

By Mustafa Akyol

Bolshevism in a Headdress

Islamic fundamentalism has more to do with hatred of the West than with religion



Islamists like Osama bin Laden are the heirs of previous anti-Western terrorists like Carlos the Jackal (right). Raised by a wealthy communist father who gave part of Lenin's name to each of his three sons, Carlos was trained by the KGB and began carrying out terrorist acts in the early 1970s. He killed, kidnapped, and bombed a path across Europe and the Middle East, attacked a nuclear reactor in France with rocket-powered explosives, and built connections with Palestinian militants and Germany's Bader-Meinhof gang of Marxist radicals. After hiding in Yemen, Syria, and the Sudan, he was jailed in France. In prison he has embraced radical Islam.

In October of 2002 I spoke to a crowded Muslim audience in the British city of Birmingham on the topic, "The Evidence for God." My lecture focused on the modern scientific discoveries that support the idea of a designed, "fine-tuned" universe. The audience consisted mostly of Muslim students, and they were very interested in the presentation.

Yet there was a small dissatisfied group in the hall. During the question-and-answer session, one who seemed to be a spokesman for the group rose and, in a passionate voice, objected to the whole idea of the conference. "Why are we wasting time with all this useless philosophical and scientific sophistry?" he demanded. "Shouldn't we concentrate on establishing the worldwide Islamic state that will save us from all evils?"

I explained that the Koran asks every Muslim to examine the natural world and witness God's signs in it, but there is no verse ordering an "Islamic state." The essence of Islam, I said, does not concern such political objectives, but rather faith in God and morality. If he wanted to exalt Islam he should focus on science, philosophy, or art, I suggested, because these are the underpinnings of a civilization.

The young man was furious. In my speech I had mentioned the fall of Marxism as a materialistic theory that claimed to be a

true explanation of human societies. He questioned me for speaking only against Marxism, not against capitalism. I responded, "Well, if we were in a communist country, we could not have a seminar titled 'The Evidence for God.' We can have it freely in this capitalist country. Isn't this a reason enough to opt for the latter?"

Later, I learned that this angry young man was a member of the radical group Hizb-ut Tahrir, firmly dedicated to establishing a global Islamic state. I am sure he and his comrades saw themselves as pious Muslims. Yet there was something terribly wrong with their faith, a defect that left them much more interested in the case against "capitalism" than in the case for God.

Muslim failure breeds radicalism

Most scholars who study radical Islam agree it is something peculiar to the twentieth century. For Muslims, the most important aspect of the last century can be captured in one word: Failure. Muslim nations became the poorest of the world, they were colonized by imperial powers, they lagged behind the West in all

.....
Mustafa Akyol has lectured at universities in the U.S. and U.K., and directs the Intercultural Dialogue Platform in Istanbul, Turkey, which promotes interfaith cooperation.

earthly standards, they were tyrannized by their own rulers.

In the early decades of Islam, Muslims had grown accustomed to triumph. They created a vast empire and gained military and political ascendancy over other civilizations for centuries. As Daniel Pipes, a scholar of Islam, notes: “To be a Muslim meant to belong to a winning civilization.” Muslim cities like Baghdad or Cordoba were “ornaments of the world” as well as centers of science and philosophy. Historian Martin Kramer opines, “Had there been Nobel prizes in the year 1000, they would have gone almost exclusively to Muslims.”

The might and sophistication of the Islamic world was severely shaken in the middle of the thirteenth century with the Mongol invasion. The “Mongol catastrophe,” as it came to be known, resulted in the destruction of Muslim cities and the eclipse of the Arab civilization—which would never recover again. The Mongols slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Muslim inhabitants when they invaded Baghdad in 1258. Arab historian Ibn-i Kasir wrote that “such a tragedy has never been witnessed since God created the world.”

The Mongol catastrophe devastated the Arabs, but Islam continued to shine under the Ottomans further north. Eventually, though, the Turks declined in relation to the modernizing West, and in World War I their empire was finally destroyed. Muslim nations of North Africa and the Middle East, previously subjects of the Muslim Ottomans, were colonized by European powers. Upcoming decades ushered in worse failures: socio-cultural backwardness, military defeats at the hands of Israel, the collapse of both socialism and Arab nationalism. There was trauma in the Muslim world, which triggered Islamic radicalism.

