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[Marxism](#)

Political Islam: A Marxist analysis

Part one of a two-part series

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SINCE THE events of 9/11, the question of political Islam has taken center stage in world politics. The “war on terror” has transformed the whole discussion on the relationship between Islam the West. A slew of books and essays have appeared on this topic since then.¹ Predictably, conservative analysts, recycling old Orientalist clichés, have advanced the idea that the West is once again at war with “Islam.” The underlying logic behind this argument is “we” are secular and democratic, while “they” are mired in the backwardness born out of an adherence to Islam. These arguments have become part of the common-sense ideology in the United States and elsewhere.²

In a previous article on Islamophobia, we challenged this “clash of civilizations” thesis (“Islam and Islamophobia,” *ISR* 52, March–April 2007). This article sets out to look historically at the phenomenon called political Islam and to explain the conditions under which it comes into being. It will begin by debunking the notion that the rise of Islamist organizations is the natural outgrowth of Islam, and instead point to the historical de facto separation between religion and politics in Muslim majority societies. Additionally, it will show that for at least the last two centuries and up until the last few decades of the twentieth century, the dominant trend in the “Muslim world” was toward secularization. The turn toward Islamism in the last three decades of the twentieth century was the product of particular economic and political conditions. Moreover, these conditions are not dissimilar to the ones that enabled the rise of other fundamentalisms, such as Hindu fundamentalism in India and the New Right in the United States.

The essay then outlines the particular historic conditions that have enabled the rise of political Islam. These include the active role played by the U.S. in posing Islam and political Islam as an alternative to secular nationalism and the left; persistent imperial intervention and domination; internal weakness that led to the decline of secular nationalist and various left parties, creating an ideological vacuum that Islamists were able to occupy; economic crises and its exacerbation under the neoliberal era, which present an economic opening for Islamists and their charitable networks.

Finally, it offers a general method for how progressives and left might view political Islam, outlining the approach taken by previous Marxists and revolutionaries, with a particular

emphasis on the theory and practice formulated during the first few years of the Comintern, the international body of radicals formed after the Russian Revolution. In essence, the argument put forward is that Marxists should never uncritically support the Islamists nor always see them as permanent and implacable enemies. Instead, a Marxist approach suggests that we examine these groups and their actions on a case-by-case basis grounded in a concrete historical analysis.

The phenomenon under study in this article has variously been referred to as “Islamism,” “Islamic fundamentalism,” “Islamic neo-fundamentalism,” and so on. We use these terms interchangeably, recognizing that they have different resonances in different countries. In a nutshell, political Islam refers to a range of groups that have come into being based on a reinterpretation of Islam to serve particular political goals.

Islam, political Islam, and secularism

An argument that has become almost commonsensical today is that the parties of political Islam are a natural outgrowth of Muslim societies. For instance, an introductory book on the world’s religions published by Oxford University Press in 2007 has a timeline in the chapter on Islam that begins with the birth of the religion and ends with the events of 9/11, the Madrid bombing, and the London transit bombing. The logic is straightforward—Islam leads to (violent) political Islam in a simple and unproblematic way.³ In this section, we debunk this notion in two parts. First, we lay out the historic separation between the religious and political spheres in Islam. Second, we outline the trend toward secularism over the last two centuries.

The architects of the idea that religion and politics have always been intertwined in Islam are the right-wing ideologues Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis. Lewis, in a now famous essay titled “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” sets out his arguments as follows. He begins by pointing to the historic separation of religion and politics in Christianity and then states that such a separation has not occurred in Muslim societies, which have not seen the equivalent of the Enlightenment, the philosophical and scientific movement in the West that militated against Christian dogma. Lewis argues that whereas Muslims at one point admired the West for its achievements, this “mood of admiration and emulation has, among many Muslims, given way to one of hostility and rejection.”⁴ He goes on to add that this “is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.”⁵

For Lewis, this is not a clash between Islam and Judeo-Christianity alone; it is a clash between the religious East and the secular West. As he notes, whereas Christians and the West were able to separate religion and politics, “Muslims experienced no such need and evolved no such doctrine.”⁶ As he put it, “the origins of secularism in the West may be found in two circumstances—in early Christian teachings, and, still more, experience, which created two institutions church and state; and in later Christian conflicts which drove the two apart.” In contrast, there was “no need for secularism in Islam.”⁷ In his book *What Went Wrong* published shortly after 9/11, Lewis develops these arguments further and asserts that, “The notion of a non-religious society as something desirable or even permissible was totally alien to Islam.”⁸

Huntington, who popularized Lewis’s “clash of civilizations” thesis, would take this one step further and argue that there were deep cultural differences between various civilizations that inevitably lead to conflict. He states that the “underlying problem for the West is not Islamic

fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture, and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.”⁹

What follows from this reasoning is that while certain “civilizations” understand the proper role of religion in society, others do not. Therefore, Islamist groups in contemporary society are a natural outgrowth of an anti-secular cultural tendency in “Islamic civilization.” This is an erroneous reading of the history of Islam. While Islam came into being as both a political and religious ideology, at least since the eighth century there has been a de facto separation of political and religious power.¹⁰ Furthermore, there is nothing unique in Islam’s political potential. When the papacy sought to unite Europe under the banner of Christianity, it unleashed the Crusades in the name of God. At least since the fourth century, when Rome adopted Christianity as its official religion, Christianity too has been political.

However, the potential for a religion to be used for political purposes needs to be distinguished from its actual role in various societies at various historical moments. Not unlike Christianity, Islam was transformed in various ways to adapt to the needs of the societies in which it was practiced. A brief overview of the birth of Islam and the rise of revivalist movements reveals a simple point: political Islam is better understood as a *contemporary* phenomenon akin to the rise of Christian, Jewish, and Hindu fundamentalisms in the recent past rather than as the natural outgrowth of Islam.

Separation of religion and politics in Islam

Islam first came into being in the early seventh century in Mecca among the trading community. The prophet Muhammad, a merchant who had traveled widely in the region, understood that if the tribes that populated his city were to gain greater political and economic power in the region, they would need to unite under a common banner. As Tariq Ali notes,

Muhammad’s spiritual drive was partially fueled by socio-economic passions, by the desire to strengthen the commercial standing of the Arabs and the need to impose a set of common rules. His vision encompassed a tribal confederation united by common goals and loyal to a single faith.... Islam became the cement utilized by Muhammad to unite the Arab tribes and, from the beginning, it regarded commerce as the only noble occupation.¹¹

Islam as envisioned by Muhammad combined spirituality with politics, economics, and social mores. He played the role of both a political and religious leader, and his authority in both realms was unquestioned.¹² Yet, this was not to be so with his successors. Shortly after his death, there would be conflicts over who was to be Mohammed’s temporal successor (caliph). The fourth caliph, Ali, was opposed by several forces, including one of the Prophet’s wives, and was eventually killed by a member of the Kharijite sect. Ali’s two sons, Hassan and Hussein were to succeed him. Hussein was assassinated by an Umayyad caliph in an event known as the Battle of Karbala. Followers of Mu’awiyah (founder of the Umayyad dynasty) are known as Sunni Muslims, while followers of Ali are known as Shi’a Muslims. It was a struggle for political power that led to this first religious division between Shi’a and Sunni.¹³

Within a century after Muhammad’s death, Muslim armies would go on to defeat the neighboring empires and establish a powerful empire. It is in this context that a de facto separation of religious and political power begins to take shape. While the descendants of the prophet or the caliphs held religious authority, monarchs or sultans/ emirs wielded political power.¹⁴ We use the term “de facto” because there was no formal or legal separation of religion from politics, but rather a separation of the spheres of activity and power, with the religious sphere being subordinated to the political one. For instance, the Abbasid caliph, the

religious leader of one of the early Muslim empires, was in reality a mere figurehead who didn't exercise power in any real sense of the term. It was the Turkic warrior-rulers who held political power from the ninth to the thirteenth century. The *ulama* justified this practice so as to bestow legitimacy on the caliph, and to validate their own authority.¹⁵ Mohammed Ayoob traces the continuity of this practice over centuries and notes that “the distinction between temporal and religious affairs and the temporal authority’s de facto primacy over the religious establishment continued throughout the reign of the three great Sunni dynasties—the Umayyad, the Abbasid, and the Ottoman.”¹⁶

The first Muslim empire, which brought together large numbers of people from various regions, sought to develop a set of laws that could be applied uniformly to all Muslim subjects. This need for a system of organization was the impetus behind the development of the Sharia—a set of rules codified into law. The *ulama*, a class of religious scholars, were then entrusted with the task of formulating Sharia. The various Sharia systems that emerged from this effort attempted to describe all human acts and activities and to classify them as forbidden, objectionable, recommended, etc. These rules encompassed almost all spheres of life from those governing commerce and crime, to rules about marriage, divorce, property, hygiene, and various aspects of interpersonal relationships.¹⁷

While early Muslim society was organized according to the Sharia, the caliph and the *ulama* were not political leaders. As stated above, the *ulama* played a secondary and subservient role in relation to the political leadership. Islamic treatises that emerged during this and later periods have a good deal to say about the nature of a good ruler, a good government, and are loaded with suggestions and advice to rulers, but they do not stake out a political role for the clergy. While the clergy insisted that the potent rule society in a way that conformed to Sharia law, they viewed their role as censures of a bad ruler rather than as rulers themselves.¹⁸ As Ayoob notes, there “was a consensus that as long a ruler could defend the territories of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) and did not prevent his Muslim subjects from practicing their religion, rebellion is forbidden, for fitna (anarchy) was worse than tyranny....political quietism was the rule in most Muslim polities most of the time for a thousand years, from the eight to the eighteenth century.”¹⁹

A division of labor had taken place between the “men of the pen” and the “men of the sword.” While the former class, which included not only the *ulama* but also bureaucrats (who worked under the leadership of political ruler) were charged with carrying out the administrative and judicial functions, the latter defended and expanded the empire and held political authority.²⁰ Thus, whereas the prophet Muhammad was both a political and religious leader, the needs of empire necessitated a de facto separation.

