{15} Sunni scholars have always quoted this narration as a means of explaining the inner dimension of jihad. Sufis, in particular, have quoted it as a corrective against a limited, physical understanding of the nature of jihad.

The traditional understanding also includes a military meaning but military jihad is strictly regulated by rules concerning its purpose, means, and resolution.

Purpose: Qur'anic verses permitting military jihad (22:39-40) indicate that it is not a vehicle to expand Islam but to defend the rights of those who are persecuted because of their religion.

To those against whom war is made, permission is given [to defend themselves], because they are wronged. And verily God is most powerful for their aid. [They are] those who have been expelled from their homes
in defiance of right [for no cause] except that they say, "Our Lord is God." Did not God check one people by means of another, there would surely have been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, in which the name of God is commemorated in abundant measure. God will certainly help those who help His cause, for verily God is full of strength, exalted in might.

Note the inclusion here of not just mosques, but "monasteries, churches, synagogues" as places where God's name is frequently mentioned and places that must be protected, if necessary by recourse to war. Empty buildings or archeological relics are not the point here; these lines indicate a militant defense of the right to religious freedom.

Self-defense: The term "self-defense" means just that and must not be stretched. The Qur'an (2:190) says, "And fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but do not exaggerate. Verily, God does not love those who exaggerate." The typical example of this is the story of Moses and the Egyptian, as narrated in the Qur'an (28:15-16). To defend an Israelite being beaten by an Egyptian, Moses killed the Egyptian. No doubt, the Israelite was a member of the oppressed people, one of those who were persecuted because of their religion and enslaved, while the Egyptian was one of the oppressors. The event could even have been described as a legitimate form of jihad. The Qur'an, however, does not support this opinion, and condemns Moses' reaction as exaggerated. Moses himself asks forgiveness for his excess.

Means: Military jihad must be waged by a regular Muslim army against another army. Terrorist acts against civilian populations are not included in the definition of jihad.

Peaceful solution: When a former enemy is ready to stop hostilities and is looking for an opportunity for peace, Muslims must stop fighting and also look for a peaceful solution. The Qur'an (8:60-61) says: "if they incline towards peace, incline thou also towards it, and put thy trust in God."

This traditional understanding of jihad as warfare to defend the weak, using armies, and ready to reach an accord has been replaced by an aggressive, guerrilla-style warfare that rejects anything less than total victory and a total defeat of the one who is perceived as the enemy (whether non-Muslim or non-Islamist Muslim). The Islamist version of jihad includes and legitimizes terrorism against civil targets such as churches, synagogues, and cemeteries and even against old people, women, and babies. Notwithstanding the clear Islamic prohibition on suicide, it also includes suicide operations. A recent fatwa by Mufti Farit Salman, deputy president of the Council of Muftis of the European States of Russia, eloquently condemned such behavior in the aftermath of the sacking of Joseph's Tomb, a Jewish shrine in Nablus:

There are many fanatics in the Holy Land who with their intelligence swayed by Satan wrecked the tomb of the Man of Allah, Joseph, peace be upon him; wrecked the tomb of the man whom the Messenger of Allah, Muhammad (blessings and peace upon him), met and conversed with in his ascension to the throne of Allah; wrecked the tomb of one of the dear prophets whom the Holy Qur'an disclosed as a model of physical and spiritual splendor and of humility . . . and this occurred during the [Islamic] holy month of Rajab! How could Muslims do such a thing? No!
Wahhabism

The origins of modern Islamism trace back to the beginnings of the Wahhabi movement in the early eighteenth century.

Wahhabism was a puritanical uprising based on reinterpreting written Qur’anic law without the enlightened support of expertise embodied in the Qur’an and the Hadiths, known as the Sunna. Wahhabis pay lip service to adherence to the Sunna, but in reality reshape it according to their ideology. Many prophetic sayings which constitute the immediate source of Sunna are rejected by means of captious arguments, as soon as they result in tenets incompatible with Wahhabism. When Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (the eponym of Wahhabism) started preaching, the mufti of Medina declared his belief a heresy and formally excommunicated him by issuing a fatwa, the text of which said:

This man is leading the ignoramuses of the present age to a heretical path. He is trying to extinguish Allah's light, but Allah will not permit His light to be extinguished, in spite of the opposition of polytheists, and will enlighten every place with the light of the followers of Sunna.

