

Understanding the Complexity of Islamism

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FABIO VENTURINI, OCT 31 2013

Claiming at least 24% of the world's population as part of the global ummah[1], Islam represents the world's second largest religious group. Yet the political ideology which has grown from it, Islamism or Political Islam, is perhaps one of the most misrepresented political movements in Western media and society.[2] Since the events of September 11th 2001, Western media, society and the political elite have increasingly come to believe that Islamism, rather than simply jihadism, is a mortal threat to the West; a violent and totalitarian ideology which holds random destruction and global domination as its core tenets.[3]

Fuel has been consistently added to the fire of these fears over the last decade by the insurgencies against the coalition occupations of both Iraq and Afghanistan with the levels of violence which they have involved coming as a shock to an unprepared military[4] and a horrified media.[5] Islamism has been demonised by respected and influential elements of the media through the use of terms such as Islamofacism,[6] and by politicians who have called for a "war on political Islamism."[7]

This essay will take a look at how the media has contributed to this confusion through inadequate explanation and clarification of the terms relating to Islamism, and will attempt to briefly explain those terms which have caused the most confusion.

Islamism and the Western Media

Agenda setting is an inevitable result of the makeup of modern mass media and its ownership by a relatively small number of large media corporations. The framing of social phenomena such as Islamism by that mass media is the primary source of understanding of such phenomena for the public, the politicians who lead it and, since the people who run the media must come from that same public, the media itself.[8]

In order to separate the myths from the realities surrounding the political Islamic movement – the ultimate goal of which is to establish governments based on shari'ah (Islamic law) – a willingness to recognise the complexity and diversity of Islamism is required of the Western media.[9] Encompassing as it does, both mainstream and militant elements, Islamism cannot be regarded as a catch-all term for Islamic politics no more than the terms 'American politics' or 'European politics' might be sufficient to explain the scope of political views and beliefs which exist across those two continents.

The Western media, it would seem, has often approached Islamism and Jihadism and one and the same thing. The mass media has often portrayed the reaction to attacks, such as those of September 11th 2001, as being welcomed by mainstream and militant Islamists alike, with joyful parades around the Islamic world in the wake of the 9/11 attacks featuring prominently on television screens and other news outlets.[10] [11] Contrary to the impression given by the media, mainstream Islamists condemned al Qaeda's attacks. Immediately following the attacks, mainstream Islamist leaders such as Hassan al Turabi, the former head of the National Islamic Front and Sudan's long time hard-line ideological leader, condemned the actions of al Qaeda as being harmful to Islam and Muslims.[12] In Qatar, the conservative Islamic cleric Yusuf al Qaradawi issued a fatwa denouncing al Qaeda's attack on innocent civilians.[13]

Observers such as Fawaz A Gerges, the author of *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* and *The Far*

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Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global, believe that the Western media consistently fails to ask a number of important questions when covering news stories on political Islam and jihadism; Questions such as: Why did al Qaeda suddenly turn their guns on the “far enemy” after having fought beside them with other Islamists during the 1980s and 1990s?, and: What is the weight of influence which al Qaeda and other jihadists actually hold within Islamism? Coverage of the war on terror rarely, if ever, considers these questions, preferring instead to paint the actions of all Islamists with the one brush of the ‘other’, setting them entirely apart from Western society.[14]

Outside of the news media too, Western entertainment media has been guilty of portraying Muslims of all types as the ‘other’. Studies of the portrayal of Muslim characters in US television shows have shown that Muslims are not recognised as being citizens of that country or a part of that society, but instead are often portrayed as dangerous immigrants with a religion that is both alien and wicked and a threat to the American way of life. The Islamic religion as lived out in American television dramas is largely one of violence, with very little other qualities being attributed to the Islamic faith.[15]

In the online media the negative definitions of Islamic people and culture are even more predominant with studies following 9/11 finding the collocation of ‘Islamic’ with negative evaluative terms such as terrorist, extremist, fundamentalist, radicalism and jihad.[16]