While this was the reality of the relationship between religion and politics, leading theologians went out of their way to demonstrate the opposite as a way to uphold their credibility. They have consistently done so through history, thereby creating the impression that religion and politics were more closely intertwined than they actually were. Yet, there are examples of more practical minded theologians, such as Al-Ghazali of the eleventh and twelfth centuries who openly advocated a division of labor between the caliph and the sultan.²¹

Thus, contrary to Lewis’s claims about the indivisibility of religion and politics in Islam, Ayoob argues that the “historical trajectory of religion-state relations in Islam... has not been very different from that of Western Christianity.”²² What is different is that there has not been the kind of clashes between the state and the religious establishment as seen in Christianity.

There are numerous reasons for this, which are beyond the scope of this essay to discuss, one of them being the diffuse nature of religious power in Islam and the lack of a corresponding hierarchical institution like the priesthood and the papacy.²³ Yet, despite this, modern secularism was able to take hold in Muslim majority societies. This too is the product of several factors; in the next section, we explore the impact of colonialism and capitalism which led to secular and modernizing reforms from above, as well as national liberation struggles from below led by secular nationalist forces. These, as well as other factors, would play a role in leading the transition toward the secularization of Muslim majority countries.

Modernization and secularization

The turn toward secularization and modernization was spurred on by the spread of capitalism and the encroachment of colonialism onto various Muslim empires. In fact, it was only during the era of capitalist development that Islam finally ceased to play a central role in social organization. In response to the loss of their territories to European colonial powers, the Muslim rulers of the Ottoman, Egyptian, and Persian empires introduced programs of modernization, capitalistic reforms, and Westernization. While the goal of the various despots was to find ways to develop their military, they also transformed their economic and political systems. The result was a series of military, administrative, educational, economic, legal, and social reforms, strongly influenced and inspired by the West, that gradually displaced Islam as the basis of Muslim society and put secularism in its place.²⁴ Additionally, a new Western educated secular middle class came into being that assumed positions of importance in government, education, and law, which then eroded the traditional basis of power of the ulama. It is only in this context that we can understand the “return to Islam” or the various Islamic revivalist movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The first efforts at modernization were initiated from above. The monarchs who presided over Turkey, Egypt, and Iran looked to the West to find ways to develop their military in order to better defend themselves from colonial conquest. The Albanian-born ruler of Egypt, Mehmet Ali, for instance, made a push toward industrial and military development in first half of the nineteenth century. As historians Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. and Lawrence Davidson note, “Mehmet Ali was the first non-Western ruler to grasp the significance of the industrial revolution. He realized that a modernized army would need textile factories to make its tents and uniforms, dockyards to build its ships, and munitions plants to turn out guns and bayonets.”²⁵ This resulted in a wholesale restructuring and modernization of Egyptian society.

The Ottomans in Turkey similarly carried out a series of reforms—they built schools, roads, and canals, curbed excessive taxation, and set up a modern financial system. Persia under the Qajar dynasty in the eighteenth and nineteenth century attempted to pass similar reforms, but had less success than their Egyptian and Ottoman counterparts. In all three cases, there was also a move to establish modern states.²⁶

One of the outcomes of these early modernizing reforms was the creation as mentioned above of a new class of people: the secular middle class. The setting up of schools based on the European model gave rise to a new intellectual elite that was modern and Western in its orientation. As stated earlier, this new secular-minded middle class assumed positions of power within the government and in law and began to displace the ulama. It is also this class that would go on to lead the early national liberation struggles in various countries.

These early struggles, despite their popular appeal, would have few successes beyond Turkey. Yet Turkey is significant. In 1923, Turkey became the first republic in the modern Middle East.²⁷ Mustafa Kemal, or Ataturk, then instituted a series of reforms, including the separation

of religion from politics, and carried out what Marxists refer to as “bourgeois democratic tasks,” the reforms needed to mark the transition from a feudal monarchical to a capitalist democratic order. His key battle was against the old order based on Islamic law and practices. To consolidate his own authoritarian rule, he had to destroy the ability of the old ruling classes whose power and authority were tied to Islam. In 1924, he abolished the caliphate, closed down the madrassas or religious schools, replaced Sharia with the Swiss civil code, and expunged the reference to Islam as the state religion of Turkey in its constitution. Ataturk was fiercely secularist, and the Kemalist legacy was carried on by the Turkish army after his death.

This did not, however, occur in other countries until after the Second World War. Prior to this, where nationalist parties did come to power for brief periods, they failed to not only carry out significant reforms that would ease the conditions under which the majority lived, but they also failed to decisively rid their countries of colonial domination, being satisfied instead with power-sharing agreements. The early nationalist leadership vacillated between collaboration with imperial powers and protest of imperial domination, conditions that created an opening for radical secular nationalism.²⁸ We will return to the post-war turn toward radical nationalism shortly.

The failures of Islamic revivalism

While the response at the top of society to colonialism was a move toward modernization and secularization, some turned to the fundamentals of Islam—the Quran, the life of the prophet and his followers, the early Islamic community—to offer a solution and a model of Islamic reform. These revivalists saw European colonialism and imperialism, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—when European powers started to make significant incursions into Africa, Asia, and the Middle East—as a vital threat to Muslim political and religious identity.²⁹ The leaders of this revivalist turn tended to be religiously minded middle-class individuals who sought to limit the control and authority that the ulama had over Islamic texts and insist on the right of individual interpretation (ijtihad) of the founding texts (the Quran and the Sunna).³⁰

The key representatives of this new current were Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida. Together, they laid the basis for the Salafiya school of thought.³¹ In essence, the Salafists advocate a return to the traditions of the original religious community around Prophet Muhammad (the *Salaf*). However, even at this stage Islamic revivalism, and Salafist thought in particular, had little to say about the state beyond its role in applying Sharia. There was no wholesale condemnation of Muslim governments and therefore not a call to overthrow these governments—such a turn within Salafism would occur only later in the twentieth century.³²

Inspired by the writings of Rashid Rida, Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928. At around the same time, Mawlana Mawdudi published his Islamist doctrine in the Indian subcontinent.³³ Mawdudi was inspired by al-Banna and went on to found the Jamaat-e-Islami in 1941.³⁴ Both parties engaged in national liberation struggles, but rejected secular nationalism. Mawdudi called for the creation of an Islamic state in all of India based on Sharia law. Similarly, the Muslim Brotherhood rejected the demands of the Egyptian nationalists who called for an end to British rule and the creation a modern state with a constitution. The Brothers argued that there was no need to look to Western models of social order; instead they championed the slogan still used today: “The Koran is our constitution.” The founding Egyptian Brothers then set up branches in several countries including Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Sudan.

Yet, all these revivalist movements and groups discussed above were minor players on the political stage in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. The dominant trend in the Middle East and North Africa during this period, as discussed above, was toward secularism and modernization. Thus despite his best efforts, the “father” of modern Islamist thought, al-Afghani, failed to build a pan-Islamic alliance. Similarly, the secular nationalists in India and Egypt had the support of the vast majority of the population and Islamist currents were marginal.

After the Second World War, a new generation of radical anti-colonial secular nationalists would take the place of their predecessors. The previous generation had failed to end colonization, and colonial conditions had become unbearable for the vast majority. Even though by 1945 many Middle Eastern and North African countries were granted formal independence, in reality they were not free. The League of Arab States, formed in 1945, consisted of the supposedly independent countries of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Saudi Arabia, but in reality these were under the thumb of the British. The vast majority of ordinary people had grown disillusioned with their leadership. The pro-Western upper and middle classes were seen as incapable of delivering internal reform.³⁵ The landed aristocracy was despised for its collusion with imperial powers and its shameless promotion of self-interest.³⁶ The loss of Palestine in 1948 and the failure of the Arab states to stop the formation of the state of Israel exacerbated matters. The result was that popular discontent combined with leftward pressure exerted by various Communist parties in the region pushed the nationalist movement in a more radical direction. This new phase saw the birth of radical Arab nationalism in the Middle East with its key leaders such as Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser referring to themselves and their program as “Arab socialism.”

Radical secular nationalism

During the post-war period, radical secular nationalism was the dominant political philosophy in colonized nations from Indonesia to Algeria. Ignoring this reality, several Western commentators asserted that people in Muslim countries, who they viewed as being deeply entrenched in their religious beliefs, would reject political ideologies like nationalism and communism. They were wrong.

As John Esposito argues, nationalism “was not articulated in significantly Islamic terms.” This is particularly true in the “period following World War Two,” when “the major ideologies of protest and of radical reform were shaped by Western democratic, socialist and Marxist perspectives.”³⁷ Walter Laqueur, writing in 1956 about the dominance of communism and nationalism in the Middle East, would argue convincingly against the aforementioned “bulwark of Islam” thesis stating that what “is decisive is that Islam has gradually ceased to be a serious competitor of Communism in the struggle for the souls of the present and potential *elites* in the countries of the Middle East.”³⁸ If that was true of communism, it was even more so of nationalism. “Communism and extreme nationalism,” Laqueur noted, “are the two main forces among academic youth in the Arab countries.”³⁹ These forces would then lead successful national liberation struggles and introduce secular reforms, among other measures, in their societies.

