

The Roots of Radical Islam

Stephen Zunes

The spread of radical Islamic movements throughout the Middle East and beyond has not only caused major political upheaval in the countries directly affected, but has placed political Islam on the forefront of concerns of Western nations, including the United States. Unfortunately this newfound attention has strengthened ugly stereotypes about Muslims already prevalent in the West. Even though the vast majority of the world's Muslims oppose terrorism, religious intolerance and the oppression of women, these remain the most prevalent images of the Muslim faith throughout the Western world.

In the United States, Muslims now outnumber Episcopalians, yet most media coverage of American Muslims stresses their alleged connections to international terrorism or focuses on the Reverend Louis Farrakhan and his Nation of Islam—a relatively small, Black separatist and (according to many Muslims) heretical offshoot of the Islamic faith. Similarly, few Americans realize that the vast majority of the world's Muslims are not Arabs, and that there are significant non-Muslim minorities in the Arab world.

The most prevailing stereotype in the United States is that Muslims are a people continually involved in conflict and violence. Yet over the centuries, Western countries have experienced far more warfare, instability and intolerance than the Muslim world. Instead, Muslims have always held a marked preference for order and nonviolence. Despite Western stereotypes to the contrary, the dramatic spread of Islam in the seventh century came not so much through Arab militarism as from the absence of any formidable opposition. More often than not, the way was open to them.

Indeed, the Arabs of that period had little military professionalism, techniques or organization. Their generals tended to be merchants, poets, or tribal chieftains. Their culture lacked the militaristic caste tradition of the Spartans, Prussians, Janissaries, or Karalis, nor did Arabs create a military organization comparable to those in the Greek, Roman, Byzantine or Persian empires. Until Israel's creation, Jews found the Islamic world to be far safer than Western Christendom and while they—like Christians and other religious minorities—were rarely granted full equality to Muslims, they seldom experienced outright persecution.

Part of this Western perception of Islamic militarism comes from a confusion about the concept of *jihad*. Rather than a holy war in the sense often used in the West, *jihad* is instead the ongoing struggle of both the individual and Muslim people as a whole to do God's work. *Jihad*—which relates to an overall struggle—is distinct from *qital*, the fight. Whether a *jihad* must take the form of

a *qital* is debatable, but belief in *jihad* does not presuppose the use of violence in the quest. The term is used as those in the West might use the word "crusade" regarding campaigns against drugs, crime, litter or AIDS.

At the same time, the reasons why a small but increasingly dangerous minority of Muslims have embraced extremist ideologies and violent tactics must be clearly understood so that the West can effectively respond. Part of the reason is historic: Although the Muslim scientific and other advances helped bring the West out of the Dark Ages, the West has generally viewed Islamic peoples with hostility. From the time of the Crusades, through the European colonial era, to the wholesale bombing of Iraq in 1991, Western Christians have killed far more Muslims than Muslims have killed Western Christians. Muslims carry a stronger sense of history than do their Western Christian counterparts, and this violence has not been forgotten.

More recently, when predominantly Muslim countries have tried to create democratic secular governments, they have been crushed by hardline Christian militias with either the acquiescence or outright support of Western nations. In the 1970s, when the predominantly Muslim but secular Lebanese National Movement tried to overturn the undemocratic sectarian state system imposed by the French, they were defeated by the rightist Christian Phalangists, clandestinely backed by the French, Israelis, and Americans.

In 1992, when Bosnia-Herzegovina's predominantly Muslim government tried to establish a pluralistic non-sectarian nation-state to replace the autocratic and militaristic ethno-chauvinism of the neighboring ex-Yugoslavian states of Serbia and Croatia, they were invaded by Serbian Christians. The West stood by while tens of thousands of Bosnian civilians were slaughtered, even preventing the Bosnians from securing arms to defend themselves.

For over three years, Western governments have been pressuring the Bosnians to abolish their secular unitary system to allow a partition of their country along religious lines. Had the situation instead been one of Muslims slaughtering Christians, there is little doubt that Western countries would have come to defend democracy and international law.

Although the U.S. government has used the threat of "Islamic fundamentalism" to justify its high military, economic and political profile in the Middle East, the U.S. has often supported Muslim extremists when perceived as supporting U.S. interests. Most U.S. aid to the Afghan resistance in the 1980s went to the Hekmatyar faction, the most extremist of the seven *mujahadin* groups, since the U.S. believed they would be least likely to negotiate a settlement with the Soviets. The Hekmatyar group has since launched a series of bloody attacks against the capital city of Kabul in an attempt to overthrow the more moderate post-Communist Islamic government. This has produced many thousands of civilian casualties, and forced those in power to impose some reactionary edicts to appease their rightist challengers.

