

Analysing Political Islam: The Need for a New Taxonomy

Introduction

One of the crucial tasks facing analysts of the Islamic world is to create a set of adequate analytical terms by means of which to categorize the world's many Islamic movements. The terminology currently used is frequently loaded; different terms are used interchangeably; and too little regard is often paid to how such terminology affects the way the movements are perceived. The social sciences can easily fall into the trap of ignoring the way that ostensibly "objective" analysis creates the reality that it seeks to describe. Furthermore, using terms that have become inherently pejorative such as "Islamic fundamentalism" to describe certain movements results in the marginalization and radicalization of the members of these movements. Great care is required both in academia and in the media to ensure that the terms used remain analytical tools rather than a mere "labelling" system.

"Islamic Fundamentalism"

The term "Islamic fundamentalism" has become the most common and perhaps the most loaded of these terms. Its use with regard to any Islamic movement is fraught with problems from the outset, as it is an attempt to borrow a term that describes a specific 20th century movement in Christianity to designate a broad range of ideological phenomena in the Islamic world. The defining tenet of fundamentalist Christianity is the literal interpretation and acceptance of the entire Biblical text, whereas a literal interpretation of the Koran is accepted by nearly all Muslims. Christian fundamentalist groups will view the Bible, or at least the New Testament, as the literal, revealed word of God rather than a work written by human hands and subject to human prejudices. In Islam, however, the Koran is by definition the revealed word of God, and it is explicit in the text itself that it is not written by the hand of the Prophet Muhammad. If the criteria for "fundamentalism" is a belief in the literal meaning of the Sacred Text and a doctrinal acceptance of the text as the revealed word of God, then all Muslims would fit the label of fundamentalist. This makes the term meaningless as an analytical tool.

However, if one by fundamentalism means a perceived return to the "roots" of the religion, then the term has more meaning. The main Islamic movement which can be described as fundamentalist in this regard would be the *Salafī* movement, which constitutes the official religion of Saudi Arabia.

The word “*Salafi*” comes from the Arabic root *s-l-f*, which designates something which is “below”, “low” or “previous”. The doctrinal core of all *Salafi* movements is the belief that Islam, as history develops, becomes increasingly corrupted by cultural and doctrinal innovations. Any such innovations (*bid'a*) are intrinsically impermissible and therefore the *Salafi* movement seeks a return to what it considers to be the “pristine” Islam of what is known as the *rashidun* (the “rightly guided”) period: the period of the Prophet Muhammad and the four caliphs who followed him: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and ‘Ali. For the *Salafi* movement, the period of the *rashidun* holds the same sway that the Ancient world did for European thinkers in the Renaissance: The Islamic *umma* (community) of the *rashidun* period was a time of wholeness and unity, which was shattered by doctrinal innovations created by deviant Muslims. If one is to argue, as Slavoj Žižek does, that ideology is always premised upon a fantasy of wholeness and the attempt to overcome a terrible “loss” of the symbolic world, then the *Salafi* movement fits the bill perfectly. It is militantly opposed to Shiism, which rejects the first three caliphs and denies the existence of the so-called Golden Age. For the Shiites, the history of Islam has been one of Sunni oppression against the Shia minority and they believe there is no lost paradise to yearn for. For this reason Shiism tends to look ahead towards the appearance of the millennial figure of Imam al-Mahdi, who most Muslim sects believe will appear at the end of time to establish justice in the world. The *Salafi* movement, while believing in the Mahdi prophecies, show little practical interest in these teachings. Their concern is not so much millennial as it is about bringing something back that was lost: the alleged harmony and purity of the early Islamic period. In his “Towards a Muslim Theory of History”, Thomas Naff argues that the utopian ideal of the early period holds a powerful grip over the Muslim imagination and that the “Muslim” theory of history (to be more exact: the Sunni view of history, but even that is a very broad label) is a fundamentally cyclical one where Islam is continually brought back to its roots by religious revivers.¹ It is the attempt to revive the period that motivates the *Salafi* movement.

