

Background

Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is an Abrahamic faith and a Monotheistic religion. Its followers are called Muslims. Islam was founded in Arabia in the 7th century by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) fought against oppression, injustice and corruption. During his lifetime he was able to create a just and fair society based on religious tolerance. After his death Islam quickly spread to various parts of the world and within a hundred years it had attracted a huge following. Various Muslim Empires were created by Muslims. Islam had not defined a set political system so these Empires were able to establish themselves and flourish by using the systems which Muslims encountered when they gained hegemony.

In the early 20th century the age of Empires was coming to an end. The Ottoman Empire had collapsed and the British Empire was withdrawing from areas it had previously occupied. A political and social vacuum was being created in former colonial territories. This political climate resulted in new ideologies emerging. In Europe totalitarian ideologies such as Communism and fascism had arisen that claimed to overcome the decadence of the dominant liberal democratic societies of the West and create the basis of an alternative modernity in a new socio-political order. In the Middle-East ideologies such as Ba'athism and Islamism formed which made parallel claims in the Muslim world. These ideologies were primarily reactions to Colonialism.

What is Islamism?

It is important to note that just as there is no one single definition of Communism, there is also no one single definition of Islamism. There are, however, certain characteristics within Islamism that distinguish it from established religions, particularly from Islam itself.

One fact about Islam that influences Islamism's nature as a political ideology is that Islamists are able to manipulate Islamic scripture and history in order to justify their socio-political aims. For example, the Qur'an mentions the virtues of being a 'just leader', and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) maintained a political, as well as spiritual, leadership in the society he established in Medina, drawing treaties and taking part in battles. For these reasons Islam is seen by many Muslims as being operative in all spheres of life, including politics.

Yet though most Muslims regard Islam as being operative in all spheres of life, including politics, this does not mean that Islam has predefined a political system or stance that it is incumbent on all Muslims to believe in. For example, there is no mention of statehood in the Quran, nor are there pre-ordained political principles prescribed in any of the Islamic holy texts that Muslims are required to follow. Islamists, however, will argue that Muslims are only allowed to follow and participate in one type of political system, and that all other political systems and ideologies are "un-Islamic". This is quite unprecedented and lacks historical or scriptural justification. Muslim empires in the past have had multiple legal and

political systems. Today Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia all see themselves as "Islamic states", yet their political systems are different. This is due to the fact that Islam is not a political ideology, and has not ordained a particular political system for Muslims to abide by.

The key difference between Islam and Islamism is that Islam is not, and has never been described as, a political ideology.

Furthermore, one could even argue that there is in fact scriptural justification for the separation of Church and State in Islam, so that there is no real scriptural justification for establishing an Islamic state as Islamists maintain. I refer to the saying of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) "You know your worldly affairs better than I do, and I know your religious matters better than you do" (Muslim - 139-141). Many have interpreted this to mean that although the Prophet was a religious and political leader, he was not infallible when it came to politics and that Islam makes no prescriptions about the way human beings should organize the political realm while on earth.

It is thus in marked contrast to both the history of Muslim societies and world majority Muslim opinion that even today the Islamists regard Islam axiomatically as a revolutionary political ideology surpassing all other political ideologies, such as Communism and Capitalism, since it is a divine ideology rather than one based on fallible man-made concepts and ideas. An implication of this is the Islamist assertion that Islam must have provided a detailed and divinely pre-ordained stance on matters such as political structure or the economy and these can be realized, by definition, only by destroying institutions based on Capitalism and Communism which have no basis in the Qur'an. If these structures and systems are deemed absent, the Islamists will work to bring them about.

A further implication of this belief is that Islam, as a political ideology, must also be in perennial conflict with other dominant political ideologies, in the same manner that Communism was in perennial conflict with Capitalism during the Cold War.

Ironically, Islamism, thanks partly to the absence of a fully developed tradition of political theory in Islam, borrows heavily from Europe's revolutionary political ideologies such as Marxism-Leninism in its organizational and operational structure, and due to this fact many of the concepts within Islamism resemble those within Marxism.

Since Islam is seen by Islamists as a political ideology destined to achieve hegemony within the modern world, they assert that the Shariah, which is the Muslim religious code of conduct, demands implementation not just as the basis of social norms but of state law and of political institutions. Any nation or state that does not implement their version of Shariah thereby becomes *dar al-harb* (an abode of war) and shall remain so until the Shariah is imposed on a constitutional level. Once such a state is created it shall cease to be *dar al-harb* and will become *dar al-Islam* (land of Islam).

Following on from this Islamists also make the claim that the global Muslim community, or Ummah, represents a political bloc rather than merely a spiritual community, an idea that shares many similarities to the Marxist concept of the proletariat. Loyalty and allegiance is thus owed to this political bloc rather than to any state or nation, hence an Islamist would

reject any form of national identity and would identify himself/herself as a Muslim only, rather than a British Muslim or a Pakistani Muslim etc.

The religion of peace

The ultimate objective of Islamism, in contradistinction to historical and scriptural Islam, is the creation of a super expansionist Islamist state, or a Caliphate, that would do away with borders and unite all Muslim majority countries into one unitary state. In its more extreme formulation this aim is expressed in terms of a 'global Caliphate' that extends its authority over the world of non-Muslims as well. Again, until such utopian goals are achieved all countries that are not united under this expansionist state or submit to Islamic authority are regarded as *dar al-harb*. Just as the international proletariat, the global political bloc for Communists, required an expansionist state to proactively 'liberate' workers from the tyranny of Capitalism, likewise the Caliphate must proactively intervene in the affairs of other states so as to 'liberate' Muslim residents from the yoke of *kufr*, or disbelief.

Despite the fact that since 9/11, 7/7 and the Madrid bombings Islamism has come to dominate the world's headlines in the West, the vast majority of the world's Muslims continue to believe Islam is not a political ideology and do not pursue the revolutionary goals that Islamists have projected onto it. In the Quran Islam is described as 'Deen-al-Islam' which translates as 'religion of peace'.

By Ishtiaq Hussain