

# **The Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism**

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Islamic fundamentalism is as old as Islam itself. Throughout the history of Islam and its peoples, fundamentalism has been the sociocultural movement that acted against what has been perceived as the loosening of ethical values and the deviation of governments from the true spirit of Islam. And in doing so, fundamentalism found itself resisting social change and cultural transformation, and opposing governments that failed to hold Islam and Islamic law in high esteem.

The term Islamic fundamentalism, as it is known today, refers to a religious movement that is loosely structured, but whose intention is to induce Moslems to return to the traditional teachings of Islam as a way to reform their societies, establish an Islamic state, and deal with the many internal and external challenges they face. The impoverished and illiterate Moslems and others in search of an identity were lead to believe that fundamentalism is a perfect alternative to the systems under which they live, and in which they have little or no stake at all. The appeal of this message was vastly reinforced by the recently articulated slogan, "Islam is the Solution."

Islamic fundamentalism has moved from being a mere sociocultural movement seeking to reform Islamic societies in general, to being a sociopolitical movement with an expanded agenda to replace the existing state system with an Islamic one, to being a radical movement using violence to achieve its social and political objectives. Through these three distinct phases that lasted some 60 years, the fundamentalist movement was able to vastly transform itself and its societal role to become the most dominant force in society, challenging the state as well as its foreign backers. In each phase, the movement added new objectives and gained more sympathizers and self-confidence, using peaceful means to recruit followers, and resorting to scare tactics to force intellectuals and politicians to stay out of its way. And as it passed from one phase to another, its cultural and political message got stronger and penetrated deeper; motivating the believers to follow its teachings, accept its tactics, and, at times condone its acts of violence.

This paper will try to review the history of the new wave of Islamic fundamentalism that began about a hundred years ago and analyze its impact on Moslem societies and world politics. It will also try to identify the major causes and forces of fundamentalism and evaluate the movement's future prospects. And in so doing, I shall try to place the movement and its causes in their proper political and historical contexts.

## Historical Background

During the last two hundred years, peoples in the Islamic world underwent a period of awakening exemplified by the following major fundamentalist movements: the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia, the Sanousi movement in Libya, the Mahdiyya in Sudan, The Ahmadiyya in India, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Khomeinism in Iran, the Amal and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Palestine. All of these movements had risen as a result of what had been perceived as a need to stem the tide of moral degeneration and political disintegration in Muslim societies, and in reaction to western hegemony and Israeli aggression and expansionism. In light of the continued state weaknesses and persistent foreign threats, the fundamentalist leadership concluded that Muslims' objectives could only be achieved through the building of a new society where the Sharia is strictly observed and all Muslims are bound together as brethren.

The basic creed of Islam is that God (Allah) is the source of all truth and that His very words were revealed to his prophet Muhammad in the Qur'an. The Sharia comprises a code of ethics, a code of religious and civil practices, a system of law, and a framework for political and economic organization as enunciated by the prophet and practices his immediate followers. It calls upon all Muslims to adhere to its teachings, defend their religion, and spread the faith. Thus, Islam is not a set of religious beliefs only but also a way of life that tends to regulate the individual's behavior and govern his relationships to God, his neighbors, his community, and the world at large.

Yet, the revival of the current wave of Islamic fundamentalism can be traced back to the el Salafiyya movement, founded in Egypt by Mohammad Abduh (1849-1905) and influenced intellectually by Jamal el Din al Afghani (1839-1897). Both men, deeply disturbed by the encroachment of the European powers on Islamic societies,

began to articulate their respective messages at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. The message claimed that Muslim societies faced a threat of complete political and cultural domination by imperialist Europe. To preserve Islamic identity and enable Muslims to resume their traditional contribution to world civilization, al Afghani and Abduh maintained, Muslims needed to reform their societies and stem the tide of political disintegration, social decay, and scientific backwardness. Thus, from the start, fundamentalism was a reaction to foreign encroachment, perceived moral degeneration, and Islamic political and cultural decline. In fact, it could be argued that fundamentalism experienced by all religions worldwide is a reaction to deep feelings of cultural insecurity and loss of identity caused by alien forces.

Religious fundamentalism in general is a sociopolitical movement that tries to explain complicated global events and societal problems through old, largely outdated slogans and ways of thinking. But since every fundamentalist group claims that its beliefs are based on absolute truths derived from God through a holy book, fundamentalism tends to reject certain scientific truths and doubt man's creative abilities. And in using the past as a model to remold the present and shape the future, fundamentalism and its leadership tend to distort reality beyond recognition, and because of that, they lack the proper tools to diagnose reality and develop a viable program to transform it. All such movements in fact try to capitalize on the fears of the impoverished and largely ignorant masses and exploit the vulnerabilities of younger generations to build the political fortunes of its leaders.

However, fundamentalism is often able to provide a good rationale for replacing the existing social and political orders. Yet, it has no clear vision of the future it strives to build or a workable program to transform the reality it distorts and rejects. As a consequence, no fundamentalist movement was able to maintain its unity, causing all movements to split and branch out, with each group claiming to represent the true religious path. Though the movement usually emerges as a force to reunify the nation, it often causes more divisions than before, and leads to distorting the very national cultures and religious teachings it is supposed to preserve.

The Salafiyya doctrine of Islamic reform was based on the conviction that Islam served the dual role of religion and state; and thus it was capable of reconstructing the

solidarity, cohesiveness and vitality that characterized Muslim societies during the first five centuries of Islamic civilization. The movement called upon all Muslims to use the accomplishments of the first Muslim generation as a model to reexamine the legitimacy and evaluate the effectiveness of religious practices and state institutions and reform them along that model.

## The Reform Phase

The Salafiyya ideas under the leadership of the first generation of reformers found a wide and receptive audience among all Muslims; yet, they achieved neither the revival of Islam nor the end of western encroachment. The an interrupted interaction between the West and most Islamic societies, particularly the Egyptian, Turkish and Iranian societies, gave rise to secular ideas such as nationalism and the separation of state and religion. As a result, the second generation of Islamic reformers moved to accept nationalism and advocate the selective emulation of contemporary western models of state building and economic thinking as bases for transforming Muslim institutions, particularly the political and military and economic structures.

The end of World War I was marked by the dismantling of the Turkish Empire and the division of the Arab world among the victorious European allies. In the wake of the Turkish defeat an upsurge of nationalism swept Turkey calling for the abandonment of the old quest for Islamic unity and the building of a modern Turkish state on the basis of the western model of democracy and capitalism. Arabs, who had allied themselves with the West in exchange for a promise to help them regain independence and unity, felt cheated and betrayed, and thus were forced to alter their priorities to face European colonialism. The imposed division of the Arab homeland into zones of western influence shattered the Arabs' sense of national pride and integrity, forcing them to concentrate on the struggle for independence and unity rather than on the transformation of Arab society.

