# Islamism and Islamists:
# A very short introduction

by Florence Gaub

Islamism today has many faces: militant groups in Iraq and Lebanon, political parties in Tunisia and Egypt, and regimes in Iran and Saudi Arabia. But this umbrella term conceals the fact that these groups use different tactics, tap into different grievances and have different political goals. Lumping them together is a gross oversimplification – it is time for an overview.

Although often associated with terrorist groups, the term Islamism simply denotes a political project inspired by Islam. Current streams of political Islam all belong to a wave of Islamist revivalism, the likes of which was last seen on several occasions between the 11th and 14th centuries. Their goal is the re-Islamisation of their respective societies, and ultimately a state based on the principles of Islam. The three major currents belonging to this wave, however, differ starkly on religious doctrine, on what kind of state to establish, and how to fulfil their objectives. In contrast to adherents of *authoritarian* Islamism, who believe they have already accomplished the goal of creating an Islamic state, advocates of both *revolutionary* and *electoral* Islamism are 'changists', seeking to replace incumbent regimes. The latter two disagree, however, on the means to bring about the desired change, as well as on the form of the Islamic state to be achieved.

## The three main sources

The beginning of modern Islamism can be traced back to around the time the Ottoman empire collapsed. Three events then set in motion the dynamics responsible for much of the violence seen today: the *abolition of the caliphate* in 1924, the *creation of the Muslim Brotherhood* in 1928, and the *foundation of Saudi Arabia* in 1932.

The *disappearance of the caliphate* created a vacuum in Sunni political Islam. In theory, the caliphate is a sovereign state uniting all Muslims under one political and spiritual leader. Since the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the caliph (from the Arabic word for successor) leads the Muslim community in political terms, but has no doctrinal power. In fact, it was around the selection of the first caliph that the split between Sunnis and Shias occurred: Sunnis believed that the successor of Muhammad should be elected, whereas Shiites deemed that the title should follow hereditary principles within the Prophet's family. Both branches went on to develop different visions of political Islam, although they often resemble each other at first glance.

In practice, only the first caliphates effectively controlled all territories inhabited by Muslims.

Although several attempts have been made to restore the title since the abolishment, the Muslim consensus necessary to pick the next caliph has never materialised. Self-proclamations, such as that recently of Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, have no validity in accordance with Sunni tradition. This absence of a unifying figure offers some explanation as to why Sunni Islamic authority is particularly fragmented today.

Around the same time as the fall of the Ottoman empire, school teacher Hassan al-Banna founded the *Muslim Brotherhood* in Egypt. The society had three objectives, which have since remained largely the same: social renewal based on Islamic values, the long-term implementation of traditional Islamic law, and ending foreign occupation of Muslim lands (at that time by the United Kingdom). Al-Banna's vision was a progressive and gradual one: he advocated re-Islamisation through means of charity and information, and can be seen as the founding father of what is now the Sunni branch of electoral Islamism.

The foundations of Sunni revolutionary Islamism were laid down twenty years later by Sayyid Qutb, also an Egyptian civil servant. Qutb rejected al-Banna's incremental approach and believed that only the violent overthrow of existing regimes (all of which he considered 'un-Islamic') would lead to the establishment of a fully Islamic state – a position which led to his execution in 1966. Al-Banna and Qutb, albeit both Muslim Brothers, symbolise the two factions which have dominated the re-Islamisation movement since the 1950s: the progressive/electoral versus the revolutionary/terrorist approach.

Created shortly after the birth of the Muslim Brotherhood, *Saudi Arabia* was the first Arab state to base its existence on Islam. A safe haven for Islamists persecuted elsewhere in the Arab world, the country only gained traction as the region's ideological powerhouse after the sudden and exponential production of oil allowed it to spread its own 'brand' of Sunni Islam – Salafism or Wahabism – from the late 1960s onwards.

## Ideological nuances

What is potentially confusing is that every form of current political Islam claims to be somewhat influenced by Salafism – but there is disagreement over what this means in practice amongst the various contenders. In the decades following independence, institutional Islamic clergy were repressed in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. Salafism therefore began to spread in the Arab world not only because Saudi Arabia actively engaged in proselytism, but also because the theological field had been left vacant.