This desire for utopia naturally leads to political action on the part of many *Salafis*, but not all. The term “Islamic fundamentalism” may be technically accurate in describing such movements, but it is so loaded that it is probably best to simply refer to the *Salafi* movement by its own name. However, even though all strands of Salafism may be described as “fundamentalist”, not all may be described as “political”. There are two broad groups in the *Salafi* movement: One is the official Salafism of Saudi Arabia, epitomized by religious leaders such as Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah bin Baz or Sheikh Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani. These groups are avidly apolitical. In spite of their obsession with reviving the lost utopia of the *rashidun* period, they have compromised firmly with the Saudi regime and have no

1 Cf. Thomas Naff, *Towards a Muslim Theory of History*, in: Cudsi and Hillal Dessouki (eds), *Islam and Power*, London 1981, pp. 21-25.

revolutionary ambitions. They are far more concerned with correcting what they feel are heretical practices among the Muslims. This includes a demand to return to so-called Islamic clothing (long shirts for men, the full-veil *niqab* for women) as well as an extremely close scrutiny of minor ritual practices and declarations of *takfir* (“pronouncing someone a non-believer”, anathema, excommunication) for those who deviate from the doctrines in the slightest. The so-called *jihadi* wing of the *Salafis* is epitomized by Osama bin Laden: The Saudi regime is considered to be one of the worst cases of *bid'a* and should be replaced by a pure Islamic state modelled on the *rashidun* period. The apolitical *Salafis* are basically a quiet religious sect; the Bin Laden movement believes in the full and free use of violence in pursuing their goals. A very important part of the *Salafi* movement is the use of *takfir*, as mentioned above. For the Bin Laden movement, declaring a person a non-believer makes the shedding of his blood permissible; it is therefore a tool employed frequently against leaders and individuals in the Islamic world.

Thus, the term “fundamentalism” may be correctly used with regard to the *Salafi* movement but it is probably best to dispense with it altogether because of the prejudice it evokes. Reference to the *Salafi* movement by that name and distinguishing between *political* Salafism (the Bin Laden variety) and *apolitical* Salafism would be a superior approach.

“Islamic Extremism”

The term “extremism” has become much more popular in recent years. The Iranian President Muhammad Khatami often uses it to criticize the authoritarian camp in the Iranian government. It is, without a doubt, one of the most loaded terms that can be used, as by definition, it implies one approach to Islam as “mainstream” thus marginalizing other groups as extremist.

Nonetheless, the word “extremism” may be meaningful when it is applied to groups whose ideological stances have led them to adopt violence as their main political weapon and have chosen the “propaganda of the deed” over that of the word. More often than not, the violence of certain groups (such as the Islamic Salvation Front, *Front Islamique du Salut*/FIS, in Algeria) leads them to become marginalized and treated as fringe groups by the majority of Muslims. However, this is not always the case; the majority of Muslims hardly regard *Hamas* in Palestine or *Hizbullah* in Lebanon as marginal even though both actively use violence in pursuit of their political goals. Thus, the use of violence is not an adequate criterion to define a group as “extremist”. Instead, one has to seek a proper definition of the word “mainstream” with regards to the Muslim world community, and perhaps the best way to define this term is to analyse what the large majority of Muslims consider acceptable and what they do not. Once “mainstream” has been de-

fined for analytical purposes, then one may describe a group as “extremist” to the degree with which they are viewed as a fringe group.

The Khilafah Movement

The *Khilafah* movement is similar to the political *Salafi* movement in many ways: Both hold a firm belief in a previous Golden Age to be revived at all costs. This Golden Age was that of the *Khilafah* (caliphate), which covers the entire historical period from the Prophet Muhammad until the destruction of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Its two main groups are *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and *Al-Muhajiroun*, but the Muslim Parliament and the movement of Kalim Siddiqui also belong to this camp. Their political ideology is basically the same with the only difference being that *Hizb ut-Tahrir* believes in focusing its efforts on the Arab world while *Al-Muhajiroun* believes that Islam is a religion without borders and feels that there is an equal potential for establishing a caliphate in the West as there is in the East. The *Khilafah* movement deems that establishing the caliphate is the primary duty of all Muslims and that anybody who shirks this duty is committing a sin. They are vehement about not accepting any man-made laws, to the point where some members of *Al-Muhajiroun* have argued that it is impermissible to stop at red traffic lights because traffic laws are man-made.