Other Muslim countries such as Iran and Afghanistan were also engaged in political, economic and social reform based on the western model. However, Pakistan and Indonesia, which became independent states after the end of World War II, used

religion as a vehicle to mobilize the masses and gain independence. Each Islamic country was in fact going its own way using Islam, nationalism, and western ideas to reconstruct its society and build its nation state; a path Arabs followed after attaining independence. Thus the post–World War II era had witnessed the formalization of the fragmentation of the Islamic empire as well as the Arab world, causing both Islamic and Arab unity to become a thing of the past.

Although the Arabic language, the language of the Qur'an, was instrumental in creating and maintaining a common denominator among all Muslims, it could not alter the cultural and political realities on the ground; Muslim societies were different in many respects that made unity hard to contemplate and harder to realize. Most peoples had different languages and histories that date back to the great civilizations of the pre-Islamic times. There were also differences in geography, traditions, local customs, and socioeconomic and political orientations.

Ultimately, nationalism which was more concerned with resisting foreign domination, but more inclined to emulate western institutions of government became the primary organizing principle of society, dominating the lives of all Arabs and Muslims. Nonetheless, Islam's legacy and ideals continued to be cherished by most Muslims, playing the dual role of an inspirational force for change and an instrument for the preservation of cultural heritage and national identity. Most Arab and Muslim masses in particular, have continued to consider Islam a way of life and a body of knowledge that determines their future. But while the masses were becoming more attached to Islam, the intelligentsia's view of itself and its relation to the traditional Islamic leadership was being transformed due to increased interaction with the West and the daily utilization of modern science and technology.

The quest for modernization consequently caused the role of Islam in shaping the sociopolitical and educational aspects of societal life to recede, and the gulf between the masses and their political and intellectual leadership to widen and deepen. Meanwhile, the West, which feared nationalism much more than Islam, began to support the religious forces in order to weaken the nationalist ones. And because the West perceived Islamists as posing on real threat to western interests in the region, they worked hard to weaken the national forces and frustrate their efforts to make political

or economic progress; thus contributing to the rise of fundamentalism at the expense of nationalism.

In fact, none of the leaders who fought for independence and led their nations after liberation was a devote Muslim; all were nationalists who believed in Islam and used Islamic slogans and symbols to mobilize the masses and gain their trust. Arab nationalists, for example, tend to think of Islam as a component of their national heritage, and to view the great cultural and scientific achievements of the Islamic civilization in the past as a product of the Arab genius. However, nations without much history, like Pakistan, have continued to be attached to Islam, using it as a cultural core and a political identity.

The reformist Islamic school of thought called for borrowing, adaptation and change. Its advocates saw no fundamental contradictions between certain western notions such as democracy and Islam. The major question to them was not to borrow or not to borrow but how can Muslims acquire western science, technology and modern institutions and still remain true to their religion and culture. Islam and democracy, they maintained, are compatible since both embody the ideas of justice, equality and freedom. Rifat al-Tahtawi for example, said, “What is called freedom in Europe is exactly what is defined in our religion as justice, right, consultation, and equality.”

Borrowing from Europe during that period, therefore, was not perceived as a process to transform Islamic society and restore the glory of the past, but as a means to gain enough military and industrial power to challenge the West and protect Islamic values and traditional institutions. Consequently, emphasis was placed on the need to develop modern military strategy and organization, and reform political institutions and state structure. These measures were seen by Muslim reformers at the time as compatible with Islamic law, or the Sharia and in the interest of Muslim societies in general. Since the perceived need for borrowing was limited, the results were disappointing; they protected neither society nor culture from western ideas, nor liberated the Arab peoples or land from European colonialism.

## The Fundamentalist Phase

During the early decades of the twentieth century, Jewish Zionism emerged as a colonialist movement that threatened and ultimately conquered Palestine, posing a serious challenge to both Islamic fundamentalism and Arab nationalism. In 1948 Palestine was partitioned by force, leaving 78% of the land in Jewish hands and causing some 800,000 Palestinians to lose their homes and land and force them to live in squalid refugee camps administered by a special UN agency. In 1967 Israel attacked and defeated the combined armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, or what had been left of Palestine in Arab hands, and brought Islam's holy places in Jerusalem under Jewish control. Controlling Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock caused Israel to become an enemy of Islam, and made the liberation of Jerusalem a duty shared by all Muslims. Subsequently, the question of Palestine and the commitment to liberate Jerusalem became very important issues in the lives of all Arabs and Muslims and states. State commitment to liberate Palestine, however, provided Arab regimes with a source of legitimacy and an excuse to suppress free thought, silence dissent, and ban political activity.

In the wake of the Arab defeat at the hands of Israel in 1967, most traditionalists as well as intellectuals concluded that the existing systems of sociopolitical thought and governance had failed to liberate or protect Arab land, free the Arab people from internal and external oppression and need, or even preserve traditional ethics and Islamic values. The ruling elite, meanwhile, tried to avoid responsibility by blaming the other for its failure; and by not recognizing the true magnitude of the defeat, it rejected accountability. Intellectuals who were either supporters of the ruling elite or members of the establishment claimed innocence and lack of knowledge. Other intellectuals, fearing governmental retaliation, remained silent, turning intellectual responsibility into irresponsible passivity. Thus no responses to the defeat were provided and no programs to overcome the new dilemma were formulated. Issues of great popular concern were neither debated with honesty nor faced with courage.

By the late 1960s it became evident that the ideas of the nationalist regimes and the ideals that motivated the Arab masses to support them had failed to achieve any of the

declared objectives. Internally, the changes introduced by those regimes had served to weaken the traditional Muslim society, while denying the masses the opportunity to participate in national politics. Externally, foreign domination had continued to exert pressure on Arab states while Israel was growing stronger and more arrogant, denying the very existence of the Palestinian people. Therefore, Arab nationalism and its state structure, which purged and replaced traditional Islamic institutions for decades, had failed to deal with either the internal or external challenges facing Arabs in their quest for liberty and change. In addition, the nation state had failed to provide satisfactory answers to questions of legitimacy, political succession, economic development, political freedom, and social justice. In fact, failure to establish the principle of popular sovereignty and democratic legitimacy at the time of independence had left the claim to legitimacy open to challenge from any group that could muster enough power, regardless of convictions, objectives, or popular support.