The U.S. also heavily armed a reactionary Islamist-oriented military government in Pakistan throughout the 1980s and clandestinely supplied weapons to the Ayatollah Khomeini's regime in Iran. Indeed, the world's most extremist Muslim state—in terms of its strict interpretation of Islamic codes, repression of women, and reactionary political orientation—is Saudi Arabia, which is never-

theless an important U.S. ally. The U.S. annually sells the Saudi monarchy billions of dollars in highly-sophisticated U.S. military equipment; it has repeatedly used this military muscle to threaten the Muslim-led but democratic secular government in neighboring Yemen.

Even where the U.S. has not supported Islamic extremist movements directly, the United States and its allies have played an instrumental role in provoking many of these radical movements. The CIA's 1953 overthrow of the moderate constitutional government of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran, followed by years of support for the Shah's brutal regime, led directly to the Islamic revolution in that country. The Shah's brutal secret police—organized, trained, and armed by the U.S. government—crushed any liberal, leftist, or other secular opposition to the monarchy, leaving the mosques as the only viable sources of resistance.

The result was a strongly Islamic movement and a virulent antipathy for the United States and the West in general. Two years after the Shah's overthrow, rightists brutally purged moderate and progressive elements from the Islamic Revolution, and have remained in power ever since.

The largely unregulated Western economic penetration into Egypt and Tunisia has created widespread social dislocation and gross inequalities which have fomented these countries' Islamic extremists. Attacks by radical Islamic groups in Egypt have been launched not at religious opponents *per se* but rather at those who support what is perceived as an unjust and corrupt political and economic system. Its leaders are often Egyptians from poor families who have risen to earn advanced academic degrees—made possible by the impressive educational system created by the socialist regime of Gamal Abdul-Nasser—but have been shut out by the capitalist system imposed by Nasser's successors.

In Tunisia and Egypt, the Islamic movement is essentially waging class warfare. Twenty years ago, many of their leaders would have been Marxists (at least one prominent individual actually was!), yet the Koran's strong social-justice message has far greater appeal among the Egyptian masses than Marxian dialectics. The failure of both Nasser's bureaucratic-authoritarian socialism and the more recent neo-liberal economics has generated support for an Islamic alternative.

U.S. support for Jafaar Nimeiry during most of his repressive sixteen-year rule of Sudan helped destroy much of that country's civil society, making virtually impossible his successors' efforts to build a viable democratic system after the dictator's 1985 overthrow. The result was a coup by right-wing Islamist military officers three years later. The earlier destruction of Sudan's self-sufficient economy by British colonialists, who imposed a cash-crop economy centered on cotton exports, created extensive social dislocation that has made the military's support of a reactionary brand of Islam palatable to many Sudanese.

In Afghanistan, the Communist coups and Soviet intervention produced a radical Islamic backlash. While many of the reforms produced by the leftist governments in the late 1970s and the 1980s were progressive, they were often imposed on the population ruthlessly and undemocratically. Heavy bombing of rural areas by Soviet forces created massive refugee flows, mostly coming under the control of radical Muslim militias. The Soviet-backed government was

eventually toppled in 1992 only to collapse into factional warfare and an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islamic law.

Islamic extremists were a minor factor in Lebanese politics until the 1982 Israeli invasion. The "Muslim" side of the Lebanese civil war in the mid-1970s was actually a largely secular group known as the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) that included Sunni Muslims but also leftists and nationalists from virtually every Lebanese community.

The LNM's destruction by successive interventions from Syria, Israel, and the United States created a vacuum filled by more sectarian militias such as Hezbollah. In southern Lebanon, dominated by the Palestine Liberation Organization and its Lebanese allies until they were driven out by the Israelis in 1982, Hezbollah has come to exercise almost full control, even as most of the other militias that once carved up the rest of the country have been disarmed by a revived central government and its Syrian backers.

The Hezbollah receives most of its support from hundreds of thousands of Lebanese Shiites who fled north to escape repeated Israeli attacks against civilian areas, and who ended up filling the slums of southern Beirut. This extremist movement, which kidnapped several Americans and other Westerners in the 1980s, has—in a little more than twelve years—become one of Lebanon's most powerful political groups.

It has gained further support from Israel's ongoing occupation of southern Lebanon, which continues largely because the U.S. has been able to block enforcement of U.N. Security Council resolution 425 and successive resolutions calling for Israel's immediate withdrawal. The Hezbollah militia have become heroes to many Lebanese for its guerrilla war against the Israeli occupiers and their allies. As U.S.-armed Israeli occupation forces have repeatedly attacked civilian targets and blockaded Lebanese ports. Since the U.S.-led peace process refuses to promote an Israeli withdrawal, the Hezbollah's popularity continues to grow.

