Islamic Fundamentalism—An Analysis

L. VENKATESHWARAN

Islamic Fundamentalism has gained a lot of currency among experts, the media and general public the world over. Standing out glaringly over a barrage of definitions, conceptualisations and perceptions, are the negative connotations attached to Islam as a religion. As John L. Esposito points out,

The term Fundamentalism is laden with Christian presuppositions and Western stereotypes and it implies a monolithic threat. More useful terms are Islamic revivalism and Islamic activism which are less value-laden and have roots within a tradition of political reform and social activism. This is a view supported by another scholar William Shepherd Jr.

Is there a suitable alternative to the term ‘Fundamentalism’ in the Christian case? I believe there is and would recommend “Islamic radicalism” since the Muslims in question insist on being Islamic in a particularly thorough and radical way.

The efforts to define and understand the term are nothing but a reflection of the sensationalisation of this term post-September 11, 2001. Why has the term caused so much of excitement and paranoia? Obviously the sensational blasts of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 attributed to Osama bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda seem to be the obvious answer.

Concept and Definition

‘Fundamentalism’ has been defined and redefined by many and this has caused confusion even in the academic world. Originally the term was conceptualised by the radical Baptist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian groups to name the southern Baptist convention, which had given a call to return to the Fundamentals of Christianity. British and American Evangelists further gradually derived the term from a series of essays during the period 1910-15. It was defined as a “description of members of militant Islamic groups.” On the other hand, Islam defined fundamentalism as “following or the acceptance of the basic tenets of a religion in a fundamentally moderate way and not by radical means.”

The author is a Research Assistant at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi; he is also a Research Scholar, American Studies Programme, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

media further compounded problems by using the term for both terrorist groups and also true moderate Islamic revivalist movements. Both were incommensurate with each other and hence the explanation was erroneous and completely unacceptable to have a comprehensive understanding of this term. The Western definition of the term was also misleading as it termed only terrorists as fundamentalists. This view aimed to create a further rift between Shia and Sunni Muslims. The term also seemed to have been exclusively used in the context of ‘religion’. Surprisingly, there has been no mention of terms like ‘democratic or capitalist’ Fundamentalism in the West. The Muslim viewpoint of the term hence seems to be more acceptable and when put in a broader perspective can be defined as follows: Islamic Fundamentalism is an effort, movement or attitude which tries to go back to the tenets or basics of Islam caused by a necessity to fight against an existing orthodoxy which has diverged from these tenets. Islamic Fundamentalism if put in simple terms is “the strict adherence to the traditional Islamic religious beliefs.”

Islam as a religion had not disappeared and could not be blamed; it was the difference in practice to what had been preached, the so-called Schism, which had to be eliminated. Hence it could even have been appropriately termed as “Islamic Fundamental Revivalism”. Fundamentalism as a term has been used in a negative and dogmatic sense by almost everybody. Hence the cry for refraining from using such terms by sensitive Muslims and the hesitancy among many scholars. Muslims the world over should realise that the term has a positive connotation and hence they should not buy into the misconceptions of the term.” Every ideology—economic, political, social and religious—is based on certain characterising features—its fundamental principles. A call to go back to these basic fundamental principles is not negative. It is only the opinion of a section of Muslims who have been frustrated by the failure of both Western and Islamic Modernists to resolve the problems of the Muslim world. This has opened the door to Islamic Fundamentalism and fundamentalist religious groups like Akhwan-ul-Mussalmen in Egypt, Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, Gam’a Islamiya in Egypt, Jamaati-Islami and Tablighi-Jamaat in India, Madrassas such as Dar-ul-ifta-ul-Irshad and Jamiat ulema-e-
Islam in Pakistan. Religious movements such as Saudi Wahabism and extremist groups like Hezbollah of Lebanon, Hamas of Palestine, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba of Pakistan are glaring examples of the growth of the concept of Fundamentalism in Islam. They prove beyond doubt that Islamic Fundamentalism exists. This fundamentalist attitude, although, exists only in sections of Muslims. Unfortunately the West looks at Islam or Muslim groups through the image of these Fundamentalists. As Sukhbir Choudhary explains:

Leading Muslim intellectuals of Meerut and eminent members of the All India Intelligentsia Forum (AIF) formed in '93 resolved to step up their crusade against Fundamentalism and begin a process of introspection within the community. 7

Some Muslim scholars though have questioned on how a revival of the glory age of Islam would solve contemporary problems, while others have advocated a balance between Fundamental principles and modern methods. Hence with differences cropping up within Islam, compartmentalising all Muslims as Fundamentalists would be inappropriate.

Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism in the Muslim World

Though Islamic Fundamentalism is not a new phenomenon, in recent times it has attained a vicious and virulent character. Modern Fundamentalism in reality is a reactionary culmination of the trends of Islamic Fundamentalist Revivalism in an epoch of modern world politics. After the Renaissance and Industrial Revolution in Europe, and the fall of the 800-year Muslim rule in Spain in the late fifteenth century, a period of long and protracted decline began for most of the Muslim world. Ankie Hoogvelt put it simply like this:

It is the failure of national development strategies in the neo-colonial period, coupled with the present episode of Globalisation that drives the contemporary Islamic crescent. Islamic resurgence is best understood as a politics of identity in response to exclusion, rather than as a subordinated incorporation. 8

This in turn led to the colonialisation of most of the Muslim world by resurgent Western imperialism. The Industrial Revolution in Europe laid the economic and military basis for this colonisation. Islamic Fundamentalism was the product of cultural and intellectual stagnation, Western colonialism, and the failure of the secular nationalist model of government.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 had a great impact on the anti-imperialist struggle in these Islamic societies. Scholars like Maulana Hasrat Mohani and Obaid Ullah Sindhvi were inspired greatly by the Bolshevik Revolution. As Xiaodongzhang pointed out,

The emergence of Islamic Fundamentalism is a direct response to the external pressure and internal crisis of Muslim society, and the change indicates that the pressure and crisis have become stronger than ever before. To some extent, it is a social movement of introspection and self-salvation. 9

In the post-World War II era Islamic Fundamentalism became a totally reactionary and counter-revolutionary phenomenon. The main current of modern Fundamentalism was based on Akhwan-ul-Muslamin in Egypt founded in 1928 by Hasan al Banna (1906-49) and the Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan, founded in 1941 by Maulana Abdul Ala Moudoodi (1903-78). These groups were of a virulent character with strong neo-fascist overtones. This led to the growth of a more fanatical version of Islamic Fundamentalism in the decades to come. As Hilal Kaashan concluded,

It is in this atmosphere of ideological and development failure that radical Islamic groups emerged, who sought to transform the ailing political systems into ones of their own creation.10

The first significant political victory for Islamic Fundamentalism came in 1979 when the Shah of Iran was forced to flee after his government was overthrown by the Islamic forces of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Iranian Revolution reflected the tension that historically had evolved between Islamic activists and the West. For decades, the Shah of Iran had allied himself with the foreign policies of Great Britain and the United States and used Western advisers at many levels of his government and military. The Iranian upper class had become increasingly Westernised and thus for many pious Iranian Muslims, their government as well as their culture came to represent many of the ills they had long lamented.11 Urged on by the United States, the Shah proposed what he labelled as the “White Revolution”. Among other things, it espoused land reform, women’s suffrage, the sale of some state-owned enterprises and a workers profit-sharing programme. The “White Revolution” in reality was out of touch with the popular feelings among the masses and hence proved to be a catalyst that ultimately increased the ulama involvement in politics. They allied themselves with the bazaar merchants who had been economically hurt by Western competition. The urban poor and working class also supported the growing activism of the ulama. Thus a broad anti-government coalition evolved in the 1960s which included not only the ulama but
also liberal secular groups. This opposition had to also share the stage with a politically conscious and aggressive Islamic movement led by Khomeini. By the late 1970s, the protest movement against the Shah became increasingly radicalised and by 1978 massive demonstrations took place in all the major cities of Iran forcing the Shah to flee for good. A national referendum followed in April 1979 when an overwhelming majority favoured an Islamic Republic.12

The success of the Iranian Revolution provided a great impetus to similar movements throughout the Muslim world. Movements started choosing both democratic and non-democratic paths to assert the glory of Islam. A classic example was in 1989 when a military dictatorship was imposed in Sudan.13 Soon thereafter the new Sudanese regime implemented the Shariah law under the guidance of a fundamentalist movement known as the National Islamic Front. This movement, led by the Front’s leader Hasan al-Turabi, was supported only by a portion of Sudan’s Muslims but not the considerable non-Muslim population in the south of the country. The result was a civil war. Islamic Fundamentalist movements also often tried to exert influence or attain power through the electoral process. This was the case in Algeria in 1989, when the National Liberation Front (FLN), which had governed the country as a one-party state since independence was won from France in 1962, promulgated a new Constitution legalising other parties. The national legislative elections in 1991 saw, among the other parties, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) that was founded by Abbassi Madani in the 1960s, participating in the elections. The FIS won a large proportion of the National Assembly seats in the first round and would have done well in the second and third rounds as well had not the Algerian Army stepped in and cancelled voting thus preventing the Islamists from achieving power. This again led to a civil war. The two examples above and in particular the first suggested two problems inherent in the phenomenon of Islamic Fundamentalism. One of these was that such movements based on religious tenets did not readily tolerate opposition and the second was the precarious political and cultural position non-Muslim populations sometimes occupied when Islamist movements became active or achieved power. Despite the fact that Islam had a tradition of tolerance towards non-Muslim minorities, Sudanese Christians, Egyptian Coptic Christians, the Bahá'í and Zoroastrian population of Iran are all groups whose situations had deteriorated as a consequence of the Islamic resurgence.14