In addition, the sudden influx of wealth generated by oil booms was instrumental in causing the degeneration of traditional life and old values. The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small merchant class and agents of foreign corporations and members of the ruling families, and the emergence of largely corrupt political and military elites in the so-called progressive Arab states, added to the malaise. People who were supposed to enjoy the trust of the masses and lead them to achieving their national sociopolitical and socioeconomic objectives turned out to be crooks; they employed political power to gain more wealth, and used wealth to gain more power, and used both power and wealth to corrupt intellectuals, control the press, and suppress dissent. Meanwhile, rapid urbanization, unplanned modernization, and the introduction of foreign labor and western consumer goods and lifestyles were creating fear, suspicion, alienation and a general loss of direction.

To tighten their grip on power in the face of rising criticism, Arab rulers began to co-opt Islamic reformers and appease fundamentalists, while suppressing nationalism, dissent and intellectualism. In addition, they began to invest heavily in the organized institutions of state control: the army, the secret service, the police force, the bureaucracy and the media. The army slowly emerged as a tool through which political power was seized and maintained; the secret service emerged as an effective instrument of repression through which dissent was traced and silenced; the police force became

the primary agency in charge of implementing state policies and enforcing public obedience; the bureaucracy grew fast to become the apparatus through which governmental domination of the masses was exercised and denial of their rights was effected; and the media was developed as a means to mislead the masses, falsify their consciousness and brainwash younger generations, while acting as the first line of defense of state corruption and impotence. As a consequence, almost all Arab states became police states whose major objective was and still is to retain political power and maintain stability at all costs; transforming the masses in the process into herds of cattle with no mind of their own.

But police states, by their very nature, are incapable of detecting sociopolitical change until reality is overtaken by a crisis. Even when the crisis finally arrived, Arab regimes felt overwhelmed by events they could neither anticipate nor control. Feeling insecure and inept, they opted for a state of denial instead of seeking the help of intellectual and enlightened traditional leaders. In addition, they imposed policies that banned all political activity by independent forces, and used the most hated agencies of state control to enforce those policies. Meanwhile, the rich and powerful became richer and more powerful; the poor and powerless became poorer and more submissive; and no serious attempts were made to distribute the oil wealth in ways that made political, security, or socioeconomic sense.

But by so doing, Arab regimes were unconsciously helping to undermine forces of moderation and strengthening forces of fundamentalism; they also denied themselves and their respective nations the knowledge and wisdom of the concerned among their constituency. Gradually, the Islamic reform school lost its rationale and its leadership lost its popular standing, intellectuals and nationalists were either suppressed or marginalized, and thus the door was opened for a new generation of fundamentalists to take the lead and claim the future. Since the old political leadership was rendered weak and vulnerable by the events of the crisis, new social forces had to emerge, take the initiative and assume the leadership role in society.

The increasing intensity of the Cold War was another factor that contributed to the deepening of the Arab crisis; it caused Arab states to be divided into two antagonistic camps, trading accusations of corruption and treason. In addition, the collaboration of

some Islamic regimes with the West, particularly with the US government which had by then become Israel's major financial and military backer, caused most Arabs to feel confused and betrayed. Since the West was responsible for the creation and maintenance of Israel, the lack of objectivity it consistently displayed in international forums regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict was seen by the overwhelming majority of Arabs as a sign of enmity; a sign that the West intends to continue to dominate and humiliate the Arab peoples and to support Israeli colonialist and expansionist policies.

The new, more fundamentalist generation of Muslim leaders emerged first in Egypt in the 1950s. Leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement declared that the West and Islam represent two different, incompatible ideologies. They further claimed that Arabs and Muslims were backward because they abandoned Islam; and because they were colonized by the West and corrupted by its ideas, lifestyles and permissive culture. As a consequence, they rejected western institutions, ideas, and cultural values, and began to call for fundamental change and prepare for confrontation with the Arab states and the West. The only solution to the Arab/Islamic dilemma, they maintained, is Islam, which holds the key to a happy life on earth and to salvation in the afterlife.

As for democracy, leaders of this school found it incompatible with Islamic teachings because it derives its legitimacy from the people, and not from God who is the only sovereign. They, furthermore, moved to reject dissent, of which nationalism is only one, because they saw it as a challenge to the idea of the unity of the Islamic community, or *Umma* and its basic beliefs. Sayyed Qutb (1906-1966) a leading thinker of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement argued that Muslims should not consider reality as a basis requiring Islam to be revised. Rather, they should think about changing reality, which he considered corrupt and immoral, to conform to Islamic standards. While in imprisonment in Egypt in the 1960s, Qutb advocated violence to change reality; causing his ideas to inspire several radical groups like Islamic Jihad.

These forces concluded that Islam must be rejuvenated as a living religion and as a viable institutional framework for governance. The goal of Islamic revival was viewed by the faithful as a duty that had long been neglected by the religious establishment and impeded by the ruling class; a task that must be undertaken if the Muslim world was ever to regain its past glory and rebuild its capability to face outside threats, perceived

as emanating primarily from western hegemony, Israeli expansionism, communism and secularism, and corrupt regimes. Meanwhile the intelligentsia, feeling frustrated and marginalized, became either an active proponent of change for the sake of change, or a passive minority having nothing to lose or gain by getting involved. Since it did not share the fundamentalists' vision, it could not support them; and because it rejected the existing political order, it did not feel comfortable opposing the only indigenous forces that were trying to change it.

In fact, support of fundamentalism by the intelligentsia would have been construed as sheer hypocrisy, and opposition to it would have been interpreted as defense of the corrupt regimes. But since religion, as Marx once said, "is for those who did not find themselves and for others who lost themselves again," a majority of the nationalist forces joined the largely ignorant masses to become a part of the fundamentalist movement; and many others have become tacit supporters and apologists for its misdeeds. As a consequence, fundamentalism emerged slowly as a potent sociopolitical force calling for change along religious lines and state models of a distant past.

It is clear that this kind of thinking does not accept reality and therefore cannot reconcile itself to its imperatives. Because of this, fundamentalist thinking can neither accept compromises willingly, nor can it provide an environment conducive to the nurturing of cultural, social or political tolerance. The major question to followers of this school was and still is how to reform Islamic societies to become copies of the past, not how to reform Islam or its basic institutions to become acceptable to the rest of the world.