There is often great sympathy with the Bin Laden movement among these groups, but they distance themselves from the ritualistic obsessions of the *Salafi* movement. They are not interested in “correcting” the behaviour of people or arguing about how long one’s shirt should be; they believe that this is a distraction from the primary task of establishing an Islamic state. Indeed, many in this camp have argued that apolitical Salafism with its focus on the minutiae of law is a conspiracy fomented by the Saudis in order to give Muslims “something else to worry about” rather than being concerned about the Saudi regime’s oppression, injustice and violation of Islamic laws.

The *Khilafah* movement is relatively new and seems to have been inspired by Imam Khomeini in Iran. There is sympathy for Imam Khomeini among many members of this camp, not the least of whom, Kalim Siddiqui, in spite of the fact that he was a Sunnite, believed that Imam Khomeini had successfully “corrected” a millennium of political confusion and error in the Muslim world. Unlike Khomeinism, however, the *Khilafah* movement has taken great pains to define the future constitution and political organization of the modern caliphate, something that the revolutionaries in Iran never really did. However, because of its close ideological connection with the *Khilafah* movement, we now turn to a brief discussion of Khomeinism.

While the term "fundamentalist" may be partially accurate in describing the previous movements, it is wholly incorrect with respect to Khomeinism in Iran. Imam Khomeini believed in the establishment of an Islamic state led by a legal scholar (*faqih*); he did not view this as in any way involving or requiring a return to a pristine Golden Age: As a Shiite, he did not in fact believe that a Golden Age had ever existed. He argued forcefully that the *faqih* has the right to dispense with any Islamic legislation if he feels that such laws threaten the integrity of the Islamic state. His *fatwa* (recognized authority's ruling on a point of Islamic law) of New Year's Day 1988 made this clear to any who had any doubts: The state was not so much the means of implementing Islamic laws as it *was* the law *in and of itself*.² The question of whether the state was violating Islamic law was therefore meaningless. Thus, he had no problem with *bid'a* or legal heresy in the way that the *Salafi* movement does. In fact, the two movements are diametrically opposed in outlook and activity. Hence, Imam Khomeini's movement was utterly unique in the Islamic world. The closest comparison one could make would be with fascism, not so much in terms of its authoritarianism but rather in view of the vision of the state as the supreme locus of true human praxis, as the body that provides meaning to the masses. Imam Khomeini's comprehensive scholarship on mysticism led him to a highly utopian vision of the state as enabling the suture that connects man and God and granting man spiritual liberation in this life and the next. Imam Khomeini's application of Shia mysticism (*'ilm al-'irfan*) also sets him well apart from any of the so-called fundamentalist movements, which view mysticism and Sufism as being the worst doctrinal innovations after Shiism itself.³

In spite of the obvious authoritarian tendencies of Imam Khomeini's thought, it opens the door to a very liberal interpretation of Islam. Notwithstanding the tense political dispute between the supporters of the Iranian theocratic system (epitomized by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei) and Islamic "reformists" that seek to democratize the state (epitomized by Abdolkareem Soroush), it would be a mistake to view this debate as one between "hard-line conservatives" and "liberal reformists". Both sides agree entirely on the possibility and permissibility of abrogating certain Islamic laws if it is in the interest of society, something that is outright *kufir* (faithlessness) for "fundamentalist" movements like the *Salafi*. For this reason, some have argued that the Islamic state is primarily the rule of *maslihat*, usually translated by the Iranian government as "expediency" but generally meaning "best interest". The only difference between the "conservatives" and the "reformists" is their definition of which aspects of Islamic law are to be changed for the sake of

2 Quoted verbatim in: Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Rule of the Religious Jurist in Iran*, in: J.L. Esposito/R.K. Ramazani (eds), *Iran at the Crossroads*, New York 2001, p. 136.