From Islamic Revolution to Islamo-Nationalism

Twenty-three years after the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the wave of Islamic Fundamentalism had taken a different course. The mainstream Islamist movements had shifted from the struggle for a supranational Muslim community to one of Islamo-Nationalism. On the other hand, the policy of conservative re-Islamisation implemented by many states, even secular ones, in order to undercut the Islamist Opposition and to regain some religious legitimacy had backfired. It had produced a new brand of Islamic Fundamentalism, ideologically conservative, but at times politically radical. The new brand of modern political Islamic Fundamentalism, which claimed to recreate a true Islamic society, by not only imposing the Shariat, but also by establishing an Islamic state through political action, has been referred to by scholars like Olivier Roy as “Islamism”.

A survey of the mainstream Islamist movements in the 1990s showed that they had failed in producing anything resembling an “Islamist international”. By the end of 1980, the Iranian Revolution had been playing on patriotic sentiments. It was also clear that, at least since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, the Iranian foreign policy has been shaped by its national interests rather than by ideology, a fact clearly acknowledged in their low profile against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan or in their support for Christian Armenia against a fellow Shia country, Azerbaijan. The effort towards “nationalisation” of Islamism is apparent in most of the Muslim countries. Hamas challenges Arafat’s PLO not on points relating to Islam, but for betraying the “National Interests” of the Palestinian people. Turabi uses Islam as a tool for unifying Sudan. The Yemenite “Islah” movement has been active in the re-unification of Yemen. The Lebanese Hezbollah is now stressing the defence of the “Lebanese nation” while the Islamic Fundamentalist groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan and India are part of the so-called “freedom struggle” to liberate Muslim dominated Kashmir.

On the domestic scene too, these parties brought social strata into the political processes. In Pakistan a “Shariat Bill” was passed on several occasions after the coup of General Zia in 1977. In Algeria, the family law of 1984 reintroduced some Shariat elements. In Turkey, religious teachings were made
compulsory at school in 1983. In Egypt, the number of teaching institutes dependent on the Al Azhar Religious University increased from 1855 in 1986-87 to 4314 in 1995-96. In Pakistan, official figures of registered Madrassahs in the Punjab province doubled in ten years (1985-95). In Kuwait, a “High Council of Islamic Affairs” was established in 1996. In the same year, the Egyptian Government tried to add 5000 mosques to the 25,000 already controlled by the state. In Iran, the function of the “Guide” appointed by a specially elected body, the Council of Experts, is in fact to ensure the subordination of theology to politics.

Nevertheless, it has been impossible to build an “official Islam” and governments in Muslim countries have quickly realised that Islamisation was spinning out of control. The secular forces within the Muslim world are not the only ones to look upon the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism with alarm. The Western powers—Europe and the United States—also have reacted to political Islam with fear and suspicion. There is a two-way historical factor that magnifies Western-Islamic mistrust. The competition for power within the Muslim world, their passion for Islamic unity has flared violence targeting Westerners and Western dislike and fear of Islamic Fundamentalism was also rooted in a long history of religiously based Christian hostility towards the Muslim world.

The Psycbe behind Islamic Fundamentalism

While analysing Islamic Fundamentalism, the factors that instigated this fanaticism among Muslims have to be analysed. Why was Islamic Fundamentalism considered a bigger threat to the secular fabric of world society than Christian, Jewish or Hindu Fundamentalism? To answer these questions, it is not only important to study the political factors that are responsible, but also emphasis has to be given to a close examination of other cultural, psychological, social and religious factors which unknowingly or knowingly lead to such fanaticism. As Joseph Kostiner warned,

There may be a single idea that guides the Islamic movement all over the world but there can be no single authority that controls all activity. The reason is the conflicts within the Islamic world, and at some point some of these movements may turn hostile towards each other. However, in the lack of any other revolutionary idea, Islamic revolution does hold certain legitimacy and shall give rise to corresponding movements.

The process of Islamic Fundamentalist mass movements began in the first half of the twentieth century. Many of their supporters shared a set of common assumptions.

1. The Muslim world is in a state of disorder brought on by decades of moral decay. This decay began when both in the public and private realm, the values and dictates of the Muslim religion were not respected or practised diligently. This decay was also made possible by the political decay that took place with the decline of the glorious era of Islamic civilisation.