Failure of the Arab nation state system on the one hand, recurring military defeats on the hands of Israel on the other, and awareness of what the world civilization has to offer caused Arabs in general to experience a complicated, multidimensional crisis. The crisis covered all aspects of social, cultural, political, and economic life; it affected all individual and group and institutional and national outlooks, creating a deep identity crisis. Therefore, the resurgence of fundamentalism should be viewed in the light of the circumstances that motivated the faithful to seek religious revival and sociopolitical change to overcome the pervasive identity crisis.

## The Radical Phase

Islamic fundamentalism claims that Islam is the only system of social life and governance that can liberate both the individual and society from foreign ideas and western hegemony; it offers a clear ideology to deal with all societal problems and face all foreign challenges. And in order to gain more legitimacy in the eyes of the Arab masses and harness popular support for its tactics, the fundamentalist leadership presented American and Israeli policies and wars against Arabs and Muslims as a resumption of the traditional confrontation between the Islamic and western civilizations. Consequently, it became only natural that the new fundamentalist movement adopts an anti-establishment, anti-Western, anti-American, and anti-Israeli stand.

The depth of the military defeats and political humiliation injured the pride of the Arab nation, and nations whose pride is injured tend to get angry and seek revenge. As a consequence, calls for the radicalization of the Arab and Muslim masses and using violence to change reality began to gain legitimacy across the Arab and Muslim words, and militant action to change reality was justified in the eyes of most Muslims. And in view of the Arab regime's inability to bridge the gap between popular expectations and reality, radical action became imperative, and confrontation between the state and the radical fundamentalist forces inevitable.

Nevertheless, a number of the Arab regimes began in the 1970s to court Muslim conservatives and even to promote them as a counterweight to liberal nationalism which represented the other sociopolitical force that demanded change and accountability. The governments of Egypt and Tunisia, for example, began to encourage fundamentalisms only to lose control of them a decade later. In most other Islamic countries, the regimes moved either to outmaneuver the movement, to accommodate it, or to challenge it and suppress its advocates. In Malaysia, the Sudan and Pakistan attempts were made to outmaneuver Muslim extremists by embracing the religious drive as their own. A policy of accommodation was adopted by Jordan, Algeria, Morocco and Kuwait, whereby the population was asked to observe Muslim holidays and respect Islamic symbols and traditions. However, the Syrian, Tunisian and

to some extent the Egyptian regime moved in the 1980s to undermine the credibility of the movement, limit its maneuverability, and ban it from political activity. And while Indonesia and Iraq moved to depoliticize Islam, the Saudis moved to embrace it and ignore its radical teachings and violations of human rights. And with the triumph of the Iranian Revolution, fundamentalism began to pose a serious threat to all regimes; a threat compounded by the Taliban victory in Afghanistan, the al Qaeda 9/11 terrorist acts, and the American and British invasion of Iraq.

Since Muslim fundamentalists claim to know all the truth embodied in the Qur'an, and to say that the holy book contains answers to all worldly questions, they tend to seek total solutions to extremely complicated societal problems in simple slogans. And by adopting such an attitude, fundamentalists have become unable to tolerate hesitation or recognize the right of dissent. Governments that tried to accommodate the movement and its demands, such as Saudi Arabia, were surprised by the deep commitment of extremism they were unintentionally and unconsciously encouraging. Compromise, the art of balancing interests and obligations, economic goals and political means, is something that fundamentalism finds unacceptable.

Generally speaking, the West has followed in its relations with both Arabs and Muslims a misguided policy based solely on the strategic importance of the Arab region and its oil resources. It has been a policy that looked after the West's interests, including those of Israel, and ignored Islamic history and culture, as well as Palestinian grievances and aspirations. For the West, particularly the Americans, the management of security and oil resource, as the latest two Gulf wars have vividly demonstrated, has priority over all other issues, including regional stability, solving the Arab-Israeli conflict and addressing issues of national dignity and social justice. And to protect perceived interests, western policymakers have used manipulation, coercion, corruption, and military force directly or by proxy to suppress Arab aspirations and advance the Israeli ones at their expense, while using the western media to denigrate Arab culture and distort the image of Islam and its followers.

In Iran for example, the western social and political challenge was very powerful; it generated a strong popular reaction culminating in the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The uncompromising Iranian response was motivated by cultural and political reasons that

saw western influence as eroding the nation's Islamic identity and the clergy's social position and moral authority. In Lebanon, the Hezbollah movement came in response to Israeli occupation of their country in 1982, and due to continued exploitation of the Lebanese poor by the Lebanese rich. Because of these grievances and others, the ideas and actions promoted by the fundamentalist movement became popular in all Islamic societies, including those of Palestine and Iraq. Calls for violence and confrontation have become most appealing to the politically oppressed, the economically exploited, the socially discriminated against, and above all, to those in search of a culturally identity.

While most Muslims tend to believe in religious dogma, only a small minority goes beyond mere belief and engages in violent acts to challenge the existing order and force it to conform to its fundamentalist vision. Thus, fundamentalism and radicalism are not the same, and treating them as symptoms of the same ailment is neither correct nor helpful. However, the deeper the belief is, the more the likelihood that it leads fundamentalism to radicalism. Radical acts and positions, which a minority of Muslims exhibits today, must be viewed as a loud, largely desperate political statement calling for change. It is a statement made by an angry minority on behalf of an oppressed majority whose grievances and aspirations have long been ignored and whose rights have been repeatedly and persistently violated. As long as such grievances continue to fester, radicalism will continue to gain new followers, and cause more destruction everywhere.

For a very long time, Islam was considered a passive religion, interested in neither politics nor political violence. Like Catholicism during the European Middle Ages, Islam and Islamic teachings were largely directed toward convincing the masses to accept their lot in life and be content, despite poverty and injustice, knowing that their true rewards were in the eternal life in the heavens. Throughout most of the twentieth century, and despite the many Arab national liberation movements and wars of independence, Islam remained on the sidelines; it never got deeply involved in the wars of independence, not even in the popular struggle for freedom and equality in society. In fact, not a single Arab or Muslim nationalist leader of the twentieth century was a fundamentalist.