3 Cf. Hamid Algar, *Roots of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, London 1983, pp. 43-45.

society. One should not assume that arguing for change in Islamic laws somehow automatically leads to a liberal society, for in most cases it has led to the opposite in Iran. This assumption would only fulfil stereotypes of a conservative and repressive “Islam” versus a liberal “West”. However, one of the main criticisms of the clerical opposition in Iran⁴ has been the argument that the government tramples on Islamic laws rather than enforcing them in a dictatorial matter. For example, Islamic law is explicit about the impermissibility of spying upon a fellow Muslim’s personal activities, but the security apparatus considers that this religious law may be temporarily lifted for the sake of preserving the Islamic state. To many in Iran, the recent attack on Ayatullah Muhammad Hussayn Shirazi’s funeral procession in the holy city of Qum was a particularly infuriating example of this kind of abrogation. Ayatullah Shirazi had willed that his dead body be buried in his house; the government, fearing that his house might turn into a kind of “shrine” for resistance movements, decided to act. Islamic law requires the utmost respect for a dead body as well as respect for the dictates of a last will and testament, especially that of an *‘alim* (learned scholar), but this did not prevent the government from attacking the Ayatullah’s funeral procession and literally kidnapping his dead body to bury it elsewhere. The government’s supporters do not argue the point that Islam forbids this, but rather that the injunction prohibiting it contradicts the more important ruling (a contradiction known as *tazahim* in Islamic law) of preserving the Islamic state from its “enemies.” Therefore, it becomes permissible to commit such acts in spite of any canonical evidence to the contrary.

Perhaps the best term to describe Khomeinism and the *Khilafah* movement would be “Islamic authoritarianism”. This is because, like fascism, it tends towards a view of Islamized authority as an end in and of itself. The state is not legitimated by its adherence to Islam, but is rather justified by the fact that it is led by a *faqih*. This distinguishes Khomeinism and the *Khilafah* movement from many movements that desire an Islamization of their states, for example, the Muslim Brotherhoods in Egypt and Jordan. These movements do not concern themselves very much with *who* runs a government as long as it is implementing Islamic laws. This has been the political philosophy of the Saudi *Salaḥī* movement, which accepts the rulership of the As-Saud family as long as they implement Islamic laws such as cutting off the hands of thieves or lashing adulterers. Imam Khomeini took the opposite tack: It does not really matter whether or not the government is cutting off thieves’ hands or not. What is truly important is *who* is running the government; if the leader is a just *faqih*, the state is automatically legitimated and has a *carte blanche* to enforce whatever laws it sees fit.

To describe such groups using the term “political Islam” is not appropriate. The term is far too broad and covers even liberal, secular reformers

4 For a discussion of the different clergy-led groups for reform in Iran, see Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?*, Washington, D.C., 2000.

such as Abdulkareem Soroush. Soroush does not so much disagree with the idea of an Islamic state but rather with the attempt to run that state in accordance with Islamic canonical law; instead he believes that an Islamic polity should be guided by Islamic “values” (such as justice and equity) and should not be a tool for enforcing Islamic laws that, for him, may or may not be useful in the current age. In this, there is really no disagreement between him and the government camp in Iran; what differentiates them is the fact that the government believes in changing Islamic laws in order to buttress state *authority* (hence, the suggested appellations “authoritarian Islam” and/or “Islamic authoritarianism”) whereas the reformist camp believes in altering the implementation of such laws for the sake of individual freedom. In reality, it is nothing but a debate about *maslihat*, that is, what is in the interests of society, rather than a more canonical debate about what Islam “says” about certain laws.