2. This decay in ethics and morality made possible Western intrusion that, for all purposes and intents, infected the Muslim world with an alien set of immoral, secularist values and behaviours based on the defining concepts of materialism and nationalism. These alien ways were an inherent part of the various Western inspired governmental and cultural experiments that proliferated in the colonial and post-colonial periods. This included nationalist, pan-Arabic, socialist and military governmental experiments, as well as the secularising of law codes, an opening up of markets to Western goods and advertising and the adoption of Western culture. The resulting environment fractionalised the Islamic community through the creation of both imperially imposed national boundaries and a Westernised upper class orientated from its own Muslim cultural roots. From the standpoint of the Islamic Fundamentalist, a new period of ignorance (jahiliyya) had dawned. Thus political and moral decay had led to a cultural synthesis and, according to them, corrupted Islamic culture.

3. In order to combat this perceived decay and infection, the Muslim world must be re-Islamised. This entails the reassertion of classical Islamic ways, particularly the reintroduction of Shariah or Muslim law. Hence an emphasis was laid on Islamic philosophy in an effort to return back to traditional Islam. A classic illustration was the reforms preached by Al Ghazzali (1058-1111) and Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328). This has been highlighted to symbolise respectively the intellectualist and activist trends within the Muslim community. One important factor which was common to both trends was the concept of “Obedience to God”, that is, obedience to God for its own sake and not primarily to avoid hell or gain paradise. To have sure belief in the day of final reckoning and in the reality of reward and punishment are there. This suitable but fundamental shift in emphasis and focus on conduct in this world of which the thought of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) is monumental was called “Islamic positivism”. But the positivism of the Islamic movements came to be so transcendentally anchored that its idea of “obedience to God’s law” was taken and followed fanatically—a fact which can be clearly seen in the call for war by Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden. Modern religious fanatics to justify their call for Islamic Fundamental-
ism have misinterpreted the philosophical teachings.\(^{19}\)

4. The only way, according to the Fundamentalists, to re-Islamise society was by re-politicising Islam itself. To achieve these objectives, Islamic Fundamentalists have started to oppose the West that represents the evils and pressurise governments of the Muslim world to reform themselves along Islamic lines. When such objectives or goals were opposed or unachieved, the frustrations of these Fundamentalists heightened. Hence a section of these diverted to use radical or extreme measures to quench their frustrations and solve their problems. This resulted in the birth of Islamic radicalism.\(^{19}\)

The various major conflicts around the world like the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the Gulf war of the nineties, the West Asian crisis between Israel and Palestine, the Kashmir problem between India and Pakistan, the recent strikes against Afghanistan by the United States, the Chechnya problem are all offshoots of the growing frustrations and animosity among the Fundamentalists of Islam towards the West. This is one of the foremost factors why Islam and Islamic Fundamentalism are so often in the news and considered a bigger threat than Hindu or Christian Fundamentalism.

\section*{Footnotes}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Aftab Macksood, "What does Fundamentalism Really Mean?", Islamic Herald—fundamentalism.htm.
\item ibid.
\item Yunus Illyas, "The Myth of Islamic Fundamentalism"—the myth of islamic fundamentalism.htm.
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\item Sukhbir Choudhury, "Muslims Struggling for National Renaissance (1930 onwards)"—Encyclopedia of Indian Nationalism Series, p. 56.
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\item ibid.
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\item ibid., pp. 35-42.
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\item Lawrence Davidson, op. cit., pp. 12-13.
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\section*{Revival of the European Constitution

\textbf{A JUDICIAL DEFICIT}}

\textbf{BETWA SHARMA and ADIL HASSAN KHAN}

The Brussels summit, convened to discuss the budget, buckled on June 17, 2005 with the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Jean-Claude Juncker, remarking that the European Union was not in crisis but in 'deep crisis'.\(^{1}\) The 'non' and 'nen' of the French and the Dutch over the European Constitution still resounded around the continent. The summit, organised in the shadows of an outright rejection of the Constitution, reeked of internal strife, disarray and blame-games over peripheral concerns. Misguided politics, imprudent economics and denial on the part of the leaders almost deflected the focus from the more cogent reasons of constitutional failure. These are the EU's framework, inaccessibility and functioning. It has been several months since the Constitution was rejected, but once again there is a subtle but consistent murmur of reviving the Constitution or at least parts of it. On January 18, 2006 de Villepin in a speech at Berlin’s Humboldt University called for a revival of the Franco-German motor to get European integration moving again. But on firm constitutional proposals he stayed mum.\(^{2}\) European integration, in the midst of Europe's identity crisis over the absorption and protection of immigrants, becomes increasingly inviting and vital. But the question, with so many loose ends, remains: how? The most potent problem is the judicial deficit created by the Constitution—the scarcity of accessing rights and benefits or rather and illusion of too many rights. The Constitution brings together in a single instrument the rights scattered over a range of national and international instruments. The only ques-

\begin{center}
Betwa Sharma is a Final Year student, National Law Institute University, Bhopal. Adil Hassan Khan is a Research Intern, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi.
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