## Islam and Terrorism

While Islamic fundamentalism started in the 1950s and gained strength after Arabs were badly defeated by the Israeli army in 1967, Islamic radicalism emerged slowly in the late 1970 in reaction to several major developments. Noted among them are the following:

1. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the US reaction to it;
2. The triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the same year;
3. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982;
4. The outbreak of the Palestinian uprising or *Intifada* in 1987;
5. The 1991 Gulf War that ended with the defeat of the Iraqi army and the imposition of economic sanctions on Iraq that led to widespread poverty and starvation; and
6. The American invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003, respectively.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 on the one hand, and the US reaction to it on the other, led to the formation of the Mujaheddeen military force to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. Muslim men from around the world were recruited, trained and equipped by agents of the US government to wage a "holy war" against the Soviet 'infidels'. The Saudi, Pakistani and other Muslim governments and rich Muslim individuals were instrumental in providing critical financial and logistical support to the Mujaheddeen. Muslim clergy, particularly from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Egypt, provided the needed religious justification for the war. So, after several centuries of being a passive religion, Islam was politicized and radicalized to fight a major Cold War battle on behalf of the United States and its western allies, and in defense of western values and strategic interests, for which hundreds of thousands of Muslims lost their lives, and millions of the Afghani people became refugees.

When the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan ended in 1989, most of the non-Afghani Mujaheddeen fighters returned to their countries. Many of them, however, were unemployed and unemployable; they knew only one thing: how to fight a guerrilla

war. Inspired by their own success in Afghanistan and by the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Mujaheddeen began to carry their message to other Muslim societies and offer their services to groups with similar aims and causes. As a result, the al-Qaeda organization emerged as a socio-military network to recruit, train and finance the old and new Mujaheddeen, and help them sharpen their message and expand the scope of their operations. Arab regimes which were perceived as politically corrupt and religiously immoral were among the first targets of the so-called “Afghani-Arabs.” And because of continued US backing of many of those regimes, the al Qaeda fighters felt that it was their duty to expand their operations to include the United States, which by then had been labeled by the Iranian clergy “the Great Satan.”

Several Arab and non-Arab intellectuals warned years ago of the impending danger of Islamic fundamentalism, but neither Arab nor western states listened. While terrorist attacks believed to have been carried out by al Qaeda and its collaborators against US targets worldwide have claimed the lives of some 4000 Americans, attacks carried out by the same people against Arab targets have claimed the lives of an estimated 250,000 Arabs, most of them Algerians. In addition, the toll of American victims killed in Afghanistan and Iraq over the last 6 years by radical Islamic forces is estimated to have reached 3000; in contrast, Iraqi victims of violence instigated by the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 is estimated to have exceeded one million.

In 1979, an Islamic revolutionary movement in Iran was able to drive the Shah out of power and out of the country and replace his secular regime with a religious one. Although the movement had strong revolutionary credentials, it was largely peaceful; it killed neither the Shah nor his family, nor the corrupt politicians of the old regime. But being deeply religious, fiercely anti-American and strongly opposed to modernization and liberalization, the new regime could tolerate neither political dissent nor social or religious freedom. As a result, the Iranian Revolution failed to liberate the Iranian people, develop the Iranian economy, or institute democracy and respect for human rights. However, the mere victory of the Islamic Revolution inspired millions of Muslims around the world; many of whom saw the Iranian triumph as evidence that Islam could win and provide an alternative solution to the acute problems facing them and their countries. But nearly three decades after the revolution, more than 40% of the Iranian population are believed to be living under the poverty line, millions more have

become addicted to alcoholism and drugs, inflation and unemployment rates are high and rising, social unrest is spreading, and the image of Islam and the Iranian regime is subject to international criticism and pressure.

In 1982, the forces of the Jewish State invaded Lebanon, occupied Beirut, forced the evacuation of the forces and leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization from Lebanon, and instigated and abetted a massacre against Palestinian refugees. And with the invasion coming at a time when the Lebanese were engaged in a sectarian civil war, the departure of the PLO weakened the non-Christian forces in Lebanon and created a political and military vacuum. As a consequence, Hezbollah, or the party of God, was formed as both a social service organization to care for the needy Shiites, and a military force to fight Israeli occupation. It ought to be noted, however that most of the Hezbollah fighters at the time were trained and closely associated with the PLO before its forced departure from Lebanon. And while Hezbollah provided the military forces to fight the Israelis and liberate Lebanon, the Iranians provided the financial and military assistance needed to make the Hezbollah experiment successful.

In the wake of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the United States dispatched some of its troops to Beirut to clean the mess created by the Israelis. The first Hezbollah suicide attack was carried out in 1983 against those American forces whose presence was perceived as a ploy to protect the Israelis and help the Jewish state attain its strategic goals in Lebanon, killing more than 250 American soldiers. President Reagan was quick to pull the American forces out of Lebanon rather than challenge Hezbollah and engage it in guerrilla warfare. Several such attacks were subsequently carried out against Israeli targets in Southern Lebanon, forcing Israel to acknowledge defeat in 2000 and withdraw from most of the land it had occupied since 1982.

The apparent success that Hezbollah suicide attacks were accomplishing on the ground and the ability of such attacks to weaken the Israeli resolve to remain in Lebanon were instrumental in radicalizing Islamic organizations in Palestine and encouraging them to imitate the Hezbollah tactics. Both the Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad began in the 1990s to carry out suicide attacks against Israeli targets inside Israel and the Palestinian occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza. Such attacks, however, receded substantially in the mid-1990s as

the promise of peace increased with the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, but were resumed with intensity when the hope for peace vanished in 2000. Israeli failure to subdue Palestinian militants over the last two decades, and destroy the military and social infrastructure of Hezbollah in 2006, have given added confidence to Islamic radicals fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and North Africa.

Daniel Williams of the *Washington Post* wrote on December 7, 2001, “In the mid-1990s when Israel withdrew troops from major Palestinian cities, Hamas’ followers shrunk to the point of insignificance. Many Palestinians were outraged in 1996 and 1997 when Hamas militants killed scores of civilians in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Hamas officials could not appear on the streets of the West Bank and Gaza without fear of verbal, if not physical assault. Then Israeli withdrawal ended under former Prime ministers Binyamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak. Construction of Jewish settlements soared. Support for Hamas grew.” Subsequently, Hamas resumed suicide attacks on Israeli military and civilian targets with more popular approval than ever before.

It worth noting that Hamas was founded in the 1980s as a social service organization and was encouraged by Israel to challenge the PLO and counter its political influence in the occupied territories. Israel, just like most other western governments at the time, still believed that Islam was largely a passive religion and that encouraging its followers to organize into social services organizations would help undermine the influence of the nationalist forces. Arab nationalists were generally seen by the West as more opposed to western presence and interests in the region than the Islamic forces were. But fundamentalists, whether they are Jews, Christians or Muslims, tend to see things in black and white only. Once their forces are activated and gained confidence, they go after the absolute they believe in without much consideration for the consequences. Today, there are Christian fundamentalists who attack abortion clinics and kill doctors in the United States; Jewish settlers who attack and kill peaceful Palestinian farmers in the West Bank and burn their orchards and stone their houses; and Muslim radicals who attack and kill Israeli Jews and Americans and other Muslims. There are also Hindus who attack and destroy mosques and burn churches in India.