The use of the term “Islamism” or “Islamist” generally refers to Islam as a political ideology. This makes it a very broad term that has to cover such diverse leaders as Imam Khomeini or Bin Laden, and would even include thinkers like Abdulkareem Soroush. Thus, it is not helpful when used with its current meaning. However, it may have some value when applied to groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, which accept Islam as the guiding force of their ideological movement but, nonetheless, do not necessarily recognize the authoritarian ramifications of Khomeinism. Instead, they believe in an Islamization of politics that does not necessarily threaten the overall regime. Though originally the supreme ideological inspiration for the *Khilafah* movement during the time of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb (1900-1960s), the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has since become a far more moderate political party that seeks to Islamize the Egyptian government through parliamentary participation and other means. Thus, one may use the term “Islamist” to refer to those movements which seek to reform societies and laws according to Islamic principles (for example, convincing the government to ban alcohol), rather than being dedicated to the radical overthrow of regimes and the establishment of an authoritarian state, as is hoped for by the *Khilafah* movement and revolutionary groups such as the FIS in Algeria.

“Political Islam”

It is common to assume that Islam is a fundamentally political religion, and that when one refers to “political Islam” one means the establishment of a theocracy based on principles of the Dark Ages. However, the term “political Islam” applies as much to the reformists in Iran as it does to the supporters of the authoritarian regime, and many of the most active reformists in Iran are high-ranking clergymen: Ayatullah Montazari, Sheikh Kadivar and the late Ayatullah Shirazi. Ayatullah Shirazi believed in the implementation of an

Islamic state based on *shura* (public consultation) and denied the right of the *faqih* to either implement the laws as he saw fit or to rule in a fashion that transgressed the individual rights of the citizenry. Montazari has advocated direct election of the *faqih* (in place of indirect election through the *majlis-e khubrigan*, the Council of Experts), while Kadivar has denied there is a need for a clergy-run state at all. Lay intellectuals like Soroush have advocated the separation of Islamic canonical law (*fiqh*) from the state while arguing that the state must always be run in accordance with Islamic values.

All of these groups have undoubtedly been classified as political Islam but they have no authoritarian tendencies; some argue for more liberties and freedoms than can be found in many Western countries. Someone like Soroush, for example, would be the first person to advocate disestablishing the Church of England, arguing that politics inevitably corrupt religious leaders.⁵ Many have opted for the term “Islamic liberalism” to describe such groups. This term is also rather broad and may suffer from the same problems that arise when the term “fundamentalism” is imported from Christianity to Islam. Many of those who advocated reform of the clerical establishment and a more free Islamic state in the days before the Iranian Revolution were influenced by Marxism or were avowed socialists, and these thinkers would probably cringe at being described as “liberals”. Nonetheless, they all share a similar ideological foundation: the belief in *individual* human liberty as a core Islamic value. The emphasis on personal freedom – one of the core doctrines of Western liberalism – may make the use of the word “liberal” acceptable in describing these thinkers in spite of their differing ideas about how to protect such liberties in an Islamic polity.

Conclusions

This discussion proposes a more nuanced approach to defining politically motivated Islamic groups, one that is more sensitive to the ideological gaps between them. There is no analytical value in using terms that include too many disparate groups under one umbrella, for example, by using the term “Islamic fundamentalists” to refer both to Bin Laden and the Iranian regime. This creates confusion in the minds of those who are not aware of the different movements in the Islamic world; it is also an example of labelling groups with inherently marginalizing terms. In contemporary Iran, there is a strong impetus towards a more libertarian understanding of Islam, even among high-ranking members of the government like President Khatami. Labelling the Iranian regime “fundamentalist” automatically precludes a dialogue with these individuals – it would be an enormous error to lump Iran together with regimes like Saudi Arabia or the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Creating a more appropriate and adequate taxonomy is an important task facing

5 Cf. Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*, Chicago 2001, p. 206.

academics in Islamic studies and area studies of the Muslim world, and it is of crucial importance to pursue further research efforts in this regard.