Sheikh Hisham Kabbani, chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council of America, describes the rise and the development of Wahhabism as follows:

The premise of this new, narrow ideology was to reject traditional scholars, scholarship, and practices under the guise of “reviving the true tenets of Islam” and protecting the concept of monotheism. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s brand of “purification” of Islam consisted of prohibiting many traditionally accepted acts of worship, reverence of the person of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and the pious saints, and burning books containing traditional prayers, interpretations of law and commentaries on the Qur’an and Hadith.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab encouraged a new interpretation of Islamic law and permitted his acolytes to apply it in light of their own understanding, regardless of their level of expertise in juridical matters. Whoever did not agree with this revolutionary approach he considered outside of the fold of Islam—an apostate, disbeliever or idolater—and thus someone whose blood could be shed, whose women could be raped, and whose wealth could be confiscated. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s ideas were debated and refuted by the Sunni scholars of Mecca and Medina but these literalist ideas over time nonetheless spread outside of Najd.

The dismantling of the Ottoman Empire after World War I gave the Wahhabis an opportunity to impose their beliefs and their rule on Muslims of the Arabian Peninsula, which they did not lose. Wahhabism took off following the collapse of the Ottoman sultanate in 1924, and went on to disfigure the face of the Islamic world. The Wahhabis first conquered the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, transforming these two sanctuaries from centers for the transmission of the Sunni heritage into places for propagating a primitive and literalist cult to Muslims coming from every part of the world. Second, the Wahhabis set up the Saudi state.
Third, expansionist like other forms of totalitarian ideology, Wahhabism seeks not just to take possession of the whole Muslim world by replacing Sunni Islam with the so-called Salafi school but even to expand its influence beyond it. Dogmatic uniformity has since then begun to suffocate the humane and enlightened Islamic tradition. Since the 1950s the Muslim Brethren (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun), an organization founded in Egypt in 1929, has been the main instrument for propagating Wahhabi influence internationally. Hasan al-Banna, an elementary school teacher who founded the Brethren, hoped to develop a new ruling class whose ideology would be a form of modernized and Westernized Islam. In line with Wahhabism, Banna described his fight with Muslim opponents as jihad and began plotting against Muslim governments.

After Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power in the mid-1950s, the Saudis needed allies against his secular revolutionary policies. So the Saudi leaders supplied financial support to the Brethren. From then on, the vast majority of Muslim Brethren adopted Wahhabi doctrines. That tradition is maintained these days by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian professor who is now the rector of the Islamic University in Medina, a Wahhabi stronghold, and who recently was banned from entering the United States because of his advocating violence and supporting terrorist organizations.

Muslim Brethren organizations are connected via a very complicated system of funding. The rich countries of the Persian Gulf not only control the development of the different branches but in some cases even try to create rivalries between local leaders, using those rivalries to prevent branches from acquiring a relative autonomy. This complicated system of international funding, together with the traditional silence that Muslim Brethren have long observed, have made the investigation of its activities extremely hard. Starting in the 1980s, this devotion to absolute secrecy began to lessen somewhat. The Brethren are now disposed to acknowledge their existence: in London the Muslim Brethren Information Centre issues press releases and the Californian branch announces on the "Muslim Brotherhood Movement Homepage" website that:

Al-Ikhwan has branches in over seventy countries all over the world. The movement is flexible enough to allow working under the Ikhwan name, under other names, or working according to every country's circumstances.

Even so, the old tradition of secrecy is so deeply rooted that this website bearing the title ends with the following "important disclaimer":

The maintainer of this page is not a member of the Al-Ikhwan party and does not approve or agree with everything they say. This page is for the sole purpose of answering the questions you always had and never knew who to ask. This page has no political purpose of any kind and no connection whatsoever to any organization or institution.

The governments of some Muslim countries, knowing that human and civil rights, democracy, and equality between men and women could represent the end of their power, support Islamism. They work against peace between Israel and its neighbors, fearing that a pacified Middle East could create serious problems for autocratic and feudal systems. Not surprisingly, the Palestinian Hamas is one of the important Muslim Brethren-controlled organizations in the Middle East. Other
governments (such as those of Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan), aware of this project to enhance backwardness, are taking measures to limit the Islamist network and control its activities.