For instance, Nasser introduced various political, social, and economic reforms under the banner of “Arab socialism.” Once such measure was to quell the influence of the clergy and prevent them from interfering in matters of the state (while another was to imprison and outlaw the Muslim Brotherhood); we see here a further separation of religion and politics. Though Nasser made statements that some of Islam’s teaching were consistent with his view of “socialism,”⁴⁰ Nasserist ideology was secular at its core. It is only with the collapse and

defeat of secular nationalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s that a space opened for the revival of political Islam.

To summarize, there is no direct link between Islam in the seventh century and the rise of Islamist groups in the latter part of the twentieth century. We outlined the de facto separation that took place in Islam between the religious and political spheres and quietist doctrines that advocated an eschewal of political power. Additionally, traditions of secularism and modernization were dominant for at least two centuries in various Muslim majority regions, beginning with modernizing reforms instituted by various Muslim monarchs, then followed by further changes implemented by secular nationalist leaderships after successful anti-colonial struggles. Political Islam, therefore, is better understood in light of recent political and economic developments—developments, moreover, that have given rise to religious movements in other societies as well.⁴¹

The rise of political Islam

Political Islam is the product of the convergence of the following political and economic developments:

- Imperial intervention and continued domination. Imperialist powers (particularly the United States) played an active role in sponsoring and promoting Islamist groups as a bulwark against secular nationalism and the left. Imperial domination has persisted even after decolonization via pliant rulers, Israel, and direct military confrontations.
- The internal contradictions and failure of secular nationalism and of the Stalinist left that created a political vacuum.
- The development of economic crises in various countries that state capitalist methods of nationalist development were unable to resolve. The Islamists, through their vast network of charitable outlets were able to offer “Islamic” solutions, and grow by recruiting from the middle classes and other de-classed sections.

All of these factors would then lay the groundwork that helped to propel Islamism onto the world stage. This did not, however, happen all at once.

U.S. imperialism and political Islam

During the era of the Cold War, the United States viewed radical nationalism and communism as dire threats to its influence. After an initial period when Washington tried to win Nasser, and the Iranian secular nationalist Mohammed Mossadegh, to its side and failed, it developed an “Islam strategy” whereby Islamist groups, helped by Saudi Arabia, would be cultivated as bulwarks against radical nationalism and communism. During the 1950s, the United States would use the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt against Nasser, and a group of clergy in Iran against Mossadegh.⁴²

If Mossadegh represented the potential for what secular nationalists in power might do to Western oil interests (he nationalized the oil industry), Nasser represented Washington’s nightmare scenario in the region. While Egypt does not possess oil, Nasserism, with its emphasis on pan-Arab unity, sought to unite the technologically advanced urban countries and their large, well-trained working classes with the vast wealth of the oil producing countries. The combination of Cairo plus Riyadh would have severely hampered Western domination over the oil resources of the region. Thus, in addition to hatching coup plots against Nasser and carrying out various assassination attempts on him, such as poisoning his chocolates etc.,⁴³ the United States began to cultivate the Muslim Brotherhood and to increasingly rely

on Saudi Arabia to act as a counterbalance. In the case of Iran, the CIA succeeded in its coup, and installed the pro-U.S. Shah.

If the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was first established with a grant from the British Suez Canal Company, it was thanks to U.S. support and Saudi funding that it was able to grow and proliferate. Saudi Arabia used it against the secular regimes in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, and helped to build its bases in Sudan. It also encouraged it in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the Muslim Brotherhood allied with Mawdudi's Jamaat i-Islami. As one senior CIA official put it, the

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optic was the Cold War. The Cold War was the defining clarity of the time. We saw Nasser as socialist, anti-Western, anti-Baghdad pact, and we were looking for some sort of counterfoil. Saudi efforts to Islamicize the region were seen as powerful and effective and likely to be successful. We loved that. We had an ally against communism.⁴⁴

This ally, which we will discuss shortly, laid the basis for precisely such an Islamization, and would seize the initiative from secular nationalism once the latter began a process of decline in the late 1960s.

In addition to secular nationalists, Washington viewed the various communist and socialist parties in the region as threats. They therefore used every means possible to curtail their influence from propaganda to assassinations. As declassified national security documents show, the United States used extensive propaganda in the form of films, pamphlets, posters, news manipulation, magazines, books, broadcasts, cartoons, etc. to counter communist ideology. One such poster featured a "Greedy Red Pig," with a hammer and sickle for a tail. The goal was to make "the Soviet-Communist state ridiculous as well as frightening to the ordinary Arab."⁴⁵ The flip side of such comical efforts (which had little impact) was targeted assassinations. The United States aided governments and right-wing paramilitaries in killing leftists, as for instance in 1963, when the CIA supplied the Baathists with the names of Iraqi Communist Party members so that they may assassinate them.

Saudi Arabia

The turn by the United States toward promoting Islam on the political stage began in the 1950s. "We wanted to explore the possibilities of building up King Saud as a counterweight to Nasser," Eisenhower wrote to a confidante. "The king was a logical choice in this regard; he at least professed anti-Communism, and he enjoyed, on religious grounds, a high standing among all Arab nations."⁴⁶ In this, Eisenhower was influenced by the prevailing ideas among leading scholars who argued that Islam had been disrupted by Western influences, and therefore had to be brought back (with U.S. help).⁴⁷ This was a rather simplistic understanding of the role of religion and politics in the Middle East. Yet, it was acted upon in a joint operation with Britain called "Omega," in which the United States sought to isolate Nasser and create an alternate pole of attraction in King Saud.⁴⁸ Some administrators even began to develop the notion of Saud as a kind of "Islamic Pope."⁴⁹ Saud, however, failed to be such a pole of attraction for various reasons. His successor, King Faisal, would take on this mantle and make significant strides towards Islamizing the region.⁵⁰ Since then Saudi Arabia has been one of the most powerful behind-the-scenes promoters of Islamism.

Even though Saudi Arabia is home to the greatest supply of oil reserves in the world, it had little political legitimacy in the Middle East during the era of progressive secular nationalism. Regionally, Nasserism was widely accepted as the model, and Egypt acted as the dominant political force until the end of the 1960s (the decline of secular nationalism is discussed

below). At any rate, after 1973, this dynamic would change. The oil embargo raised Saudi Arabia's prestige, so much so that it was able to seize the initiative and put Wahhabism on the map. The Saudi ruling elite then used their vast oil resources to promote Islamism in the following ways:

- They set up a massive network of charity and good works, which allowed Islamist groups to provide solutions to the economic crises gripping various countries.
 - They used the World Muslim League, which was set up in 1962 to counter secularism.
- They brought together a number of countries in the region under the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1969 to set an agenda consistent with the Saudi outlook.
 - They created an Islamic financial system that tied various African, Asian, and Middle Eastern countries to the oil rich nations.⁵¹

If the World Muslim League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference were the political means of establishing Saudi hegemony, it is the Islamic financial system that laid the economic basis for its growth. Under Saudi guidance, the vast amounts of money pouring into Arab oil exporting countries in the early 1970s were directed into a network of banks that were under the control of the Islamic right and the Muslim Brotherhood. These banks then funded sympathetic politicians, parties and media companies as well as the business ventures of the devout middle class—a group consisting of the descendants of the mercantile classes of the bazaars and souks, and of the newly wealthy professionals, flush with money from jobs held in various oil-producing countries. The Muslim Brotherhood also financed their operations in Egypt, Kuwait, Pakistan, Turkey, and Jordan through these banks.⁵²

The West wholeheartedly supported this banking system. Wanting not to be left out of the vast amounts of petrodollars that were now flowing through these banks, Western banks pitched in to provide expertise, training, and technological know how. The key players in the United States included Citibank, Chase Manhattan, Price Waterhouse, and Goldman Sachs. Additionally, the rise of the Islamic banking system coincided with the development of the neoliberal model in the West. Close ties were forged between neoliberal guru Milton Friedman and his disciples at the University of Chicago and the Islamists. As Robert Dreyfuss states, “Islamic finance repeatedly relied on right-wing economists and Islamist politicians who advocated the privatizing, free-market views of the Chicago school.”⁵³ Once in power, it is not surprising that the Islamists adopted neoliberal measures such as in Algeria and the Sudan.⁵⁴

At the end of the day, through its various political, religious, and economic institutions, Saudi Arabia played a key behind-the-scenes role in furthering the cause of Islamism. As Gilles Kepel observes,

Saudi Arabia's impact on Muslims throughout the world was less visible than that of Khomeini's Iran, but the effect was deeper and more enduring. The kingdom seized the initiative from progressive nationalism, which had dominated in the 1960s, it reorganized the religious landscape by promoting those associations and ulemas who followed its lead, and then, by injecting substantial amounts of money into Islamic interests of all sorts, it won over many more converts. Above all, the Saudis raised a new standard—the virtuous Islamic civilization—as a foil for the corrupting influence of the West, while still managing to remain a staunch ally of the United States and the West against the Soviet bloc (unlike the Iranians).⁵⁵

In sum, Saudi Arabia has played a key role in promoting political Islam. As Rachel Bronson notes, “it was Saudi Arabia, with its vast fortune and very real foreign threats, that altered the global course of political Islam. In doing so, it received the tacit approval of the United States.”⁵⁶ This role was accentuated even more after 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution deposed the Shah. We turn to these two events next.

Afghanistan

While the United States supported an assortment of Islamists from the 1950s, it was its backing of the Afghan Islamist holy warriors (mujahideen) from 1979 onward that would be decisive in projecting Islamism, particularly the radical wing, onto the international stage after the 1990s. For the United States, support for the mujahideen was a means to weaken its Cold War enemy, the Soviet Union. Thus, with the help of its allies in the region (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, and Pakistan) it pumped billions of dollars into the training and arming of the mujahideen.