In December 1987 the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza began a peaceful uprising against Israeli occupation, hoping to free themselves and gain independence. However, the Israeli response to the Palestinian *Intifada* was harsh; the Rabin government adopted a policy of “beating and breaking the bones of stone-throwing” children. By the time Israelis and Palestinians signed the Oslo Declaration of Principles in 1993, hundreds of Palestinian children had been killed and tens of thousands more were either maimed or severely injured or tortured and thrown in Israeli Jails. In addition, hundreds of thousands of boys and girls had lost years of schooling due to Israeli policies of collective punishment and curfews that resulted in closing most Palestinian schools and universities, sometimes for months, often for years.

In August 1990, Iraqi forces invaded and occupied Kuwait. And despite intense international pressure, the Iraqi regime at the time refused to withdraw its forces and abandon its expansionist policy. Consequently, an international coalition, with substantial Arab political support and military participation, was formed under the leadership of the United States to liberate Kuwait. Within months, the military campaign against Iraq ended and Kuwait was liberated. It was, however, a bloody campaign, during which an estimated 250,000 Iraqis lost their lives. And to prevent the Iraqi regime from developing and rearming, the UN imposed on it a comprehensive regime of economic sanctions that claimed the lives of 5% of the Iraqi people, most of whom were innocent children.

As Kuwait was being liberated, thousands of unarmed Iraqis and innocent non-Kuwaitis, fearing Kuwaiti retaliation, began to flee the country with their families and meager belongings. American pilots saw people traveling in civilian cars as easy targets to be trapped and indiscriminately eliminated. The sight of American pilots targeting innocent people and killing thousands of children inflamed the passions of millions of Arabs and Muslims everywhere. And because the US government did not withdraw its forces from the Gulf after the war had ended, the anti-American Arab forces, particularly the fundamentalists, saw the continued American presence in the region as a new form of foreign occupation. The goal of such presence, they concluded, was to control the Arab oil resources, protect US surrogate states and agents in the region, defend Israel’s security and advance its interests. And this in turn gave bin

Laden a larger human pool to recruit new fighters and solicit financial and logistical supporters.

In 2001, al Qaeda led by bin Laden launched a spectacular terrorist attack on New York and Washington, causing the death of some 4000 Americans and the destruction of two land marks in New York City. In 2001 and 2003 the United States, under the pretext of “war on terrorism,” invaded and occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively, inducing Muslim radicals to become much more determined to fight and defeat Americans forces and designs in the region. As a consequence, acts of terrorism increased, civil war broke in Iraq, regional instability intensified, and anti-Americanism spread and deepened everywhere, in Arab as well as Islamic and Asian and even European states. The US mistakes in managing the war in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and arrogant behavior in the international arena have caused the world order to become one of disorder and increased suspicion and enmity.

Despite Arab tendency to support Islamic causes, neither the Afghani-Arabs nor bin Laden had ever received tangible support or even much sympathy in most Arab countries. But as a consequence of the American wars against Iraq, continued Israeli occupation of Arab land and humiliation of the Palestinian people and American unconditional support of Israeli expansionist and even criminal policies, the Arab masses began to show sympathy for bin Laden and support for his message. The pictures of Iraqi children dying every day of malnutrition and disease and violence, and Palestinian children being beaten, maimed and killed by Israeli forces, has inflamed the passions of Muslim peoples and deepened anti-Americanism in the Arab world.

Thus, the monster of terrorism associated with Islam and the Arabs was essentially created by the United States to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan and fostered by continued Israeli aggression and colonialism of occupied Palestine. Today, terrorism is nurtured by an American policy to continue waging war against Arabs and Moslems in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia while defend Israeli crimes against the Palestinian people; and is sustained by elite corruption in most Arab and Muslim countries. It is clear, therefore, that terrorism associated with Islam was the result of both American and Israeli military actions and political inaction. Meanwhile, terrorism continues to be invigorated by the forces of globalization that seem to exacerbate poverty, deepen

socioeconomic gaps and sociocultural divides in society, and foster alienation in Third World states in general. These are some of the hard facts that must be acknowledged and seriously considered if the war on terrorism is to succeed. On September 25, 2003, Thomas Friedman argued that the US and EU failure to address the grievances of Third World nation are destined to give an added incentive to international terrorism.

## Objectives and Prospects

Islamic fundamentalism is a vision that derives its inspiration from the qualities of the Islamic society which the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate successors had established. As for the fundamentalist movement, it is a combination of many social and political organizations whose primary aim is the realization of the Islamic society they envision; however, most components of the vision remain ill-defined and misunderstood. As Augustus Norton said, the fundamentalist movement today is a multifaceted admixture of parties and societies with a correspondingly diverse collection of goals, programs, motives, and even religious views. What ties members of this movement together is not a party discipline or a formal association but a shared religious and political state of mind.

While fundamentalism is a deeply rooted conviction based on certain religious beliefs and traditions, radicalism is an attitude dictated by changed sociocultural and political circumstances. The first may be open for reinterpretations, but it could not be altered or even modified. The latter, in contrast, is always subject to change and transformation as circumstances change. Radicalism, as explained earlier, is an act of desperation to draw attention to the cries of the oppressed and dispossessed and to underline their accumulated grievances. In fact, the resort to violence as a political tactic has always been considered a means that justifies its own ends by the ideologically committed marginal forces in every society, throughout history.

The Arab defeat of 1967 in particular caused a severe shock from which Arabs are yet to recover. It was an all encompassing shock that led the Arab masses to loose confidence in their political leadership, public institutions, political parties, and the prevailing sociopolitical ideologies, causing a serious identity crisis. The ideological

and political vacuum created by the shock, forced the masses and their traditional leadership to look inward instead of looking outward or forward. And inward they found Islam and its glorious legacy which they believed had the answers to the urgent and much asked questions. Islam, unlike nationalism and the other foreign ideologies, offered a genuine ideology with deep roots in Arab political and social history. Consequently, "Islam is the solution" emerged as the all-encompassing slogan to rally the masses and silence criticism. And because of its simplicity and authenticity, the slogan appealed to Muslims everywhere; it required no sophistication to understand, or training to practice, or proven experience to appreciate, causing the slogan to become an instant success. To most believers, fundamentalism is the true ideology with the right model for social change and political transformation, and the only source of communal identity and national pride.