Radicalism in the West

These problems are not limited to the Muslim world but are now also found in the West. Local branches of the radical organizations that promote terrorism in the Middle East are taking root in Western countries. They represent not more that 10 percent of the total Muslim population in those countries but they control the main Muslim organizations and most of the mosques in western Europe and North America. They are a worldwide, organized network, using acronyms, but always ensuring that the Muslim Brethren is the inner circle behind the scenes. They claim to represent all Muslims and get a respectful reception from non-Muslims, who know no better.

This situation has many causes, but the principal one is that while traditional Islam is multifaceted and spontaneous, Islamism is forwarded by a worldwide network of activists funded by the Saudi and some other Gulf governments. Those looking for ways to prevent Muslim minorities in Europe and North America from turning to Islamism find that the Gulf countries represent the main obstacles. Ironically, then, the structure of the Muslim Brethren is supported, in other words, mainly by those countries that are regarded as friends of the West. Muslim Brethren are often appointed as imams of important mosques, especially in democratic countries where there is no ministry of religious affairs to check their orientation, and where imams with the expected permission to teach (ijaza shar‘i) are the exception.

The West is both loved and feared by Islamists. They cannot hope to defeat it militarily so instead they aim to influence it from within. In part, this means that Islamists divide their work between militants and more moderate-sounding types. Militants execrate the U.S. government and call for its destruction, while the more moderate Islamists are honored guests at the White House. With the Soviet bloc history, they dream of making Saudi Arabia prevail over Israel in U.S. foreign policy. This will be achieved by increasing the Saudi lobby activity to convince the American establishment that Saudi Arabia serves not just as a source of key hydrocarbons but also a gate to the Arab market; in contrast, Israel is presented as a strategic and economic liability.

The United States and Italy

The danger is that radical groups could become the official representatives of Muslim immigrants in the West. Let us review the situation in two countries, the United States and Italy.

United States. Sheikh Kabbani, of the Islamic Supreme Council of America and a disciple of Nazim ‘Adil al-Qubrusi, declared at the U.S. State Department:

We would like to advise our government, our congressmen, that there is something big going on and people do not understand it. You have many mosques around the United States. . . . So the most dangerous things are going on in these mosques that have self-appointed leaders throughout the United States. The extremist ideology makes them very active. We can say that they took over 80 percent of the mosques in the United States. There are more than 3,000 mosques in the United States. This
means that the ideology of extremism has been spread to 80 percent of the Muslim population, mostly the youth and the new generation.\textsuperscript{22}

Sheikh Kabbani is trying to show Westerners the reality behind the deceptive façade. The great majority of all mosques in democratic countries—not only in North America, but in most of western Europe as well—are controlled by extremists.\textsuperscript{23}

Looking at two organizations in specific: the Council for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is a Muslim Brethren front organization\textsuperscript{24} in the United States that lobbies against journalists and scholars who dare to write anything about Islam at variance with the Brethren's Islamist agenda, such as advocating diversity in Islam.\textsuperscript{25} Notwithstanding CAIR's evident connection to Hamas, it is accepted by the U.S. government as a legitimate representative of the Muslim American community. Likewise, the American Muslim Council (AMC) is another branch of the Muslim Brethren. According to Khalid Durán, "The AMC's most remarkable feat was to obtain the monopoly on the training of Muslim chaplains for the U.S. Army (which is like Tehran entrusting the training of its Revolutionary Guards to the U.S. Institute of Peace)." Thus, while non-Islamist Islamic organizations like the Association for Islamic Charitable Projects\textsuperscript{26} are more or less ignored by the U.S. government, Muslim American soldiers receive spiritual assistance from Islamist chaplains.

\textit{Italy.} Two Muslim Brethren–controlled organizations are active: the Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy (UCOII) and the Union of Muslim Students in Italy (USMI).\textsuperscript{27} Although their membership does not exceed one hundred persons each, they control some mosques owing to their steady flow of foreign funds.\textsuperscript{28} In the past few years, two of their leaders, 'Omar Tariq and Abu Ja'far, were expelled by a decree of the minister of the interior, Nicola Mancino, for their presence in Italy was considered "dangerous for national security and public order."\textsuperscript{29} Abu Ja'far's lawyer presented in a regional administrative court, a request for the minister of the interior to inform the court about the nature of the supposed danger, and Mancino answered with a press release saying, "The nature of this evaluation by the executive is eminently political, not subject to the administrative jurisdiction for reexamination, and the related decree is for immediate enforcing."\textsuperscript{30}

The Sunni organizations of Italy—such as the Italian Muslim Association, the Cultural Institute of the Italian Islamic Community, the Islamic School of Rome and the Alchimia-Islamitalia Forum—are trying to inform European governments about the risks they are facing in this regard, much as Kabbani and Durán are doing in the United States. But ours are—for the moment—voices crying in the wilderness.