In addition to the groups based in Afghanistan, the United States sought actively to build the numbers of the holy warriors in order to more effectively challenge the Soviet Union. Thus, the CIA undertook a program of recruitment and toured people like Osama bin Laden and Sheik Azzam (the spiritual leader of the mujahideen and the one of the founders of the Palestinian group Hamas).⁵⁷ Azzam also traveled the length and breadth of the United States, visiting twenty-six states.⁵⁸ The men recruited through such activity were then trained at various military locations in the United States.

Official training began under the Carter administration and included the training of CIA personnel, military soldiers, and Pakistani ISI operatives who would later train the holy warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵⁹ The trainers of the Afghan holy warriors passed on more than sixty deadly skills, such as how to stab an enemy from behind, how to strangle them, how to use karate chops to kill, how to use sophisticated timers, fuses, and explosives, how to use a remote control device to set off bombs, and techniques in psychological warfare.⁶⁰ The United States also supplied large quantities of arms such as C4 plastic explosives, long-range sniper rifles, wire-guided anti-tank missiles, and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.⁶¹

The main source of volunteers for the Afghan jihad were from the Arab world, and thousands of people who came to be known as the “Afghan Arabs” poured in from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and several other countries. Up to that point, militant Islamists in these countries had no program outside of isolated acts of urban terror. The Afghan war served to unite them, train them, and give their movement life.⁶²

As Fawaz Gerges writes,

In Afghanistan was assembled the first truly global army of Islamic warriors—the Afghan Arabs. Never before in modern times had so many Muslims from so many different lands speaking so many tongues journeyed to a Muslim country to fight against a common enemy—Egyptians, Saudis, Yemenis, Palestinians, Algerians, Sudanese, Iraqi Kurds, Kuwaitis, Turks, Jordanians, Syrians, Libyans, Tunisians, Moroccans, Lebanese, Pakistanis, Indians, Indonesians, Malaysians, and others.⁶³

For the first time, it seemed as if a global “community of believers” had come together to fight against infidel encroachment, thanks to the United States and its allies in the region.

When the Soviet Union retreated from Afghanistan in 1989, it marked a high point for the global Islamist movement, and it legitimized the extremist tactics of the militants in eyes of others who would look to them as a way forward. Their job complete in Afghanistan, the holy warriors now dispersed to other regions such as Bosnia, Kashmir, and elsewhere to carry on the holy war.⁶⁴ The former CIA asset bin Laden, in alliance with the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, formed al-Qaeda and turned the Afghan jihad into a global phenomenon.⁶⁵

Beyond al-Qaeda, many of the militants who had fought in Afghanistan returned home to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria, and elsewhere and, equipped with their CIA-ISI training and war experience, started to escalate violent tactics in these countries. Others moved and settled in Pakistan's tribal zones (as well in the Afghan mujahideen encampments) and began to train a new generation of jihadis. This next generation which came of age during a time when the university system had deteriorated were not as highly educated as the previous one. Olivier Roy refers to this group as the "lumpenintelligentsia," and argues that they are more prone to neo-fundamentalist views.⁶⁶ It is this group of people that would go on to carry out various attacks in Western nations, from France to the United States.⁶⁷

Another consequence of the Soviet-Afghan War is the emergence of the Taliban and various militant Pakistani Islamists. The Afghan War created a massive refugee crisis and three million Afghans were transplanted to Pakistan. Impoverished and displaced, the Afghan refugees sent their children to free schools (madrassas) based on the Deobandi tradition of Islam. These children lived in the madrassas and were cut off from their families and society in general, providing the ulama an excellent opportunity to brainwash them in the ideas of Deobandi Islam.⁶⁸ These Afghan children also mixed with Pakistani children of different ethnic origins and started to forge a universal Islamic identity. This generation of children then emerged as two factions: the Afghan Taliban and the Sunni extremist militias who not only carried their struggle into Kashmir but also massacred and harassed Shia in Pakistan. The Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), the ulama party associated with the Deobandis saw this as a way to advance their agenda.

With the backing of Benazir Bhutto's government in Pakistan, the Taliban began to take control of Afghanistan in 1994, and finally captured Kabul in 1996. Once in power, they applied the Deobandi philosophy not only to their own community, but to Afghanistan as a whole. While the various mujahideen groups in power in Afghanistan had already started to Islamize Afghan society, the Taliban took it to a new level.

Women were forced to wear the veil and were not allowed to take jobs; men had to grow beards and wear certain types of clothing; a "virtue/vice" police was set up to enforce their brand of Islamic morality; television, music, and movies were strictly forbidden. In short, the atmosphere inside a madrassa was reproduced in Afghanistan's cities and villages. Other than the enforcement of their religious dogma, a basic level of commerce, and warfare, the Taliban took little interest in anything else. They preferred the country to the city, and traditional ways to modernism. Despite this, the United States was more than happy to work with the Taliban in order to establish a pipeline to tap into oil and natural gas resources in the Caspian Sea.⁶⁹

In short, U.S. intervention into Afghanistan (and Pakistan) played no small role in unleashing various Islamist forces. The "Afghan Arabs" introduced more extreme discourses and tactics into the Islamist movement in various countries; some carried the holy war to other regions; the mujahids who stayed on would train a new generation of neo-fundamentalists; bin Laden would form al-Qaeda and set his sights on the West; and the Taliban and various Sunni Islamist groups in Pakistan would go on to attempt to Islamize the region.

Despite the crucial role played by the United States in fomenting the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, mainstream accounts of the new “terrorist menace” often elides this history. Instead, most accounts shine a spotlight on Iran, whose revolution in 1979 is seen as the source of all things Islamist. Yet, even here the United States had a part to play—by curtailing and thwarting the left, the United States helped create an ideological opening for the Islamists.

Iran

As mentioned above, Mossadegh, who came to power in the elections of 1951, nationalized Iran’s oil industry and dealt a blow to British petroleum interests. Initially, the United States saw Mossadegh as the means by which it could establish greater control over Iran’s oil resources and elbow Britain out. However, when Mossadegh rejected a plan to allow American oil companies into the country, the United States turned against him. The CIA organized a coup (known as “Operation Ajax”), relying on the support of the Islamist clergy, particularly Ayatollah Khomeini’s mentor Ayatollah Abolqassem Kashani, who could mobilize large numbers of people from Tehran’s slums against the secular nationalist Mossadegh.⁷⁰ Kashani received substantial sums of money from the CIA and had very close ties to them. It is this initial ground work laid by the CIA and Kashani that helped position Khomeini for the role he played in the 1979 revolution.

The Iranian Revolution was the product of deep discontent among workers, students, peasants, and traders (or *bazaaris*) against the U.S.-backed Shah. The left played a role in the uprisings in the military and well as in the student protests, but they failed to provide leadership for the movement as a whole for various reasons, including the part played by the United States in weakening the communists and other leftists. Iran’s working class, in particular the oil workers, provided the key muscle that brought the Shah down, but they were unable to play an independent role. This allowed Ayatollah Khomeini, over the course of two years, to maneuver between various factions and take power for the Islamic Republican Party.⁷¹

Khomeini as a Shia was able to accomplish something that no Sunni Islamist had managed to accomplish. He not only brought students, the middle class in the cities, and workers under his fold, but he also brought together the two classes that are inclined to gravitate to Islamism (discussed in greater detail below)—the urban poor and traders, as well as other devout sections of the middle class. Once firmly in power, his version of Shia Islam was then used to Islamize Iranian society, while all other interpretations were marginalized.

Firmly entrenched, Iran’s Islamic republic then began to challenge Saudi hegemony in the 1980s. The Iranian model was about a people’s Islam, and it put the words “Islam” and “revolution” together. The Saudi model, on the other hand, was a top-down approach based on the use of oil wealth to spread Islamism, with strict control being maintained at the top, particularly over the radical elements that were inclined to disrupt the status quo. These two competing strategies were on offer to Islamists around the region. While Iran downplayed Shiism in order to attract young Islamist intellectuals, Saudi Arabia emphasized Iran’s Shiism and even denounced the 1979 revolution as a vehicle for Persian nationalism.⁷²

Despite this conflict, many Islamists of both the Sunni and Shia sect were inspired by the Iranian Revolution. They looked to Iran as offering a model for how to depose a pro-Western leader and create an Islamic state.⁷³ To them, the Iranian Revolution was akin to the French Revolution or the Bolshevik Revolution. As one Islamist from the Sunni tradition put it, “By swiftly toppling the Shah of Iran, Khomeini boosted our morale... [H]e also mobilized young

Arab nationalists who were skeptical about the possibility of reestablishing the caliphate in the twentieth century.”⁷⁴

If the Iranian Revolution served as inspiration not only for Arab Islamists but also for nationalists, this was in no small part due to the internal weaknesses of Arab nationalism. While the United States had played an important role in stymieing secular nationalism and thwarting the left in Iran and elsewhere, the internal weaknesses of secular nationalism, as well as the various left parties, also played a part.

However, a final note on the impact of continued imperial intervention is in order. Despite the end of formal colonialism, the West has continued its dominance over the Middle East and elsewhere through pliant local rulers. From Egypt and the Gulf monarchies to Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States continues to exercise control over nations that produce or house gateways for the transport of oil through alliances with corrupt leaders who are unaccountable to their people. This dynamic, as well as U.S. support for Israel, fuels anti-imperialist sentiment, and lacking a viable left, the Islamists have been able to benefit from this anger.