However, fundamentalism and its slogans have nothing new or original to offer; they bring no new revelations and offer no new ideas or concrete solutions. Nevertheless, they create a strong psychological feeling capable of motivating most believers to follow their religious leaders and adopt proposed programs for change. But psychological forces are nothing more than social movements whose durability and effectiveness are a function of their ability to transform themselves into popular sociopolitical institutions and engines of economic growth and material gains.

But due to its very nature, fundamentalism tends to distort the reality it has to deal with and to reject all ideas that do not correspond with its vision; and therefore it tends to alienate all people who do not believe in it. It also tends to concentrate on exposing the shortcomings of institutions and ideas it opposes and ignore the need to provide credible alternatives to them. As a consequence, fundamentalism has become an ideological movement of rejectionism rather than a sociocultural movement of open dialogue and positive engagement.

Since Islamic societies lack the experience to deal with most issues of our times, such as political democracy, economic development, freedom of speech, the role of the press in society, and the ethics of modern science and technology, fundamentalism as a sociopolitical movement is doomed to fail in the long run. In reality, attempts to rejuvenate Islam have boiled down to a cloudy program to remold the present and

shape the future in the image of a glorious but fading past. However, as a religious, faith based movement, fundamentalism cannot fail; it promises its followers no material or even political gains on earth, and therefore, it cannot be held accountable for the consequences of its actions; the only thing it promises its diehard followers is a place in Heaven in the afterlife. A believer therefore has to wait for the afterlife to find out if his or her religion is able to deliver.

Due to these shortcomings and many more, the movement could neither achieve unity nor substantiate the claim that it is the only force capable of reuniting the Muslim peoples. The passions demonstrated by some factions in their zeal to challenge the political establishment and defy other competing factions has led to further political and ideological divisions and aroused uncalled for ethnic conflicts. In brief, the Islamic fundamentalist movement has proved capable of identifying its enemies and pinpointing the major issues it stood against, but failed to define the issues it stands for and formulate workable programs to realize them.

Nevertheless, the impact of fundamentalism has been evident in every country and among Muslim communities everywhere. While the Sharia is being observed in only a small number of states, most peoples and regimes have become more sensitive to and respectful of Islamic practices and symbols than before. However, the future prospects of the fundamentalist movement seem to be uncertain. For a majority of observant Muslims, Islamic practices have become a habit rather than a state of mind, which makes it subject to change as traditions and habits and circumstances change. Many developments and emerging forces are expected to influence the direction of the movement and thus to affect its future course. The success or failure of the Iranian revolution, the ability of the existing Arab and Islamic regimes to live up to popular expectations, the response of the nationalist and liberal intellectuals to its ideas, the course of the US Middle East policy, the prospects of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, globalization, and the general reaction of the international community to religious conservatism are expected to determine the future of Islamic fundamentalism.

The actions and achievements of the Iranian state on the one hand, and the outcome of the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan on the other are probably the most important factors influencing the direction and affecting the standing of

fundamentalism today. The Iranian experiment of Islamic rule is a living proof that Islam possesses the ability to mobilize the masses and inspire change. The financial and material support granted by Iran to fundamentalist states and organizations in Sudan, Lebanon and Palestine have reinforced the notion of brotherhood of all Muslims. As the spokesman for the Muslim opposition party in Malaysia once said, "The victory in Iran gave the fundamentalist movement a new spirit that Islam can achieve victory." Or as Saad Eddin Ibrahim put it, "If the Iranian revolution succeeds, it will be a motivation. If it fails, it will not dissuade many of the hard core militants from trying again, but it will adversely affect the attraction of Islamic militancy."

As for the American invasion of both Iraq and Afghanistan, it is clear that it has increased the level, frequency and victims of terrorism, while strengthening the arguments of the opposing forces. The many facts ignored and lies fabricated to justify the invasion of Iraq have undermined American credibility in all Islamic and most other countries of the world. In addition, the continued Israeli occupation of Arab land and refusal to implement UN resolutions and make peace with its Palestinian neighbors have resulted in strengthening Hezbollah in Lebanon and enabled Hamas to win parliamentary elections in Palestine in January 2006.

The ability of the governing regimes in Arab countries to cope with the crisis that gave rise to fundamentalism in the first place is probably the third most important factor influencing the prospects of the fundamentalist movement. After the 1967 defeat, Arab intellectuals raised the question of accountability and stressed the need to reevaluate Arab ties with the West in general and the United States in particular. But instead of initiating a constructive dialogue with such intellectuals, Arab regimes responded by using their most hated apparatuses, the secret services and the police, to stifle criticism and silence dissent. Ever since, the profound transformation which has been taking place in the lives of the Arab masses has remained partially understood and hardly attended to.

In fact, many of the changes taking place in Arab and other Muslim countries today have become very complicated; they seem to defy rational analysis. Response to internal and external challenges has been so weak; it reflects abdication of rights to defend communal values and national interests. Attempts to react even to the most

threatening challenges have been formulated in broad, theatrical terms that lack both the honesty to acknowledge reality and the political will to face it and deal with it. Manifestations that are alien to the Muslim experience, and others that are critical of the performance of regimes, are being either ignored or denounced as the product of some evil force. Intellectuals, especially liberal nationalists, are being co-opted, coerced, or forced to seek refuge in passivity, often in countries other than their own.

Arab intellectuals who believe that Arab unity is the shortest way to building a strong, progressive nation capable of meeting the challenges of the times are very weak and lack the courage to act. Governments, in contrast, seem determined to deny the national forces the right to establish political parties and interact with the masses and seek their support. In addition, the strict limits imposed on the press have practically eliminated the possibility to develop a forum where ideas could be freely expressed, new thinking promoted, and constructive dialogue started and sustained. Since Arab governments have continued to follow this course, fundamentalism was able to deepen its roots, attract more recruits and become the dominant social force. In certain instances, it has even become the most influential political force, as the cases of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Taliban in Afghanistan, Hamas in Palestine and the Religious Courts in Somalia demonstrate, raising the possibility that many countries might be on their way to becoming fragmented and dominated by non-state actors.

In fact, continued suppression of freedoms by Arab governments and lack of credible political and economic opportunity have pushed some intellectuals from all ideological shades to lend their support to the fundamentalist forces because they are the only force willing and able to challenge the establishment; intellectuals, however, do this not out of conviction but as a result of frustration and despair. In such an environment, it was only natural for radical ideas to proliferate, without either the sanction of the governments or the approval of the social critics.