A Confusion of Terms

This confusion of terms is apparent across all types of media and in many instances of discourse on Islamism and its actual meaning. Political Islam has been popularised as a term by respected media outlets such as *The Economist*, a publication which does much to explain the different threads of Islamism to its readers.[17] This marks a positive change in Western discourse on Islam which has long associated the term with fanaticism, medieval backwardness and terrorism. Including the word ‘political’ as part of the term potentially moves that discourse away from being concerned with terrorism to a more general appreciation of the governance of Islamic societies. Despite this attempt to bring better understanding to the public, ‘political Islam’ continues to be associated in the public mind with terrorism and fundamentalism.[18]

In his book *The Future of Political Islam*, Graham Fuller provides a counterpoint to the belief that Islamism is fundamentally recidivist and dangerous. He explains that Islamism, or political Islam, as a term includes fundamentalists, traditionalists, modernists and liberals, giving the definition of an Islamist as: one who “believes that Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world and who seeks to implement this idea in some fashion.”[19] Fuller believes that the attempts made by the US administration to stress that the War on Terror is not a war on Islam, and so separate Islam from politics, has led to the West ignoring the reality that Islam the religion and Islamism the political movement are inextricably linked.[20] Such attempts to explain the terms surrounding Islamism are far from the norm however and, in general, little attempt is often made to explain their meanings to an audience.

The first two terms which cause much confusion for the general public are ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islamic’. While often used interchangeably, this is not always correct. A Muslim country might merely refer to a country in which the majority of the population are Muslim, while an Islamic state will refer to a state which bases its legitimacy upon Islam and is committed to upholding the values of Islam within its laws.[21]

‘Islamic fundamentalism’ is yet another term which can prove problematic. While the term is useful in that it shows how, like other forms of fundamentalism, Islamic fundamentalist movements call for a restoration of the original purity of the Islamic faith through a literal interpretation of its holy texts. It also places this movement within the context of a global trend towards fundamentalism in many religions and so suggests that Islam might not be all that different from the other major religions. The term does appear to carry connotations in the Western mind which misrepresent the reality of Islamic fundamentalism. Whereas fundamentalist Christians are something of a break away from the established Catholic and Protestant churches in their literal belief in the Bible, all believing Muslims are expected to regard the Quran as being the literal, infallible word of god and in that respect all Muslims are ‘fundamentalists’.[22] Although to suggest that all Muslims actually hold this to be the case would be incorrect. Islamic fundamentalists as

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might be recognised by a Western audience will more often have selected specific elements of original Islamic teaching and believe that they should be emphasised in modern Islamic society. The choice of which teachings a fundamentalist movement might have selected will vary greatly from movement to movement, further differentiating them from a Christian fundamentalist movement which will have much more in common with other fundamentalist Christian movements.[23]

Salafism and Wahhabism

Salafism is the Islamic tradition which comes closest to the Western idea of Islamic fundamentalism. A Salafi is a Muslim who emphasises the importance of the Salaf, or predecessors, as model examples of Islamic practice. In use since the Middle Ages, the term today refers especially to followers of the modern Sunni Islamic movement known as the Salafiyyah, which actually includes the tradition of Wahhabism, so that the two terms are sometimes incorrectly believed to be synonymous. Salafism has come to be associated in the West with a strict, literalist approach to Islam and with the promotion of violent jihad against civilians as a legitimate expression of Islam.[24] The true meaning of Salafism is far broader than the Western misinterpretation would have us believe. Salafism urges believers to return to a more pure form of Islam as practiced by Muhammed and his companions. It rejects all practices, beliefs and actions not condoned by the Quran or Muhammed's acts or sayings. However, Salafi thinkers also refuted the idea that Muslims should only follow the interpretations of religious texts as given by theologians, having instead the right to interpret these texts for themselves through the practice of *ijtihad* or independent reasoning.[25] Salafism developed as a broad philosophy rather than a single movement so there is no single Salafi ideology or religious organisation. These movements have traditionally avoided politics and instead comprised of a multitude of movements and ways of thought which have reflected particular local and historic conditions.[26] In the past three decades however, the Saudi brand of Salafism, Wahhabism has taken a particular interest in the politics of the Islamic world.