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1. A search on Amazon.com of “Islam” will reveal more than a hundred books written since 2001.
 2. For a thorough critique of culturalist tendencies on the left and the right, see: Aijaz Ahmad, “Islam, Islamisms and the West,” in *Socialist Register 2008: Global Flashpoints: Reactions to Imperialism and Neoliberalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).
 3. Willard Oxtoby and Alan Segal, eds., *A Concise Introduction to World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 200.
 4. Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic*, September 1990, 10.
 5. *Ibid.*, 11.
 6. *Ibid.*, 9.
 7. *Ibid.*, 9.
 8. Quoted in Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 23.
 9. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 217.
 10. Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 13–14.
 11. Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads, and Modernity* (New York: Verso, 2003), 29.
 12. Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. and Lawrence Davidson, *A Concise History of the Middle East* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2006), see Chapter 3.
 13. Some scholars argue that during the reign of the first four descendents of Muhammad, the “righteously guided” caliphs’ religious and political power was synonymous. Yet, Mohammed Ayoob suggests that even during this era, it was politics that drove religious war. See Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 11.
 14. Roy, *Failure*, 14.
 15. Ayoob, *Many Faces*, 5.
 16. *Ibid.*, 11.
 17. Goldschmidt and Davidson, *Concise History*, 108-9.

18. Roy, *Failure*, 29.
19. Ayoob, *Many Faces*, 11.
20. Goldschmidt and Davidson, *Concise History*, 114.
21. Ayoob, *Many Faces*, 5.
22. *Ibid.*, 13.
23. Ayoob explains the differences between the Christian and Muslim experience as follows: the “religious class [in Islam] did not pose the sort of challenge to temporal authority that the religious hierarchy presided over by the pope did to emperors and kind in medieval and early modern Europe. The dispersal of religious authority in Islam therefore normally prevented a direct clash between temporal and religious power, as happened in medieval Christendom...It also helped preclude the establishment of a single orthodoxy that, in alliance with the state, could suppress all dissenting tendencies and oppress their followers, as happened in Christian Europe during the medieval and early modern periods. Wars of religion and persecution of ‘heretical’ sects were therefore infrequent in Islamdom in contrast to Christendom. At the same time, it promoted the creation of distinct religious and political spheres that by and large respected each other’s autonomy.” (13).
24. John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (third edition) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 52.
25. Goldschmidt and Davidson, *Concise History*, 173–74.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, 228.
28. Maxime Rodinson, *The Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 97.
29. Esposito, *Islamic Threat*, 49.
30. Roy, *Failure*, 33.
31. *Ibid.* See also Joel Beinin and Joe Stork, “On the Modernity, Historical Specificity, and International Context of Political Islam,” in *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), 5–6.
32. Roy, *Failure*, 33. Salafist thought has been influential in various Sunni Islamist circles. The connections with Wahhabism are close, particularly since both traditions draw on the teachings of a fourteenth century ulama named Ibn Taymiyya. See Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 219–20. Today, the Wahhabis prefer to be called Salafis. See Fawaz Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt Books, 2006), 106. As an aside, let us note that not all Wahhabi’s are radicals. While Saudi Arabia is a Wahhabi nation, only a small subset are jihadi extremists. The Wahhabi-Salafi jihadis who have their base of operations in the tribal areas of Pakistan offer a literal and even stricter interpretation of Wahhabi/Salafi doctrine.
33. Kepel, *Jihad*, 34. In the 1920s, Mawdudi, a modern Islamist, argued for the formation of an Islamic state in all of historic India. This was in contrast to the Muslim nationalist leaders who called for a “Muslim state,” one that might include secular spaces. Mawdudi rejected nationalism and secularism, seeing them as Western ideas that were impious and therefore unacceptable. In his book *Jihad in Islam*, published in the 1920s, he called for an Islamic state based on Sharia law where all of society would be run based on Islamic rule. He also argued that to achieve this, political struggle or Jihad was vital. He founded the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) to carry out this struggle (see Kepel, *Jihad*, 34). The JI continues to exist as a political party of the devout middle classes in Pakistan.
34. Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil’s Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 20. While there are many connections between the various Islamist forces that Dreyfuss points out

well, each of these currents also have their own histories. In India, for instance, after the last Muslim ruler was deposed by the British in 1857, Muslims found themselves in a minority in a country dominated by Hindus. The Deobandi Islamic movement came into being shortly after in 1867 as a response to this situation. It was founded as a means to provide Muslims in the Indian subcontinent with a set of rules to live by in order to preserve Islam in a country where Muslims were a minority. Toward this end, the Deobandi's trained a core of ulama to issue fatwas, or legal opinions, to make sure that Muslims in India conformed to their very rigorous and conservative interpretation of Islam (Kepel, *Jihad*, 223). In this, the Deobandis are very similar to the Wahhabis and would in the later part of the twentieth century establish close ties with them in the context of U.S.-sponsored activities in Pakistan (Kepel, *Jihad*, 57–58).

35. Rodinson, *Arabs*, 100–101
36. *Ibid.*, 100. See also Walter Laqueur, *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East* (New York: Praeger, 1956), 163. Laqueur discusses popular discontent with feudal landowners and corrupt regimes in Lebanon. The Lebanese Communist Party was in power at this time (after 1954). No doubt they influenced the Baath Party's shift leftward. Similarly, student struggles in Egypt in 1952–55 (Communist-led) and workers' strikes must have impacted Nasser (see Laqueur, 54–57).
37. John Esposito and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5.
38. Laqueur, *Communism and Nationalism*, 6.
39. *Ibid.*, 17.
40. Rodinson, *Arabs*, 111.
41. In India, for instance, the Hindu extremists began to gain ground in the political vacuum created by the failure of progressive nationalism and its inability to deliver on its promises. Coupled with the ravages of liberalization, the Hindu right came to hold political power and to consequently push through a program of “Hindutva,” i.e. the Hinduization of society. In the industrialized West, the United States saw the rise of a Christian fundamentalist movement that began to impact mainstream politics at least since the late 1970s. Gaining momentum as a backlash against the progressive movements of the 1960s, the fundamentalists succeeded over the course of a few decades in shifting the terms of debate on most social issues to the right. In short, the entry of religion into politics is not unique to countries where Islam is the dominant religion.
42. See Chapter 4 of Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game*.
43. Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game*, 97–104.
44. Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game*, 125.
45. Joyce Battle, “U.S. Propaganda in the Middle East—The Early Cold War Version,” National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 78, Dec 13, 2002. Available online at the George Washington University National Security Archive database, 7.
46. Quoted in Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game*, 121.
47. Nathan Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Saud, and Making of U.S.-Saudi Relations* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2002), 125–26.
48. *Ibid.*, 95.
49. Rachel Bronson, *Thicker than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 74.
50. See Bronson, *Thicker than Oil*. Also see Asad AbuKhalil, *The Battle for Saudi Arabia: Royalty, Fundamentalism, and Global Power* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

51. See Kepel, *Jihad*, Chapter 3. See also Bronson, *Thicker than Oil*, and AbuKhalil, *Battle for Saudi Arabia*.
52. See Chapter 7 of Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game*.
53. *Ibid.*, 172.
54. *Ibid.*, 173. It should be noted that neoliberal privatization measures, known as *Infitah*, were also implemented in Egypt starting in the early 1970s under Anwar Sadat. Perhaps Hezbollah is among the few exceptions when it comes to embracing neoliberalism. It is one of the few parties that has adopted a more Keynesian welfare state approach to economic questions. See Niciolas Qualander, "'The Savage Anomaly' of the Islamic Movement," *International Viewpoint*, <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1169>.
55. Kepel, *Jihad*, pp. 61–62.
56. Bronson, *Thicker than Oil*, 11.
57. Mamdani, *Good Muslim*, 128 and 135.
58. John Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 70.
59. *Ibid.*, 70–2.
60. *Ibid.*, 71–73.
61. Steve Coll, "Anatomy of a Victory: CIA's Covert Afghan War," *Washington Post*, July 19, 1992.
62. Mamdani, *Good Muslim*, 130.
63. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist*, 111.
64. Kepel, *Jihad*, 10.
65. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist*, 122–23.
66. Roy, *Failure*, 50–51. Those who set up camp in Pakistan acquired a unique brand of Islamism known as Jihadi Salafism, which emerged out the circumstances in which they lived. Based in various tribal regions cut off from urban centers and inured to incessant conflict, this group espoused a new Islamist doctrine whose purpose was first and foremost to justify and rationalize their existence. They developed a very literal interpretation of Salafism, and argued that people needed to live in the ways of the ancestors. The Jihadi Salafists are fundamentalists in the true sense of the term. As such, they were opposed to compromise of any sort and thus criticized the Salafi-Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia who, being more moderate, were viewed by the Jihadis as sellouts (Kepel, *Jihad*, 219–22).
67. Kepel, *Jihad*, 218–19.
68. *Ibid.*, 225.
69. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
70. *Ibid.*, 113–16.
71. For more about the dynamics of the Iranian Revolution, read Maryam Poya, "Iran 1979: Long Live Revolution...Long Live Islam?" in *Revolutionary Rehearsals*, Colin Barker, ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2002); Saman Sepehri, "The Iranian Revolution," *International Socialist Review* 9, August–September 2000.
72. Kepel, *Jihad*, 120–21.
73. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist*, 84.
74. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 84.

[Marxism](#)

Political Islam: A Marxist analysis

By [Deepa Kumar](#)

[Issue #78](#)

18

THE REVOLUTIONS and mass protests that spread across North Africa and the Middle East are, at their core, democratic, secular, and (largely, though not exclusively) peaceful. These movements have confounded many a Western commentator rooted in Orientalist views of Muslim majority countries. Contrary to their propaganda, these movements are not clamoring for an Islamic state, and it is not the parties of political Islam that have played a key leadership role. Rather, the Islamists have been one among several forces, including secular, democratic, liberal and leftist groups and coalitions, that have participated in actions against U.S.-backed regimes; demonstrating quite clearly the plurality of political visions in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere.