In many respects, the Palestinians are among the least likely Arab people to embrace Islam's radical strains. With the most highly-educated population in the Arab world, Palestinians have shown remarkable tolerance towards the many peoples and cultures they have encountered over the centuries in their homeland, a crossroads of civilizations. Unlike neighboring Lebanon, Muslims in Palestine have lived with their country's sizable Christian minority quite peacefully. Before the rise of Zionism, Palestine's small Jewish community also fared well.

Yet from Afghanistan to Algeria, radical Islamic movements have risen from great social dislocations, whether caused by war or misguided economic policies. The Palestinians are the ultimate dislocated people, forcibly uprooted from their land more than forty-seven years ago and surviving as refugees ever since. Most of them have been living since 1967 under an often repressive Israeli military occupation that has also denied basic economic opportunities for other Arabs in neighboring countries. Such conditions inevitably breed extremist movements. While the ideology of Hamas and related Palestinian Islamic groups is undeniably reactionary, a surprisingly broad cross-section of Palestinian society supports it in the absence of a credible alternative.

In the meantime, the secular and nationalist Palestine Liberation Organization has repudiated terrorism or any form of armed resistance to Israeli occupation. The PLO has unilaterally recognized Israel. They have renounced their goal of reclaiming all of Palestine; indeed, they no longer even insist on receiving the 50% of Palestine promised by the United Nations in 1947. Yet Israel and the United States still deny the Palestinians their right to an independent state, even on the Arab-populated 23% of Palestine known as the West Bank and Gaza. As a result, many Palestinians are susceptible to Hamas' contention that moderation gets you nowhere.

In the early 1980s, the Israelis actually encouraged Islamic groups in the occupied territories to split the Palestinian movement. While secular PLO supporters were denied their own media or right to hold political gatherings, Israeli authorities allowed radical Islamic groups to hold rallies, publish uncensored newspapers and even have their own radio station. Just prior to my first visit to Gaza twelve years ago, Israeli soldiers—who had never hesitated to brutally suppress peaceful pro-PLO demonstrations—stood by when Islamic extremists attacked and burned a PLO-affiliated health clinic in Gaza.

In 1988, Israel forcibly exiled Palestinian activist Mubarak Awad, a Christian pacifist who advocated peace with Israel and Gandhian-style resistance to the Israeli occupation. At the same time, Israeli authorities allowed Islamic militants in Gaza to circulate anti-Jewish hate literature and to call for Israel's forceful destruction.

While the PLO and other moderate secular nationalists struggled to provide their people with even the most basic of social services, Hamas and its allied groups received millions of dollars from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Their impressive health clinics, schools, and cultural institutions became effective recruiting centers for thousands of young Palestinians to join their movement.

Ironically, the oil-rich Muslim nations backing these extremist groups have long been labeled "moderates" by the U.S. government, even as successive American administrations have refused to include the increasingly conciliatory PLO in the peace process. Indeed, for several years prior to the Oslo Accords, U.S. officials in Jerusalem had been meeting with Hamas leaders while being barred from meeting with the PLO, even though the PLO had renounced terrorism and recognized Israel as far back as 1988.

Perhaps the biggest boost for Hamas came when the Israeli government expelled more than 400 Palestinian Muslims in late 1992. Most of the exiles were associated with Hamas-affiliated social service agencies, but few had been accused of any violent crimes. Such expulsions directly violate international law, and the Security Council unanimously condemned the action, calling for their immediate return. Yet the Clinton Administration blocked the U.N. from enforcing the resolution. As a result of these Israeli and American actions, the exiles became heroes and martyrs; Hamas' credibility in the eyes of the Palestinians grew enormously, as did its political strength.

Algeria seems like an anomaly compared to nations where Islamic extremism has been so prevalent. Unlike the other countries affected by "Islamic

fundamentalism," whose populations had been disrupted by war and Western economic penetration, Algeria had been stable, socialist, non-aligned and relatively prosperous since its bloody war of independence against France nearly thirty-five years ago.

Thus, the cancellation of scheduled free elections (which the opposition Islamic Salvation Front would almost certainly have won), the military coup, assassinations, and the ongoing civil war between the military government and radical Islamic forces has shocked those who have seen Algeria as something of a model of autonomous Third World development, non-aligned international relations, and principled support for oppressed peoples around the world. Yet the internal situation was less than ideal.

The ambitious industrialization schemes of the long-ruling National Liberation Front (FLN), combined with a serious neglect of agriculture and one of the world's highest population growth rates, led to rapid urbanization and social problems. The FLN's strong secular orientation, and the party's estrangement from the masses, made the leadership forget how strong traditional values had remained. Most people felt alienated from what was supposed to be a populist revolutionary government.