Salafism as a movement is not necessarily a militant one. It is a school of thought advocating the return to the purest form of Islam as practiced by Muhammad's 'companions' – *Salaf* meaning ancestors or predecessors. Today, Salafism is practiced mainly in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar – and is strongly influenced by the conviction that obedience to authority is key. Proponents of revolutionary Islamism (who see themselves as the *real* Salafis) disagree with this notion, and see all current Muslim governments as un-Islamic and therefore legitimate targets.

While electoral Islamists such as the Muslim Brothers sympathise with Salafism's rhetoric of Islamic renewal, their progressive approach has, in practice, meant making concessions on issues such as gender equality and political pluralism. Such compromises are, however, rejected by most Salafi thinkers on the grounds that they contradict Islamic principles. This explains why al-Qaeda's leader al-Zawahiri once wrote an entire book condemning the Muslim Brotherhood for acquiescing with Egypt's leadership ever since its inception. His recent (contradictory) vocal support for the organisation following the ouster of President Muhammad Morsi is a mere tactical move.

Shiite Islamism lacks these ideological debates, and does not challenge the revolutionary-turned-authoritarian Islamism of Iran. It does, however, have representatives in both revolutionary and electoral branches.

## The three main streams

- *The children of the revolution*

The notion that an Islamic renewal will be triggered by a revolution began to take root in the 1970s: the defeat against Israel in 1967 exposed the shortcomings of Islamism's main political contender, pan-Arabism, and in 1979, Shia *revolutionary Islamism* toppled Iran's regime. Ayatollah Khomeini claimed Iranian supremacy over all Muslims (in spite of the fact that Iran is a Shia state and around 90% of Muslims are Sunni) and openly called for an overthrow of the Gulf monarchies. Sunni revolutionary Islamism, albeit different in many ways, drew inspiration

from Iran's successful example, and has, on occasion, been funded by Tehran, too.

While the rhetoric emanating from Iran was frightening enough to its neighbours, actual attempts to topple first the Saudi regime in 1979 and then the Bahraini one in 1981 confirmed revolutionary Islamism (whether Sunni or Shia) as a genuine threat to Arab regimes. Egypt's President Anwar Sadat was assassinated in 1981 by Islamic Jihad during a military parade, and similar groups began to form in Algeria, the Palestinian territories and Lebanon. Arab governments chose three broad tactics to counter revolutionary Islamism: repress their populations, engage in a sectarian war of words against Iran, and co-opt certain Islamist groups considered to be moderate. A fourth tactic emerged following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979: it provided a welcome opportunity to actively encourage young men who adhered to revolutionary Islamism to take up arms against the communist occupation of Muslim lands.

But the hope that the concept and these men, like Osama Bin Laden, would fade away in the mountains of Afghanistan proved false. Revolutionary Islamism was galvanised by the Soviet withdrawal in 1988, the arrival of American forces in the Arabian Peninsula following the invasion of Kuwait, and the Palestine Liberation Organisation's renunciation of violence, which led to the creation of Hamas in 1987. Returnees from Afghanistan began to train in camps in states such as Sudan, Yemen and Somalia, and established a database of those volunteers who had attended – hence the name al-Qaeda (Arabic for 'the base') attributed to the organisation by US secret services.

Revolutionary Islamist terrorist attacks, involving suicide bombings, became a global phenomenon from 1998 onwards. Groups such as al-Qaeda, IS, Beit al-Maqdis, Ansar al-Sharia and others routinely employ terrorism in an attempt to weaken governments and trigger a uprising of the Muslim population against their rulers. They differ in tactics, however; whereas al-Qaeda seeks to hit the 'far enemy' (i.e. the US and its allies), IS, for instance, takes the fight to the 'near enemy' – ranging from secular Arab governments to adherents of different faiths. This tactical choice is, however, determined by feasibility rather than ideology.

But in spite of the recent hysteria over Sunni revolutionary Islamism, it is clear that all groups have failed to inspire the uprising they desire. Whether in Algeria, Iraq, Bosnia or Saudi Arabia, Sunni revolutionary Islamism has never managed to garner large-scale and lasting support. In this regard, it stands in stark contrast to the Iranian revolution, a mass event which enjoyed popular backing.