Part one of this article showed how traditions of secularism and the separation of religion and politics have long been a part of the political culture of the “Muslim world.” It also argued that the rise of political Islam is historically new and contingent upon various contemporary factors. As laid out in part one, the first of these factors is the part played by the West, and the United States in particular, in fomenting Islamic fundamentalism as a means to thwart radical secular nationalism and communism. Part two examines the other conditions that enabled the parties of political Islam to grow.

The failure of secular nationalism

The rise of radical secular nationalism in the post–Second World War period marked a progressive turn in anti-imperialist politics in colonized nations. From Indonesia to Algeria, a new generation of secular-minded political leaders at the head of popular anti-colonial movements swept aside the old order and introduced a series of reforms. However, not all Muslim majority countries experienced similar developments. This trend appears in Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia, Algeria, and Pakistan, but not in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, for instance. In the latter, secular nationalist and leftist forces, to the extent that they existed (as in Yemen and to a lesser degree in Saudi Arabia) were pushed back by Western-backed monarchs. Nevertheless, this development was highlighted in the previous article in order to point to the fact that secularism was arrived at and developed in various Muslim majority countries, albeit in ways different from the European experience. Here we turn to the failure and decline of these movements.

In a nutshell, secular nationalism was unable to realize the radical economic and political promises made to its polities. The case of Egypt illustrates this point vividly. In 1952, Nasser and a secret association known as the “Free Officers,” following on the backs of workers strikes and student uprisings (as well as region-wide anger over the Palestinian issue), led a rebellion against King Farouk and deposed him. Once in power, they initiated a series of reforms that in essence destroyed the old system that was dominated by feudalism and bourgeois mercantilism.¹ They undertook a program of agricultural reform, industrialization, and the nationalization of various sectors of the economy; they abolished the constitutional

monarchy and established a republic, but concentrated power in their own hands. They also passed pro-labor laws in response to the strikes and demonstrations of the early 1950s. Perhaps most importantly, the Nasserists were able to finally rid Egyptian society of British control; the culmination of these efforts was the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. When Nasser defeated British, French, and Israeli opposition to the nationalization of the Suez (with the support of the United States and the Soviet Union), he became a regional hero, and Nasserism from then on was viewed as a model for emulation in the rest of the Arab world.

In 1957, Nasser called for the establishment of a “socialist” order in Egypt. What he meant by socialism was unclear and it varied depending on the context in which he spoke about it.² In practice, Nasser, who emerged from the middle classes, led a program that curbed the power of large capital through nationalizations and concentrated economic planning in the state.³ Arab socialism in practice was state capitalism; it involved state planning combined with authoritarian control and the use of repression to quell opposition. Politically, Nasserism sought to unify and regroup Arab territories into one nation and overturn the arbitrary divisions imposed by the allied powers after the First World War. The principal enemy was imperialism, particularly U.S. imperialism, which emerged as the dominant power in the Middle East after the war. While Nasser sought military and financial support from the Soviet Union, he was by no means a stooge of Soviet interests. Nasser’s main counterpart in the East was the Arab Baath Socialist Party of Syria and its various branches in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. These parties had a similar orientation and class base, but they never achieved the same prominence as Nasserism. Other examples of secular nationalism in North Africa and South Asia include the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria, Sukarno in Indonesia, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in Pakistan.

However, postwar secular nationalism, despite its radical promises, was ultimately a middle-class ideology that served the interests of this class. State capitalist measures, while moderately successful for a period, were unable to seriously address class inequalities and produce real economic change. Furthermore, various countries would go into crises in the 1970s that state capitalist methods were unable to resolve. The result was increased unemployment and growing class inequality—conditions that were only exacerbated with the introduction of neoliberal reforms.

On the political front, Israel’s defeat of neighboring countries in 1967, annexing their territories in a matter of six days, dealt a deathblow to the political legitimacy of Arab nationalism. As the French Marxist Maxime Rodinson puts it,

Both Nasserism and Ba’thism failed to achieve Arab unity and to resolve the problem of Israel and the Palestinians. Nowhere was economic performance brilliant, and Nasser’s Egypt in particular sank into destitution and cultural decline. The new classes in power were often painfully reminiscent of the old. The June 1967 fiasco raised the question of the adequacy of old ideas for solving the pressing problems of the day. Every major problem, every failure, every crisis that arose...led to feelings that something was lacking in nationalist ideology, that other important ideologies should be looked to as sources of fresh ideas.⁴

The ideological vacuum created by the collapse of secular nationalism and the search for “fresh ideas” created an opening for the Islamists. While the far left could have occupied this vacuum, as the following section will show, they squandered their credibility and thereby ceded ground to the Islamists.

Again Egypt demonstrates this dynamic well. At about the same time that the economy began to decline, Islamic Associations (*Jamaat Islamiya*) started to emerge in student circles in the main cities. The regime of Anwar Sadat, helped nurture and support the development of these groups, in an attempt to make a sharp turn away from the secularist and statist policies of the previous period. These associations recruited students who were growing increasingly disillusioned with left politics, and trained them in the “pure Islamic life” at summer camps. In order to gain broad support in a climate where the left still had influence, they offered what they called “Islamic solutions” to the crisis facing Egyptian universities. For instance, students had to deal on a daily basis with an inefficient and overcrowded transportation system. For women, this was particularly difficult as they were often harassed in these situations.

The “Islamic” solution was to transport women in minibuses brought explicitly for this purpose. Once this alternative mode of transport became popular, however, the Islamists restricted this service to only those women who wore the veil. The privatization of transport was thus a way of responding “Islamically” to a social problem, and of placing women students in a situation where they had few choices but to adopt the veil. A similar approach was used with dress and gender segregation.⁵ It was a combination of social services and moral instruction that advanced the agenda of the Islamic Associations. Soon chants of “Democracy” began to clash with “Allahu Akbar” (God is Great) at student demonstrations. In a matter of a few years, the Islamists were dominant on campuses and the left were forced into hiding.⁶

A similar dynamic can be seen in other nations where secular nationalism and the left lost political credibility, albeit at different points. Thus, it was only in the late 1980s and 1990s that Hamas was able to successfully challenge Palestine Liberation Organization dominance in Palestine. Yet, it was not a foregone conclusion that Islamists would occupy a vacuum created by the collapse of secular nationalism. If there was a political alternative to the left capable of leading working class struggles, it was the various Communist Parties (CPs) in the region.

The failure of the Communist Parties

In the twenty years after the Second World War, mass movements swept the Middle East and North Africa. In three countries—Egypt, Iran, and Iraq—the working classes played an important role in the mass mobilizations. In the context of rising class struggles, religious and sectarian divisions were sidelined, and the parties of political Islam like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood saw their influence wane.⁷ Additionally, in countries like Lebanon, Syria, and Sudan, the CPs played an important role in leading student, peasant, and workers struggles.⁸

Yet, despite these successes, the CPs were severely hampered by their adherence to Stalinist politics.⁹ They vacillated back and forth on various important questions. When the Soviet Union declared support for the United Nations partition plan for Palestine, despite massive popular opposition to this plan in the Arab world, the CPs went along with it. Later when the Soviet Union changed its position and turned against Israel, the CPs simply followed suit. They would also shift between support for and opposition to nationalist parties as Soviet policies changed. After the Second World War, and with the onset of the Cold War, the Soviet Union advised the Arab Communist Parties to sever popular front alliances with bourgeois nationalist groups and to assert their independence. In practice, this meant opposition to radical Arab nationalism, which had immense popularity among the population. The CPs took a stance against Nasserism and Baathism.¹⁰ In Algeria, the CP supported the integration of the

Algerian masses into French life, which put them on the opposite side of the struggle for national liberation led by the FLN.¹¹

In the 1960s, they once again switched their position to accommodate Soviet directives. The CPs of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan issued a joint statement in 1964 calling for “closer unity and cooperation between all the patriotic and democratic trends and...all the national forces of the Arab liberation movement.”¹² In practice, this meant that the Syrian CP declared the Baath Party one of the “basic revolutionary forces.” They then entered the regime and gave up all political independence. Similarly, the Iraqi Communist Party aligned itself with the Baath Party and by association the war against the Kurds and the repression of the Shia.¹³ All of these disastrous shifts delegitimized the CPs in the eyes of people who had once turned to them for leadership. Additionally, the parties’ uncritical support for various “revolutionary” nationalist parties and regimes meant that when radical nationalism went into decline, the CPs too suffered a loss of credibility. As Phil Marshall notes, “[b]y the late 1960s communist strategy had evacuated the Middle East of any coherent secular alternative to nationalism—and had done so at a time when the region was about to move into a period of increased instability. This left an increasingly disillusioned population without a point of reference for change and opened a political space which religious activism soon started to occupy.”¹⁴

Economic crisis and the class basis of Islamism

In addition to the political crisis that secular nationalism faced, the 1970s saw the emergence of economic crises that state capitalist economic systems were unable to deal with effectively. Additionally, the turn to neoliberalism and the institution of International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment programs meant that various states were no longer able to deal with social welfare needs. It is here that Islamist organizations with their vast charitable networks were able to make inroads. The dynamic can be understood as follows:

As a result of structural adjustment, state capacity to co-opt oppositional movements declined and services were increasingly restricted to urban middle class and elite areas. Income distributions polarized. Structural adjustment meant that states were unable to provide previously established levels of services or to ensure adequate supplies of commodities.... The political and moral vacuum opened up great opportunities that were seized by Islamists, who established a social base by offering services that the various states have failed to provide.¹⁵