Wahhabism was developed by an eighteenth century theologian, Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab in Saudi Arabia who advocated the purging of Islam of what he believed to be impurities and innovation. Followers of Wahhabism claim to adhere to the correct understanding of the doctrine of *Tawhid*. *Tawhid* is the belief in the uniqueness and unity of god and is held by the majority of Islamic traditions but was uniquely interpreted by Ibn al-Wahhab who believed particularly that there was a moral decline and political weakness present in the Arabian Peninsula.[27]

In modern times the fundamentalism of Wahhabism has grown to become closely connected with political violence.[28] Wahhabism has been strongly promoted by Saudi Arabia with the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice acting as the 'religious police' to enforce *shari'ah* law.[29] Wahhabism started to gain influence outside Saudi Arabia with the 1973 oil boom when the Saudi regime began a major push to spread Wahhabi ideology to other Muslim nations. It did this for two reasons – partly out of religious conviction, but also partly because it perceived other ideologies as presenting a potential threat to its national security.[30] The Saudi regime is believed to have spent at least \$87 billion promoting Wahhabism abroad through the building of mosques and the funding of scholarships and education. Saudi funded religious institutions, such as the American Muslim Council, are seen as representatives of the Muslim community by the United States government, cementing the influence of Wahhabism not just in the Muslim world but also in the West.[31]

Islamism / Political Islam

Coined as a term in the 1970s, Islamism or Political Islam refers to the set of ideologies which hold that Islam is as much a political ideology as it is a religion. Islamist thinkers believe in a pan-Islamic political unity which encompasses all members of Islam no matter which nation state they may live within. It also emphasises the removal of non-Muslim influences, particularly Western military, economic, political, social and cultural influences which are believed to be incompatible with Islam.[32] Islamist movements typically are critical of the existing order in Muslim countries and seek to bring about regime change. Islamism addresses the social, political, economic and cultural challenges which are faced by contemporary Muslim societies and claims to hold the solutions to these through a reinvention of concepts taken from the Islamic tradition.[33]

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One characteristic which all Islamist movements share is a two-sided relationship with modernity. A belief in the corrupting nature of Western cultural influence on Middle Eastern societies is at the core of Islamist beliefs. However, both the profiles of Islamist leaders and the reliance of their movements on Western communications technologies show Islamist movements to be a particularly modern phenomenon. These movements seem to have embraced some of the trappings of modern western society, such as the internet, in order to achieve their goal of holding the modern, Western world at bay.[34]

Although religious in nature at first glance, politics lies squarely at the heart of Islamism. For Islamists, the Islamic religion provides a political blueprint with which they mean to take action to effect real change. This differentiates Islamists from the fundamentalists who are concerned solely with religious reform. Islamists are most often social and political activists intent on creating a new type of Islamic society.[35]

Islamism and the War on Terror

Jihadist Salafism grew out of the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s and rose in influence during the 1990s. Jihadist Salafis believe in a strict literal interpretation of Islam but have combined this with an emphasis on violent jihad or holy war. For them, jihad has become the primary instrument through which to bring about the return to the original message of Islam.[36] The War on Terror which the actions of the jihadists of al Qaeda brought about saw the return in massive numbers of Western military influence to the Islamic world and strengthened the positions of the so-called 'apostate' regimes which the Islamist groups had long struggled to overthrow. The War on Terror came to be seen as a war on Islam and mobilised many Arab youths to see jihadism as a means of defending Islam and Arab identity.[37] The reaction of the West to this trend was to see the actions of jihadists as representative of the will of all Islamists in a return to Huntington's theory of the clash of civilisations.[38]

Conclusion

Though the role played by Islamist movements in the sparking of the Arab Spring was marginal in most cases, the events witnessed across sections of the Muslim world have put Islamism in the spotlight. Suddenly finding themselves with the opportunity to participate in the democratic process in light of the fall of so many authoritarian regimes, Islamist groups have been moving away from their belief that democracy is a foreign concept, unsuited to governing Muslim countries.[39] It has now become more important than ever for the misrepresentations and misunderstandings of Islamism to be addressed and corrected as Islamist movements begin to become major actors on the international political stage.

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