Europe has turned out to be a perfect petri dish for growing Islamic radicalism. Muslim communities there consist mostly of poor immigrants living in closed communities. Such a social situation is fertile ground for radicalism, and disenchanting European Muslims have easily been recruited by radical groups. Antoine Sfeir, a French scholar studying Islamic radicalism in Europe, characterizes it as “a kind of combat against the rich and powerful by the poor men of the planet.” Oliver Roy, another French expert on Islamic movements, notes, “To convert to Islam today is a way for a European rebel to find a cause; it has little to do with theology.” Not surprisingly, Lionel Dumont, an Algerian-born French national suspected of links to al-Qaeda, said that he joined Islam because “the Muslims are the only ones to fight the system.”

This fight against “the system” links Islamic radicalism to the Marxist-Leninist radicalism that preceded it. Marxism had a considerable influence on Islamic radicals like Sayyid Qutb, Sayyid Mawdudi, and Ali Shariati—architect of the Iranian Revolution. Shariati thought that Islam presented a better ideology and system than Marxism-Leninism for Muslims to topple the “imperialists.”

**Marxists and
proto-fascists such as
Martin Heidegger—
a sworn enemy of
America—set the table
for the resentments of
today’s radical Islamists.**

It is thus not surprising to see ex-Marxists join the ranks of Islamic radicals. A compelling example is the recent “conversion” to Islam of Carlos the Jackal, the notorious Marxist terrorist now imprisoned in France. From his prison cell he has penned a book titled *Revolutionary Islam*. This brand of Islam, he argues, “attacks the ruling classes in order to achieve a more equitable redistribution of wealth” and is the only “transnational force capable of standing up to the enslavement of nations.”

Hatred and the West

It is imperative to note how radicals deviate from Islam proper. Radicalism uses Islam as a force to divide “us” from “them,” to lead “enslaved” nations against “ruling” ones. The Koran, however, presents Islam as a way to lead all humans to the right path. From a purely Koranic point of view, Westerners are potential brothers to whom Islam should be presented “with wisdom and fair admonition...in the kindest way.” From the radical point of view, Westerners are dehumanized enemies to be insulted, attacked, and murdered.

The starting point of Islam is faith in God, whereas the starting point of radicalism is hatred against the West. When people begin from such markedly different premises, even if they refer to the same texts, they arrive at very different conclusions. Islam has produced a magnificent civilization, beautiful mosques, tolerant Sufis, and law-abiding citizens; Islamic radicalism produces suicide bombers and cold-blooded killers.

The anti-Western hatred at the heart of Islamic radicalism is an import from alien sources. In fact, it is an ideology all of its own. Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, professors at Bard College and Hebrew University respectively, call this ideology “Occidentalism,” and argue it was born in the West itself.

The first radicals to attack liberal democracies (especially the U.S.) as “rootless, cosmopolitan, superficial, trivial, materialistic, racially mixed, fashion addicted civilizations” were nineteenth-century European revolutionaries of both the left and right. Marxists and proto-fascists such as Martin Heidegger—a sworn enemy of America—constructed the basic criticisms. Others followed, like the fascist Japanese intellectuals of the early 1940s who defined the West as “a poisonous materialist civilization,” or the communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia who slaughtered the Westernized “enemies of the people”—identified as anyone with “soft hands,” or who wore glasses.

The creators of Islamic radicalism borrow heavily from these predecessors. They also draw extensively from fiercely anti-American intellectuals in Europe, and other 1960s radicals. And they have incorporated much of the Marxist-Leninist literature into their political discourse.

The most influential Muslim Occidentalists were Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian ideologue regarded as the mastermind of Islamic

radicalism and militancy. Qutb became a hater of the West after spending time in the U.S. between 1948 and 1950. Based on what he observed in New York City and Greeley, Colorado, he was persuaded that America was a soulless, decadent, corrupt civilization. He even hated the religiosity of Americans, calling it completely insincere. He regarded American Christians and Jews not as “the People of the Book”—a term of respect used in the Koran to describe Bible-believing monotheists—but as *jahiliye*, a society of ignorance and barbarism.