\textbf{Countermeasures}

The best means to limit the influence of Islamist factions is by supporting the teachings of traditional, moderate Islam. In the Middle East, unfortunately, this role of countering Wahhabism has not been assumed by moderate, Sufi-oriented Sunnis, so it was appropriated by the non-Muslim 'Alawis of Syria, headed by the Asad family. This circumstance has further discouraged the emergence of organized moderate Sunnis. In the former Soviet republics, in contrast, the muftis are starting to understand that Wahhabi infiltrations threaten to change the face of their society; they seem to be willing to join forces in a common project of
prevention. The president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, has recently founded a new Islamic University in Tashkent which has among its main goals the education of moderate imams specially trained to refute Wahhabism and to promote dialogue between Muslims and other monotheists. In September 2000, the mufti of Russia, Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin, in cooperation with the muftis of Chechnya, Daghestan, Ingushetia, Bashkoria, and Siberia, established in Kazan the first Islamic university in Russia; the goal of this university is also to fight extremist influences coming from abroad. This can be understood as a sign that the diffusion of Wahhabism is no longer understood by Sunnis as ineluctable, and that the followers of traditional Islam are starting to realize how such a global menace necessarily calls for a coordinated self-defense.

Non-Muslims also have a role to play. They must overcome their tendency to assume that real Islam is the one propagandized by the Wahhabis and their Islamist network. They need to understand that Islamism is a menace not just for Muslims but for all humans. Once they realize these two points, they should increase their dialogue and work with those traditional Muslims who join them in seeing radicalism as a disease, and who have ideas for an appropriate therapy to heal those afflicted by it.

Sheikh Abdul Hadi Palazzi was appointed to teach Shafi‘i jurisprudence and Qur‘anic exegesis by Sheikh Isma‘il al-Azhari and Sheikh Husayn al-Khalwati, and ordained as a community imam by Sheikh Abu Ibrahim al-Badawi. Presently he is secretary-general of the Italian Muslim Association (AMI) and director of the Cultural Institute of the Italian Islamic Community. He lectures in Muslim history at the Research Institute for Anthropological Sciences (IFOSCA) in Rome.

FOOTNOTES

1 Often called fundamentalist Islam, I do not use this term (or radical Islam). If anything, I would use the term radical pseudo-Islam, thereby indicating that Islamism is not a legitimate form of Islamic expression.


The exegesis of the hadith according to Sheikh ‘Abd ar-Rahman Aylish al-Kabir, Sahifa ash-Shamsiya (Cairo: Dar al-Maliki, 1328) is summarized by René Guénon in Le Symbolisme de la Croix (Paris: Véga, 1931), as follows: "the social and exterior application is only secondary, as it is shown by its being 'the lesser jihad,' while the 'greater jihad' only concerns the inner, spiritual dimension."

Vesti (Tel Aviv), n. 1888, Oct. 19, 2000.


Muslim Brotherhood Movement at http://www.ummah.net/ikhwan/.


24 Conference for Middle East Peace Newsletter, Jan. 5, Jan. 7, 1999. These are two separate references to the same newsletter, entitled The first reference is to the "Special Issue" of Jan 5, 1999; the second reference to the ordinary issue of January 7, 1999 (Vol. 102, no. 4).


29 Il musulmano (Imperia), May 1993, p. 2.

30 Ibid., p. 3.


33 Asher Eder, Peace Is Possible between Ishmael and Israel according to the Qur’an (Jerusalem: Root & Branch, 1996), pp. 5-11.
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Radical Islamists are at war – first and foremost – with their fellow Muslims. Indeed, Gingrich acknowledged that, “they [Muslims] are often the victims of the violence themselves.” He also said that “since January of 2015, some 30,000 people have been killed at the hands of terrorists,” but failed to mention that the vast majority of those deaths — almost 80 percent — were in five countries with significant Muslim populations: Iraq, Nigeria — which account for over half of the deaths — Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria. Gingrich did not cite the source of his data, but according to the 2015 Gl