The main recruits to Islamism in the early 1970s were urban educated youth. Between 1955 and 1970, population growth in the Muslim world approached 50 percent.¹⁶ By 1975, with urbanization and literacy growing steadily, 60 percent of the population was under the age of twenty-four. While this group, which hailed from families that had recently moved to the cities, had access to education thanks to the reforms instituted by the secular nationalists, they had few opportunities for economic advancement. In some cases, states offered jobs to these new graduates and were able to absorb a section of them into roles as state bureaucrats. Yet, as stated above, even this avenue became tenuous as IMF policies of liberalization and government cuts instituted in countries such as Egypt and Algeria lowered salaries for the intellectual bureaucrat, who then had to find a second job as a taxi driver or night watchman at an international hotel to survive.¹⁷

The frustration and political discontent that grew from this situation then led these students toward Islamist ideologies. While many of them had been attracted to nationalism and communism, the failure of these ideologies combined with economic hardship pushed them in

the direction of Islamism. A sizable number of these young intellectuals, educated in government schools following a Westernized curriculum, came from the sciences (engineering in particular) or from teachers' training schools.¹⁸ The typical Islamist of this era was an engineer born sometime in the 1950s whose parents were from the country.¹⁹ Gulbadin Hikmatyar, the leader of an ultraconservative faction of the Afghan mujahideen, was trained as an engineer; Hacene Hashani, the spokesperson for the Algerian Islamic Salvation Movement (FIS) in 1991, was an oil engineer; and Ayman al-Zawahari of al-Qaeda was trained as a medical doctor.

As such this intellectual leadership held a modern urban worldview. Thus, the rise of contemporary political Islam is not the reemergence of a medieval clergy crusading against modernity, but rather a modern urban phenomenon born of the crises created by capitalism.²⁰ As Chris Harman puts it, "Islamism has arisen in societies traumatized by the impact of capitalism—first in the form of external conquest by imperialism and then, increasingly, by the transformation of internal social relations accompanying the rise of a local capitalist class and the formation of an independent state."²¹

If the urban, educated youth became the cadre base of the newly emerging Islamist movement, other classes that were threatened by capitalist modernization also drifted towards Islamism. Chief among them is the devout section of the middle class who is another mainstay of the Islamist movement. One section of this middle-class bloc consists of the descendants of the mercantile classes of the bazaars and souks, another of the newly wealthy professionals, flush with money from jobs held in various oil-producing countries.²² The international Islamic banking and financial system spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, discussed above, was able to finance and promote the interests of this middle-class base.

If urban-educated youth and the devout middle class are the main forces behind Islamism, other classes also support them. At times, in countries like Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan, these two classes have received support and funding from landowning classes whose power was diminished by the nationalists.²³ At times, they have also had the backing of the big bourgeoisie.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Islamists made headway among yet another class—the very poor. This includes people who are either declassed refugees, urban slum-dwellers, or people who are historically oppressed and exploited due to their religion. For instance, Hamas has recruited heavily from the refugee camps created by Israel, and while it has the support of business people, the middle class, merchants and the wealthy, its leadership and cadre are largely drawn from the refugee camps.²⁴ This is true too of Hezbollah, whose mainstay is the Shia poor who live in the outskirts of big cities like Beirut in what is known as the "belt of misery." Similarly, the Sadrists in Iraq, both in the 1990s and today, draw much of their support and muscle from the slums of Sadr City.

The devout middle class, which sometimes has the backing of other sections of society, typically tends to be more conservative in its orientation and constitutes the "moderate" Islamist wing. While they share the vision of creating an Islamic state, they prefer to do so under conditions of social stability that advance their economic interests. The urban youth, on the other hand, displaced from the middle class due to a lack of opportunity, tend to be open to more confrontational and violent tactics; they constitute the "radical" wing of the Islamist movement. At times, these two groups have cooperated with each other, and at other times they have gone their separate ways.

Typically, the moderates advocate an Islamization of society from the bottom up through the use of strategies such as preaching and the establishment of social and charitable networks. They also seek to pressure political leaders and enter into political alliances to promote Islamization from the top. They are sometimes open to revolt, but only when all peaceful methods of protest have been exhausted. The radicals, however, advocate the concept of revolution, that is, the forceful overthrow of the existing political regime and its replacement by a radically different system.²⁵ At times, those who begin as moderates get radicalized in the context of political persecution. Thus, Sayyid Qutb, an influential Islamist theoretician who belonged to the moderate Muslim Brotherhood, took a radical turn in 1954 after he was imprisoned and tortured by Nasser's government.

These vacillations are typical of movements led by the petty bourgeoisie because, as a class, it lacks the social weight to bring about effective political and economic changes. Placed in a context of economic crisis, the Islamists often make vague anticapitalist appeals against poverty and greed, and combine it with attacks on "Western values" and imperialism. In reality, however, this is not anticapitalist ideology. With few exceptions, Islamists are in practice strong advocates of capitalism and neoliberalism and therefore cannot offer real solutions to the people who turn to them as a political alternative.

In sum, the confluence of several political and economic developments in the late 1960s and early 1970s laid the basis for the growth of political Islam. These include, first, the part played by imperialist nations, particularly the United States, in bolstering the parties of political Islam; second, the failure of secular nationalist movements, and the consequent inability of Stalinist parties to offer an effective alternative; and third, economic crises in various countries that state capitalist methods were unable to resolve and which neoliberalism exacerbated. All of these factors came together at various points and helped to propel Islamism onto the world stage.

Political Islam: Mixed fortunes

Over the last three decades of the twentieth century and into the new millennium, the parties of political Islam have been able to advance and position themselves as players on the political arena. Both the moderate and the radical wings have seen successes, yet they have also experienced setbacks and defeats. For instance, after the Afghan mujahideen defeated the Soviets in 1989, the politics of radical, violent Islamism gained legitimacy. Yet, when the Afghan Arabs returned to their home countries and carried out a program of violence such as in Algeria and Egypt in the 1990s, their credibility declined considerably in both contexts.

Similarly, the electoral approach suffered a set back in 1992 when the FIS in Algeria was not permitted to govern after winning elections. This pattern continued with the Turkish case in 1997, when the Islamists were forced from power by the army. Yet, in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) was able to win elections and come to power. Similarly, Hamas achieved an electoral victory in 2006.

This pattern of ascendance and decline is likely to continue until a left alternative can present itself and arrest this dynamic. The Islamists are able to tap into the real anxieties and economic insecurities faced by the vast majority of people. Their charitable networks, funded by petrodollars, offer a level of relief to those whose lives are devastated by neoliberalism and imperialism. Yet, they have no real solutions to the crises endemic to capitalism. Once in positions of power, they have floundered and have often been unable to prevent the outbreak of violence and chaos by the more radical elements bent of ridding their societies of

“impious” influences. Their puritanical laws and edicts have alienated the very people who had once supported them, paving the way for their decline.

Political movements led by the middle classes cannot offer real solutions to the problems faced by the vast majority. As Chris Harman argues,

Islamism, then, both mobilizes popular bitterness and paralyzes it; both builds up people’s feelings that something must be done and directs those feelings into blind alleys; both destabilizes the state and limits the real struggle against the state. The contradictory character of Islamism follows from the class base of its core cadres. The petty bourgeoisie as a class cannot follow a consistent, independent policy of its own. This has always been true of the traditional petty bourgeoisie—the small shopkeepers, traders and self-employed professionals. They have always been caught between a conservative hankering for security that looks to the past and a hope that they individually will gain from radical change. It is just as true of the impoverished new middle class—or the even more impoverished would-be new middle class of unemployed ex-students—in the less economically advanced countries today.²⁶

These contradictions were played out in Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Sudan, and elsewhere, revealing the bankruptcy of Islamist politics. Yet, at the same as Islamists in these countries started to discredit themselves, in others such as Lebanon, occupied Palestine, and Iraq, the Islamists began a process of ascendancy. In short, from the 1990s to the present, we have seen a contradictory dynamic of decline and ascendance. This dynamic will continue into the future until such a point when a real left-wing political alternative is built.

The recent revolutions and mass mobilizations sweeping the Middle East and North Africa have strengthened the existing left and created the conditions under which such a viable new left can be born. These struggles have completely shattered the radical Islamist argument that acts of terror by individuals and small cells is necessary to rid Muslim societies of pro-imperial leaders and have instead put on the map a different model for social change. Egypt and Tunisia have shown that mass, nonsectarian rallies and demonstrations can succeed in toppling dictators. At the same time, the practice of the Muslim Brotherhood since the fall of Mubarak in Egypt—its backing of the army, which seeks to put the genie of revolution back into its bottle, and its opposition to new protests to ensure the fulfillment of the revolution’s goals—reveals better than any example today the limitations of political Islam. (See Mostafa Omar’s article in the current issue of the *ISR*.)

In the coming months and years, a new left will undoubtedly begin to emerge, as it has already begun to emerge in Egypt. However, the Islamists will continue to be players on the political stage; it is therefore necessary to have a method by which to access these parties and their actions.

Imperialism, the left, and political Islam

While the shape and form of imperialism has changed since the early twentieth century, powerful nations led by the United States still assert their domination around the globe. They do so economically through institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, or World Trade Organization, politically through pliant local rulers, and militarily through the occupations of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine (not to mention the hundreds of U.S. bases scattered around the world). In this context, Marxists should take a principled position against imperialism and must support the right of oppressed nations to self-determination.