Qutb misjudged the U.S. Most Americans are deeply and passionately religious. Besides all the revealing polls and statistics, I have personally observed this during many visits to churches and religious communities in the U.S. I have met American Christians who left their comfortable houses and went to the poorest areas of Africa or Indochina as missionaries, solely for the sake of God. That is sincerity indeed.

Jews, Islam, and Nazis

Another import of Islamic radicalism is anti-Semitism. Many Koranic verses harshly criticize Jews for not being submissive to God and His prophets, including Moses, John the Baptist, and Jesus Christ; but this is far from anti-Semitism. These verses criticize only Jews who disobey God. Other verses demand respect for the Jews as “People of the Book.” In one chapter, after describing the sins committed by some Jews, the devout ones are praised:

They are not all alike; of the People of the Book there is an upright party; they recite God’s communications in the nighttime and they adore (Him). They believe in God and the last day, and they enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong and they strive with one another in hastening to good deeds, and those are among the good.

So the Koran considers whether Jews are loyal to God in judging them. This is not much different from the view of the Old Testament, which includes some very harsh passages about Israelites gone astray.

Islamic radicals, however, hate all Jews. I have personally witnessed that they even suspect Jewish converts to Islam. They demonstrate a racial hatred of Jews, which is a characteristic of modern anti-Semitism. That hatred is often nurtured by the belief in a global Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world, a belief that has its foundation not in the Koran but in modern anti-Semitic literature such as the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Some Islamic radicals even feel sympathy for the Nazis, contending that they gave the Jews “what they deserved.” Ex-friends of Mohammed Atta, the 9/11 mastermind, inform us that he had

We Muslims must understand that Islam is not about avenging our failures, justifying our hatreds, and establishing repressive political systems.

a kind of “Nazi *weltanschauung*.” Such pro-Nazi Islamists are so far removed from a religious perspective they fail to remember that Muslims are also Semites (“children of Abraham”), and that the neo-pagan Nazi ideology was inherently hostile to all Semitic monotheisms.

An Islam without animosity

Islamic radicals do use many religious arguments, and those arguments are cited by some Western analysts as evidence that Islam itself is the real source of their mili-

tancy. But while there truly are some militant teachings within the Islamic tradition that radicals use to justify their positions, the pathological hatred of the West, the obsession with politics, and the indiscriminate murderousness of these radicals is something without precedent in mainstream Islam. It is a worldview much closer to Bolshevism than to any kind of theism.

As for the militant teachings within the Islamic tradition, they can be ameliorated by a critical evaluation of traditional Islamic sources and a modern exegesis of the Koran. This takes us to the greatest doctrinal problem within the contemporary Islamic world: The majority of Muslims rely uncritically on religious schools that date back to the Middle Ages. The founders of those schools were pious Muslims, but they lived in a medieval world and interpreted the Koran within that milieu. There was no modernity or democracy at that time, and their political doctrine assumed a perpetual conflict between “us” and “them”—“house of Islam” and “house of war.”

Yet times have changed. We Muslims don’t ride camels anymore; we drive cars. Similarly, we can’t apply a medieval political doctrine to the twenty-first century. There is a modern phenomenon called the open society, in which all Muslims are free to practice and evangelize their faith. We should embrace it and question those traditional teachings that would forbid our doing so. We should build a “Muslim conservatism” through which we will stand for our values in a modern democratic society. This will not be a departure from our faith—it will be a great service to it.

Islam needs a doctrinal renewal. As a first step, we should rid ourselves of animosity toward the West, because it perverts the very essence of Islam. We Muslims must understand that Islam is not about avenging our failures, justifying our hatreds, and establishing repressive political systems. Yes, Islam has principles that will guide the political sphere, but our religion does not start there. It starts with faith in God and the moral values He has decreed.

We can build a “Muslim conservatism” through which we will stand for our values in a modern democratic society. This will not be a departure from our faith—it will be a great service to it. I wish that the young militant in Birmingham, along with the radical group he represented, could realize this.

