

Assessment Three

Discuss the Relevance (if any) of the term
“Islamic Fundamentalism”

Muslim Politics

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Introduction:

The term “Islamic fundamentalism” is frequently applied when examining events associated with violence, terrorism, and radicalism, with the perpetrators often justifying these actions by their declaration of Islamic religious motivation. Yet not only is this term inherently problematic, but it is also inaccurate when assessing the relevancy of its utilization and the history associated with the terminology.

The word “fundamentalism” incorporates a significant portion of the term “fundamental,” which is associated with the concepts of basic principles. When examining this from a linguistic perspective, this directly implies (although it may not always be the intent), that the fundamentals and basic principles of the Islamic religion are the motivating factors of these instances of violence, as well as the limitations of progress, thereby incorporating populations of Muslims and Islamic perspectives. Therefore, the term is often used to portray a narrative of an alien, often barbaric, set of people whose application of their religious beliefs is the reason for their resistance to progress and modernization.¹

Along with the issues associated with its problematic use, it also simplifies a significantly complicated issue, compounded by historical factors with acts of political violence and regional instability. Factors such as conflicting interests, political and strategic issues, as well as the history of colonialism in various Islamic societies are key factors to consider when analyzing aspects of contemporary violence and terrorism associated with Islamic fundamentalism. The term fails to address the relevance of these substantial factors, often leading to incorrect assessments. Additionally, it leads to a simplification of various, and often conflicting, Islamic ideologies and consolidates them all into a general characterization without proper analysis.

This essay is going to examine the relevance of the term “Islamic fundamentalism” and the issues associated with its use. Part I will examine the history of the term, as well as the West’s historical relationship with Islam, along with the sociological impact of the term’s application. Part II will examine historical factors, such as colonialism to gain an understanding of the contemporary aspects often associated with Islamic fundamentalism, as well as analyze

¹ David Watt. 2008. “What’s in a Name?: The Meaning of ‘Muslim Fundamentalist,’” *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective* https://origins.osu.edu/article/whats-name-meaning-muslim-fundamentalist?language_content_entity=en.

conflicting Islamic perspectives, illustrating the inaccurate application of the term “Islamic fundamentalism.”

Part I.

When evaluating the term “Islamic fundamentalism” in its contemporary use, it is imperative to analyze the historical factors leading up to the term and its eventual relevance. Even before the events of mass globalization, the relationship between Islam and Christian Europe was not inherently constructive, with both sides engaging in religious polemics, discrediting each’s philosophical and religious thought. When attempting to understand the 20th-century European attitude toward Islam, this can best be illustrated by the assessment of French scholar, Maxime Rodinson who is quoted as stating “Western Christendom perceived the Muslim world as a menace long before it began to be seen as a real problem.”² Western Christian philosophers were involved in an emphatic attempt to discredit Islam and its philosophical ideologies.

Interestingly, the term “fundamentalism” was not inherently applied to Muslims in the early 20th century. The term held strong relevance from the 1920s, till the late 1970s, primarily in its designation of Protestant Christianity and its adherents. However, there was a clear shift in its transfer of the application to Muslims, primarily after the theocratic takeover of the Western-supported Pahlavi regime of Iran. After the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, there was a rise in the characterization of the “fundamentalist” now being applied to Muslims with greater frequency.³ Preceding events, such as the Arab-Israeli War, along with the Arab oil embargo gave an image of Islam, as not only a threat to Western society but also to its economic interests.⁴ The aftermaths of these events witnessed the use of the term “fundamentalist” to be applied to Muslims with veracity.

These historical factors provide a basis for understanding the contemporary use of the term “Islamic fundamentalism.” However, the sociological impact of the term also holds great significance in understanding its application and effective narrative. Associating “Islam” with

² Fawaz A. Gerges. 2003. “Islam and Muslims in the Mind of America,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 588 p. 73-74 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1049855>

³ Watt

⁴ Gerges, p. 76

“fundamentalist” allows for the recognition of a collective “other,” providing a unique basis of unity against this specific outsider to the threat it possesses to the greater social order.⁵ There is a clear identification of not just the culprits and their ideology (in this case Islam), but the dangers it possesses to a specific society and its interests. The obvious consequences of this narrative of the collective “other” and the dangers associated with it, not only include a strange harmony of unification (obviously excluding the particular “other”) but also involves active scapegoating of individuals from a particular group.

As an example, then U.S. presidential candidate, Donald Trump often engaged in rhetoric of a collective “other”, such as proposing a ban on Muslims entering the United States, prompting the use of a similar term, “radical Islam.” Then-President Obama refused to use or acknowledge the term and criticized Trump’s idea of blocking the entrance of Muslims into the United States, from both a practical and moral perspective.⁶ However, the use of the term to define this collective “other” undoubtedly had a monumental effect. To avoid being categorized or viewed as passive on terrorism, Obama’s endorsed Presidential candidate, Hilary Clinton started to use the term, stating that she is “happy to say [radical Islam],” with Trump claiming credit for Clinton’s eventual use of the term.⁷ When analyzing the political components of Clinton’s use of the term, undoubtedly due to Trump’s persistent use, is that to effectively portray herself as being vigilant in matters of security, the term “radical Islam” needed to be employed to illustrate such a sentiment and reach to a particular vote bank.

Part II.