In concrete terms, this solidarity with anti-imperialist forces means *on some occasions* offering critical support to the parties leading these struggles. When organized against imperialism and oppression, Islamists sometimes deserve the support, albeit critical and conditional support, of the left. Hezbollah's resistance to Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006 was one such moment. Such resistance should be defended on the grounds of the right of nations to self-determination. The U.S.-backed invasion of Lebanon was an act of imperialist aggression that would have advanced the U.S./Israel agenda. Hezbollah, widely supported by Lebanese of all religious backgrounds, dealt a blow to this agenda when it militarily pushed back the Israel Defense Forces. This is a step forward not only because it upholds self-determination, but also because any struggle that weakens the Zionist colonial enterprise and by extension the United States—the world's biggest, best-armed, and most violent imperialist power—is a victory for ordinary people around the region, and around the world. This does not, however, mean that the left is obliged to support Hezbollah in its wrangling for political power, such as its military operation in Beirut in May 2008. While we should defend their right to hold on to their arms against a U.S.-backed puppet regime and Israel, and their right to contest elections and demand modifications to Lebanon's confessional political system, we may not support their particular tactics to realize these goals, and we should not paper over their reactionary views on women, gays, and lesbians.

Similarly, Hamas's struggle against Zionism is worthy of support, especially when it has the backing of the Palestinian people. This flows from an understanding that the resistance of a colonized people, no matter what form it takes, should be supported, particularly when left alternatives have discredited themselves (popular support for Hamas rose only in conjunction with the betrayals of the secular left). Furthermore, the Hamas of 1987 is not the same organization today. It has gone through many shifts in response to the day-to-day challenges of fighting Zionism and imperialism. One of these shifts is the downplaying of its Islamist ambitions and a corresponding emphasis on its nationalist politics. Writing in 2000, Khaled Hroub, one of the movement's closest political observers would note:

Hamas' doctrinal discourse has diminished in intensity since the mid 1990s. And references to its charter [its 1987 founding document] by its leaders have been made rarely, if at all. The literature, statements, and symbols used by Hamas have come to focus more and more on the idea that the core problem is the multidimensional issue of usurpation of Palestinian land and the basic question is how to end the occupation. The notion of liberating Palestine has assumed greater importance than the general Islamic aspect.²⁷

By 2006, and with the victory of Hamas in the January elections, this trajectory had reached such a level that Hroub and other commentators genuinely questioned whether the movement was the same as that begun in the late 1980s. This does not mean, however, that Hamas has abandoned its reactionary politics. While it ran women candidates in the 2006 elections, it still believes in sex segregation as well as archaic notions such as women's place being in the home. The left should not minimize these differences. In short, a concrete analysis of the politics and strategies of Islamist organizations are necessary before a position of support or denunciation can be pronounced.²⁸

Additionally, the left should uphold basic democratic rights and support Hamas's right to take political power after having been elected by the Palestinian people in free and fair elections. Consequently, we should stand opposed to U.S. and Israeli efforts to isolate them and collectively punish the people of Gaza. Part of the equation is also the consideration that allowing Hamas to rule unhindered would show that it, like other Islamist parties in power, would not really have a solution to the problems faced by the Palestinian people. This vacuum

could then potentially be filled by a secular left committed to more effective strategies for liberation that linked the Palestinian struggle with those of Arab workers and oppressed throughout the region, regardless of religious affiliation.

In Iraq, the right of Iraqis to resist U.S. imperialism in any way they see fit should be defended. This does not, however, mean support for the forces and groups fighting on the ground at all times. During the early stages of the resistance, Shia and Sunni were both involved in the struggle, and the possibility of a united national liberation movement had potential. The high point of this united struggle was the solidarity shown by the Shia when Sunni fighters were attacked in Fallujah. Until 2005, Moktada al-Sadr had the support of sections of the Sunni population, and the beginnings of a genuine nonsectarian national liberation struggle existed in Iraq.²⁹ After that, however, the situation degenerated and sectarianism became rife. All the forces involved in the resistance mercilessly slaughtered and displaced innocent civilians. The Sunni forces also began to collaborate with the United States through the so-called “Awakening Councils.” In such a situation, where the resistance has disintegrated into sectarian violence and deal-making with imperialism, it would be wrong to offer support to these forces. After 2008, many groups, including Sadr’s Mahdi army, went underground. Sadr reemerged in Iraq in 2011 to win credibility for his party in mainstream politics. However, the possibilities for the birth of a genuine national liberation struggle that includes Shia, Sunni and Kurds, and that can rout the remaining U.S. troops and establish an Iraq independent of U.S. dominance, seem unlikely in the near future.

The same is true of Afghanistan. We must support the right of the Afghan people for self-determination, and consequently we are unalterably opposed to the U.S. occupation. However, the Taliban who are leading the struggle against the U.S./NATO occupation are neither a genuine national liberation movement nor an anti-imperialist force. Based among the Pashtuns, who constitute about 40 percent of Afghanistan’s population, the Taliban is a highly sectarian organization that has little appeal beyond this ethnic group. Their narrow and rigid interpretation of Islam, which favors Pashtun cultural practices, has little to offer the Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and other ethnic minorities. In fact, non-Pashtuns seem to prefer the United States to the Taliban.³⁰ Thus, the prospect of the Taliban building a genuine national liberation struggle that brings together all the people of Afghanistan is extremely unlikely.

Even among the Pashtuns there was a generalized discontent toward the Taliban’s reactionary politics, so much so that this section of Afghan society also welcomed the United States at the start of the 2001 war. However, the destruction and lawlessness created by the occupiers and their allies the Northern Alliance has created the conditions where Pashtun farmers and displaced rural workers started to turn to the Taliban. Today’s Taliban has a different rank and file makeup from the forces that emerged from the Afghan-Soviet war. Yet, its politics still remain reactionary.

The Taliban is also not a principled anti-imperialist force. In addition to its willingness to negotiate with the United States in the 1990s, the Taliban has close ties to Pakistan and can act as a conduit of Pakistani influence in Afghanistan. As discussed earlier, Pakistan nurtured and cultivated the Taliban, and, even today, Pakistan’s military intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence, maintains strong ties with the Afghan Taliban.³¹ In a region destroyed by three decades of war and civil war, with an economy dominated by opium production and sale and negligible industry, the political forces that come into being inevitably enact the agendas of greater powers. The Northern Alliance is backed by India and the United States, and the Taliban was and continues to be Pakistan’s entry into Afghan politics. In short, it does

not represent the hopes of the Afghan people for national liberation. For all these reasons, socialists have little reason to offer support, even of a critical kind, to the Taliban.

In general, Islamists might at times fight against imperialism, but they are not principled anti-imperialists. If we look for historical examples we can find cases where the Islamists have organized against imperialism and where they have collaborated with imperial powers. For instance, a leading figure in the 1930s revolt against British control over Palestine was the radical Sunni clergyman Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, and the rebellion gave momentum to the radical Islamists.³² The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, despite their original aim to be a non-political group, took an anti-imperialist stance and organized against the British. Similarly, Khomeini at the head of the revolution that deposed the U.S.-backed Shah, dealt a blow to U.S. power in the region after 1979. In other words, Islamic fundamentalists sometimes find themselves in situations where they have to organize against imperial powers.

At the same time, however, we also find instances of collaboration and cooperation with colonial powers. For example, Said Ramadan who was instrumental in building Muslim Brotherhood branches from North Africa to South Asia, struck a series of deals with the West. He is even believed to have been a U.S. agent.³³ Khomeini, who famously denounced the United States as the “great Satan,” took part in the CIA orchestrated demonstrations in the 1950s against Mohammad Mossadegh.³⁴ When the United States sent troops to Lebanon in 1958, and Britain to Jordan, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood joined in on their side to help crush the nationalist uprising in both countries. In short, we often find that Islamist groups are self-serving entities that are not principled anti-imperialists. We should therefore not make the opposite mistake of offering support to all Islamists at all times. Instead, a concrete historical analysis and a case by case assessment is necessary to determine when to offer critical support to the parties of political Islam.

Conclusion

Today, the ravages of imperialism and neoliberalism are plain to see. While tens of thousands have lost their lives in the U.S.-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, millions more suffer under the daily depredations of the free market. But there is a major reconfiguration of forces taking place in the region. Secular nationalism, with its considerable mass appeal, was the main driving force of change in the area in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s, there was a concerted effort by the Arab regimes to stabilize the region and part of that effort lay in supporting “Islamist” forces against secular nationalism and the left.

The revolts of the past several months seem to indicate a break with the status quo of the last two or three decades. The mass movements that have developed across the region are aimed against the dictators that have come to rule with impunity. They also are rebellions against the political and economic system that has become known as neoliberalism. These revolts have raised fundamental questions about the character of the economic distribution of wealth—that is, who rules and in who’s interest. A genuine solution that links the struggle against the ravages of both capitalism and imperialism in the Middle East can only be forged by rebuilding the left. As the various struggles from Pakistan and Iran, to Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt show, the system forces ordinary people to fight back. It is in this context that both the existing left can grow and strengthen its bases, and a new left can emerge. Such a left can not only pose a different kind of leadership against imperialism, but also organize against the priorities of neoliberal capitalism and the local ruling classes that benefit from it. This is the challenge of new millennium.

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5. Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 82.
6. Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 153.
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15. Paul Lubeck, "Antinomies of Islamic movements under globalization," Center for Global, International, and Regional Studies Working Paper Series, available on line at www2.ucsc.edu/globalinterns/wp/wp99-1.PDF.
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18. *Ibid.*, 50.
19. *Ibid.*
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22. Kepel, *Jihad*, 6.
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24. Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: A Beginner's Guide* (London, Pluto Press, 2006), 69 and 125.
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