## Where to Go From Here

In order to weaken fundamentalism and defeat terrorism, the new generation to be born in the Middle East must find itself in an environment that provides hope and

economic opportunity, nurtures tolerance and cultural diversity, promotes political plurality, and tolerates neither violence nor injustice. For such an environment to become a reality, the roots of the current political and socioeconomic crisis in the Arab world must be addressed with honesty and urgency. Such roots include the following:

1. The Arab-Israeli conflict;
2. The Iraqi impasse;
3. Life conditions in the Arab world; and
4. Poverty and globalization.

A successful campaign against terrorism has to start with a campaign against ideological extremism, religious fanaticism and socioeconomic injustice, not only against individual fanatics who, if eliminated, would be replaced easily by possibly more radical ones. Such a campaign has to come in the context of a new American policy that addresses the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, ends American occupation of Iraq, deal fairly and squarely with issues of poverty and injustice, and respects the Arab mind and national dignity. Something like this was supposed to take place at the end of the 1991 Gulf war; yet the American schemes to transform the ideologies and politics of the Middle East devolved into a narrow Arab-Israeli peace process that failed to achieve anything. Sixteen years later, the failure to bring about deeper sociopolitical and socioeconomic change in the Middle East has multiplied the threat posed by Osama bin Laden and his followers. In fact, the US campaign against terrorism on the one hand, and American failure to address issues of political injustice on the other, have caused acts of terrorism to increase, and human rights to suffer a severe set back, not only in countries experiencing a rise in terrorism but in the United States as well.

Can the West win the fight against ideological radicalism, religious fanaticism and socioeconomic injustice by itself? The simple answer is no. Only the secular and politically moderate Arab forces can lead the fight against ideological radicalism and help defeat terrorism in the long run. But such forces have been subjected to intimidation, suppression and even persecution for half a century in their countries, often with the cooperation of western governments. Western states in general have formulated their Middle Eastern policies on the assumption that Arab nationalism was

more of a threat to the West's interests than Islamic fundamentalism. Consequently, while providing refuge to many fundamentalists, the West often helped authoritarian regimes to suppress and oppress the secular and national elements of society. Today, Arab governments, fearing a popular backlash, are working hard to appease the religiously conservative factions, while limiting the freedom of the secular and national ones, denying them the opportunity to reach the masses through the mass media, which remains under government control.

To have a fighting chance of winning the war against extremism and injustice, the secular forces in the Arab world must have the freedom to fully participate in the political process and the sociocultural life of society. They must have the freedom to write and publish, to organize and mobilize, to debate and challenge culturally and religiously conservative views, and to criticize government performances and hold state officials accountable. And their right to do so has to be guaranteed by law and protected by state agencies. The United States, on the other hand, has to develop a new Middle East policy based on moral principles, international law and UN resolutions. Such a policy is a must if the United States were to deal with the Arab-Israel conflict fairly and address other regional problems honestly. Furthermore, the rhetoric regarding the "war on terrorism" has to be reframed in such a way to make Arabs and Muslims feel that they are a part of the war on terrorism, not the intended target of it. Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin wrote in the *Washington Post* on December 12, 2001, "America needs a radically new foreign policy. No foreign policy devoid of sound moral principles is realistic today. Even a 'victory' in Afghanistan will do little to protect us from terrorism if we once again become complicit with authoritarian regimes that abuse their own people."

What the oppressed Arab masses and the repressed intellectuals are asking Americans to do is very simple: to be true to their own ideas and ideals enunciated in the US Constitution and practiced by American governments within the borders of the United States. They are asking the United States to stand for democracy, respect for human rights, fairness, national self-determination, and economic development everywhere. They are furthermore asking the US government to abandon its double standard regarding the implementation of UN resolutions and work with honesty and

honor to end the inhumane, unjust and illegal Israeli occupation and colonization of Arab lands.

Liberals and conservatives in the Arab world have been fighting a war of ideas since the mid-1960s, with the conservatives winning most of the battles, particularly among the religiously minded and the hopelessly poor and largely ignorant Arab masses. While the nature of the message of the liberal and national forces and its vagueness have been largely responsible for their failure, the simplicity of the religious forces message has contributed to their success, and thus to their ability to win the battle of ideas. While secular governments and national forces can and do often fail when they disappoint their constituents and appear unable to live up to popular expectations, religious forces do not usually fail; they seldom promise people much in life on earth. The true promises the religious forces usually make and swear to deliver are those that supposedly await the believers in the afterlife. To find out how real such promises are, one must die without sin and, in the current political climate, often accept death as a result of killing a perceived enemy in war.

Therefore, if current socioeconomic and sociopolitical conditions and trends were to continue unchallenged for another decade or two, the religiously and culturally conservative forces would be in a good position to win a decisive victory. Non-state actors are more likely to dominate the scene, war between such actors and Israel would become more intense and frequent, and forces of terrorism would gain new bases and spread further. And if this were to happen, any further talk about winning the war on terrorism and causing a genuine sociocultural transformation of Arab societies would become an exercise in futility, at least for decades to come.

Every nation that experiences major setbacks emanating from the failure of its predominant ideology to meet the challenges of its times, causes its people to lose faith in their sociopolitical ideologies and seek salvation in religion, the most resilient force in the life of most people. And this in turn gives religious fundamentalism the opportunity to rise, take the initiative and claim the future. However, the future fundamentalism usually envisions is one that would be built in the image of a past that had never experienced the challenges posed by the present. In addition, changes that fundamentalist movements usually espouses are behavior oriented rather than scientific

or economic oriented, which make them less able to deal with the complexities of life. While changes inspired by fundamentalism are likely to influence the attitudes and relationships of many people, they are less likely to develop the systems and build the institutions needed to meet the ever increasing challenges of the times. A fundamentalist society may become more ethical and moral and seeks less pleasure, it is doubtful, however, that it will ever become more productive and able to bridge the socioeconomic gap in society or the sociocultural and technological gaps with the advanced nations of the world. The lack of new ideas on the one hand, and hashing and rehashing of the past on the other, make religious fundamentalism a route to escape reality rather than a positive reaction to the challenges posed by it; and illusion rather than a practical solution.

Religious fundamentalism is not a unique phenomenon that prevails in Muslim states only. From the United States to India and China, from Central Asia to Morocco, and from Eastern Europe to Latin America, the appeal of fundamentalism appears to be on the rise. As an international phenomenon, fundamentalism has its own logic and roots that seem to transcend national borders and religious orientations, and thus to cut across various cultures. The universality of this phenomenon dictates that its social causes and possible political implications be carefully examined; which can only be examined by placing them in the communality of human needs, social relations, and national aspirations shared by all peoples.

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