One of the emblematic issues with the term “Islamic fundamentalism,” is that it undermines the complexities of various issues, many of which are not related to organic religious motivation. For instance, when evaluating radical ideologies and militancy, colonialism is undoubtedly a significant component that needs to be addressed but is often neglected from both

⁵ Watt

⁶ Larisa Epatko. 2016. “Obama Explains Why He Doesn’t Use ‘Radical Islam,’” *PBS Newshour*, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/watch-live-obama-statement-on-countering-violent-extremism>

⁷ Abby Phillip. 2016. “As Clinton Shifts on ‘Radical Islam’ Label, Trump Claims Credit,” *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/06/13/clinton-on-radical-islamic-terrorism-label-its-not-what-we-call-it-its-what-we-do-about-it/>

an academic and practical perspective. For example, Saudi Arabia is often incriminated in its exports of Wahhabi ideology, often providing a religious ideological basis for militant groups. Yet, the aftermaths of colonialism and the spread of Wahhabi ideology undoubtedly have an imperative relationship. The joint venture of British and American involvement in the newly formed Saudi Arabia, particularly in their political and economic interests associated with the Saud dynasty in the 1920s is a significant factor in understanding the contemporary affairs of the Middle East.⁸ The Saud dynasty was (and still are) strong proponents of Wahhabi ideology, but to not factor in the economic and political events of the 1920s, which harbored the rapid spread of Wahhabi ideology throughout Islamic societies, oversimplifies a complicated history of economic and political interests of foreign actors.

This is again illustrated by political events shaped during the Cold War period, and factors involved in the spread of specific ideologies, in an otherwise non-Islamic conflict (although later propagated into one). With the Soviet Union's mission to spread communism amongst sympathetic partners leading to the invasion of Afghanistan, the United States' goal was to thwart any such attempt. Yet, the eventual involvement of the Mujahideen, the predecessors of the later Taliban regime, turned the course of events in later years. Jihadist ideology, in this case, utilized against a foreign invasion, was employed to weaponize against the common Soviet enemy. Not only was the Mujahideen movement of Afghan rebels openly supported in the United States, but also heavily funded. Various lobbying groups during President Ronald Regan's administration increased the annual funding for the Mujahideen significantly, totaling \$250 annually during 1985.⁹ Although eventually morphed into a religious conflict by Afghan rebels to garner public sympathy and support, the organic conflict in Afghanistan was based on economic interests and ideology between foreign powers, absent of organic religious motivation.

Additionally, a key question must be asked when evaluating the term "Islamic fundamentalism." Whose Islam, and which Islam? Islam is a religion of billions, with various sects, political ideologies, and interpretations. The term "Islamic fundamentalism" undermines

⁸ Barry Rubin. 1979. "Anglo-American Relations in Saudi Arabia, 1941-45," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 14.2, p. 253-254 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/260058>

⁹ Christian Parenti. 2001. "America's Jihad: A History of Origins," *Social Justice*, 28.3 (2001), p. 32 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29768089>

Islam's vast diversity of ideologies and generalizes otherwise complicated and often conflicting issues.

The lack of awareness of the diversities associated with Islamic societies is best illustrated by the works of scholar, William E. Griffith. When examining the root cause of Muslim societies' apprehension of western modernity and evaluating Islamic philosophy that leads to such a conclusion, Griffith states Islam "knows neither the idea of progress nor any distinction between God and Caesar or church and state."¹⁰ Using Iran as a case study, (again illustrating the effect the Islamic Revolution of Iran had on the perceptions of Islam and Muslims) Griffith's assessment reaches the conclusion that Islam is an all-encompassing ideology, not differentiating between the administrative and religious frameworks of an individual.

The issue with this statement is that within Islam, there are conflicting narratives of not just Islamic authority, but beliefs, interpretations, and political philosophies. There is no doubt that within various interpretations of Islamic philosophies, there is a lack (or sometimes no) distinction between secular and religious authority. However, when examining the works of the 11th-century Sunni Islamic theologian, jurist, and scholar, Al Ghazali holds a different narrative. According to Al-Ghazali, no doubt factoring in his contemporaneous political environment, he recognizes the distinction between secular and religious authority. He outlines a dualistic approach within a system, in which the secular, administrative leader is devoid of religious leadership and provides the political stability of a state, whereas the remaining religious leadership provides the religious and moral guidelines, absent of administrative responsibilities.¹¹ Al-Ghazali counters Griffith's narrative of Islam not having any boundaries between the secular and religious, as well as illustrates the vast diversity of Islamic political philosophy.

¹⁰ William E. Griffith. 1979. "The Revival of Islamic Fundamentalism: The Case of Iran," *International Security*, 4.1, p. 133 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2626789>

¹¹ Patricia Crone. 2005. *God's Rule - Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), p. 241-242

Conclusion:

The term “Islamic fundamentalism” undoubtedly holds significance in its widespread use when discussing contemporary Islam and radicalism. Due to the historical tensions and polemical history between Europe and Islamic societies, the term has not only sustained but thrived in its implementation. However, the term is an egregious oversimplification of complexities, many of which have seldom roots in religion, but rather in political and economic interests. This is primarily witnessed by the significant factors of colonial history in the Middle East, in which puritan ideologies, were (at the very least) tolerated for political and economic interests, and in the latter case of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, actively funded.

Additionally, the term is often incorrect, when evaluating various political ideologies and philosophical ideas of authority within Islam. Within both a historical and contemporary framework, there are a plethora of diverse opinions among jurists, philosophers, and theologians within Islam, not to mention conflicting ideas of authority within differing sects and schools. The term does not factor into account the diversity of thought within Islamic societies and often portrays an illusion of a homogenous Muslim population, contrary to its vast diversity and perspectives.

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