A whole generation had grown up since the FLN's protracted independence struggle from France. The heroism of the revolution could no longer legitimize rule by a party that could find no meaningful opportunities for millions of unemployed and underemployed youth. And despite belated reforms, the party had been unable to shed its reputation for authoritarianism and corruption.

Indeed, among those who remember the anti-colonial revolution, some still resent how the Islamic element in the struggle was suppressed by the ascendent FLN leftist elites. Even though mild compared to their Arab secular nationalist counterparts—the Baathist regimes in Syria and Iraq—the FLN government did have a history of abusing its citizenry. A lack of authentic democracy and high level of corruption produced increasing pressures for liberalization.

There were also growing economic difficulties from declining oil prices and mismanagement. Algeria faced enormous pressure from the International Monetary Fund and private banks to cut government spending and privatize state enterprises. A confidential report within the World Bank noted with satisfaction that Algeria dropped the word "socialism" from its new constitution in 1989 and abolished the planning ministry, a sign of the government's new tolerance for increased inequality. It was no surprise, under such circumstances, that a radical Islamic movement would be able to seriously challenge the government for power.

When a people have lost their identity—whether through foreign occupation, war relocation, a collapsing economy, or other reasons—they long for something that can provide the structure, world view, and purpose for rebuilding their lives. The mosque is one of the few constants in Muslim countries that have experienced great social disruption. Islam is a faith that offers a clear sense of social justice, a feeling of empowerment, and an obligation by individuals to challenge those who cause the injustice. While political Islam has often adopted a reactionary orientation, this has not always been the case.

In countries like Jordan and Yemen, where Islamic parties have competed in

a relatively open political process, they have generally played a responsible—if somewhat conservative—role in the political system. The more radical elements of Islamic movements have resulted from a denial of their right to participate in political discourse. Many of these Islamic movements, such as those in Egypt, Palestine and Algeria, include many diverse elements that would span the ideological spectrum if they were allowed to function in an open democratic system.

In some situations, Islamic movements have been quite progressive, paralleling the liberation theology movements in Latin America and the Philippines. One example is Western Sahara, a country largely in exile since its 1975 invasion by Morocco, backed by France and the United States. While Islam is the “official” religion of the Western Sahara government, it is treated as a private matter, not to be imposed or enforced from above. The Sahrawis are of the Maleki jurisprudence of Islam, generally considered more tolerant than those practiced in some other parts of the Muslim world. While alcohol is strictly prohibited, other Islamic codes are less stringent. The de-emphasis of mosques in the refugee camps reflects the people’s preference for allocating their scarce building materials for schools and medical facilities. Traditionally nomadic peoples also believe that worship can take place anywhere.

The tolerance for diversity and the freedom of women in Sahrawi society—including positions of political leadership—is seen as consistent with their view of Islam. The Sahrawis emphasize the difference between true Islam (the message of the prophet Mohammed) and the cultural traditions of societies that adopted Islam. As a people who were never under Ottoman rule and who have never known an emir or imam, the Sahrawis never adopted Islam as a state religion; the religious faith was never used to rationalize oppressive political or social institutions. The Sahrawis see themselves as practicing perhaps the most unadulterated form of Islam existing today, and reject more reactionary movements as distorting the faith.

The Western Sahara situation is unusual, however. Most of the aforementioned Islamic movements are reactionary and totalitarian. Nevertheless, given the root causes of these movements, military solutions—such as those preferred by the U.S. and some of its allies—against the rise of political Islam will not work. Yet the NATO alliance, desperately trying to justify its existence after the Cold War, has made Islamic movements into its top strategic priority, and begun discussing mutual security arrangements with some North African regimes.

The U.S. has also rationalized its support for several autocratic and repressive regimes, arguing that it is a regrettable but necessary means of suppressing the Islamic opposition. In many respects, this policy closely parallels the decades of support during the Cold War of repressive right-wing governments in the name of anti-Communism. The result is similar, too: the repression of open political expression only encourages oppressed masses to ally with an underground—and often violent and totalitarian—opposition movement.

Ironically, in some cases—such as Tajikistan and other former Soviet republics—the United States has even allied with old-line Communist Party bosses to counter the growth of Islamic movements. This comes even though the Islamic

movements in much of Central Asia—due to their strong Sufi influence—are actually quite progressive and moderate compared to some of their Middle Eastern and North African counterparts.

Only by addressing the legitimate grievances of these movements will there be any hope of stopping their often illegitimate methods and questionable ideologies. Unfortunately, the United States and other Western nations instead may be headed toward a more confrontational approach that may soon eclipse the bloody surrogate Cold War battles that ravaged the Third World in previous decades.