- *The descendants of the founder*

Less prominent than revolutionary Islamists, *electoral Islamists* – groups which chose to follow Hassan al-Banna's tactic of a progressive and gradual Islamisation of society – also emerged on the political scene from the late 1970s onwards. This happened first in Sudan with the admission of the National Islamic Front to parliament in 1979, and later with the creation of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria in 1988. Hizbullah, a Shiite militia created in 1984 with Iran's support, has participated in Lebanon's elections since 1992. The Muslim Brotherhood, albeit formally banned, fielded individual candidates for political office in Egypt from 1984 onwards. Its Palestinian counterpart, Hamas, won the elections in 2006, while the Turkish AKP, founded in 2001, secured a majority in 2002 and has been in power ever since. In Iraq, dozens of Islamist parties – both Shia and Sunni – have dominated the political landscape following the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

But it was the overthrow of governments in Tunisia and Egypt which provided Sunni Islamist political parties with the necessary launch pad to come to power. In Tunisia, Ennahda (the Tunisian outlet of the Muslim Brotherhood), won 37% of votes cast in the country's first free elections; in Egypt, six Islamist parties participated in the 2011 elections, with the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party winning 34.9% and its Salafi competitor, Nour, 25%. The Muslim Brotherhood's candidate, Muhammad Morsi,

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then went on to become president in 2012 with 51.73% of the vote.

Although these parties share a broad political goal, they nevertheless disagree over content and strategy. In Egypt, Nour joined the anti-Muslim Brotherhood alliance in spite of their shared Islamist background, arguing that the Brotherhood is too flexible on issues such as allowing women and Christians to serve in office, and too tolerant towards Iran. In the tradition of Hassan al-Banna (and in stark contrast to IS), the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood did *not* seek the establishment of a state encompassing all of the Muslim community. Although al-Banna favoured the pursuit an all-Islamic state, he nevertheless accepted the existence of Egypt as a country.

Electoral Islamism is often viewed with suspicion; this is in part because some of its representatives started out as revolutionary movements (such as Hamas in the Palestinian territories, Dawa in Iraq and Hizbullah in Lebanon) or eventually resorted to violence (such as the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front). When parties favouring electoral Islamism have reached power, their track record is mixed: the Sudanese National Islamic Front supported not only an authoritarian government but also the strict implementation of Islamic law, Dawa proved to be a divisive sectarian actor in Iraq, whereas the Tunisian Ennahda successfully embraced political pluralism. President Morsi's constitutional decree of 2012, which granted him near absolute powers, fuelled fears of an undemocratic Islamist regime in Egypt and undermined the Brotherhood's earlier declarations advocating a pluralistic and democratic society.

▪ *The established regimes*

There are currently only a few states which actually come close to embodying the ideal of an Islamic state. Aside from Saudi Arabia and Iran, Islamist governments have also existed in Afghanistan (1996 – 2001) and, to some extent, Sudan (since 1989). Both Saudi Arabia and Iran rest their legitimacy on a certain form of Islamism, although they are, in essence, authoritarian regimes. Saudi Arabia has declared jihad illegal on its soil and argues that as its political system is perfectly in line with Islamic doctrine, there is no need for elections or political pluralism. Across the Persian Gulf, Iran's political system is based on the supremacy of the Shiite clergy.

The difference between the two states is that while Iran's revolutionary-turned-electoral outlets, such as Hizbullah, accept its authoritarianism, Sunni revolutionary and electoral Islamism challenge Saudi Arabia either by violent means or by offering a political alternative. Although ideologically distinct from Iran, the two wings nevertheless echo Teheran's rhetoric of change – fostering Saudi fears of an alliance between Sunni 'changists' and its geopolitical rival. These fears seem somewhat unfounded, given the different political goals of Sunni and Shia revolutionary Islamism in Syria, Iraq, the Palestinian territories, and Lebanon.

In an attempt to roll back both revolutionary and electoral Islamism, Saudi Arabia has reversed some of its previous positions and adopted a hard line. It lately declared both Hizbullah and the Muslim Brotherhood to be terrorist organisations, although the latter's leadership was granted exile in Saudi Arabia for decades. And though the Saudis once supported Islamist groups in Syria fighting the Assad regime, it has joined the international coalition in its bombing campaign against IS. Riyadh also sent troops to Bahrain in 2011 to quell a Shia uprising it claimed was instigated by Iran. Most importantly, Saudi Arabia is financially supporting Egypt's new government in order to ensure stability in a country which was traditionally a hub of political Islam.

Although clothed in doctrinal and sectarian rhetoric, the current struggle among the three Islamist wings is ultimately one concerning political power.

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