Radical Islamism and Failed Developmentalism

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ABSTRACT The rise of radical Islamism in recent years does not limit the applicability of the concept of cultural nationalism. Rather the two are intertwined in ways which this article will attempt to highlight. Islam took specific national forms as modern nation-states arose and the contemporary resurgence of radical Islamism also follows that modern pattern. I examine the emergence of the three most important movements in the Islamic world, namely, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jama’at-e Islami in Pakistan and Khomeinism in Iran. I argue that imperialism, authoritarianism and the contemporary rise of radical Islamism are closely related. More particularly, the latter is the complex product of failed modernisation programmes, failed developmentalism under the auspices of international capital and in collaboration with the local propertied classes, and corrupt, undemocratic governments throughout the Islamic world. The failure of secular left and liberal nationalist movements to attract mass-based support has also contributed to the strengthening of radical Islamists. The article concludes that the mobilising power and populist appeal of radical Islamists can be challenged effectively only if the social, economic and political factors that give rise to these movements in the first place are eliminated.

Like any other religion and ideology, Islam has had a contingent nature, influencing and being influenced by the cultures and societies it came to dominate. Contrary to simplistic views in the West—shared, ironically, by the Muslim orthodoxy—Islam is not a monolithic religion. Heresiographers have identified over 72 sects within it, each considering itself the ‘saved sect’ and the others as misguided.1 Beside the major division between the majority Sunnis and the minority Shi’is, within each there are major sub-sects and divisions.2 Those who try to explain Islamic movements on the basis of the ‘essence’ of Islam do not take into consideration the complex interplay of religion and society, and its articulation with political, cultural, social and economic structures in particular societies in different stages of historical development. In modern times this has meant that Islam has not only interacted with the movements and forces which created modern 20th century
states and their developmental nationalisms (see Bamyeh in this volume) but it is also part of the processes through which these developmental nationalisms have unravelled, opening the door to a range of more or less extreme versions of Islamic politics which form, in different Islamic countries, their national versions of cultural nationalisms.

While the contemporary, and transnational, rise of Islamic politics might seem to limit the applicability of the concept of cultural nationalism, the two are intertwined in ways which this article will attempt to highlight in the course of its argument. Although Islam is in some sense transnational, not only has it taken specific national forms as modern nation-states arose, its contemporary transnational resurgence also follows that modern pattern, although Pakistan may be an exception of sorts (see Shaikh in this volume). In this article I examine the emergence of the three most important movements in the Islamic world, namely, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jama'at-e Islami in Pakistan and Khomeinism in Iran. Approaching the matter politically, rather than etheologically (the latter approach is, unfortunately, all too common, and misleading) I argue that imperialism, authoritarianism, and the contemporary rise of Islamic politics are closely related. More particularly, I will argue that the latter is the complex product of failed modernisation programmes, failed developmentalism under the auspices of international capital and corrupt, undemocratic governments throughout the Islamic world. Suppression of secular forces by dictatorial regimes, as well as the failures of the secular left and liberal nationalist movements in these societies, has further contributed to the rise of radical Islamic movements.

In the most blatant cases radical Islamic movements have emerged as a result of the direct encouragement of imperialists and foreign forces: the USA supported the mujahedeen in Afghanistan unconditionally while they confronted the USSR and Israel early on supported Hamas in order to weaken the secular PLO in the Palestinian Occupied Territories.4

Modern Islamic politics and the nation-state

Contemporary Islamic movements which have emerged in different parts of the Islamic world for a variety of reasons may appear, given their radical interpretation of Islam, akin to the old phenomenon, stretching all the way back to the Islamic revivalism of the teachings of jurists such as Ibn Hanbal (780–855), Ibn Taimiyyya (1263–1328) and, in a later period, Muhammad Abd al Wahhab (1703–92). Yet the modern Islamic movements are not direct continuations of that revivalism: none of the earlier movements, which were suppressed at the time, were mass movements. When Caliph Al-Ma’mun in the ninth century brutalised Ibn Hanbal and his followers, he was not faced with a major reaction. When in the 14th century Ibn Taimiyyya was constantly sent to jail by the Mongols and Egyptians, and eventually died in captivity, no movement was formed around him. Likewise, when in the 18th century Muhammad Ali, the Viceroy of Egypt, sent an expedition to suppress and eliminate the Wahhabis in Arabia, there were no mass reactions in their
favour. Even at the earlier stages of the rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements in the contemporary era, we do not witness any mass movements. When in Egypt Hasan Al-Banna was killed by King Farouk, and later Sayyed Qutb was killed by Nasser, or when in Iran the leaders of the Fedayeen of Islam were executed by Mohammad Reza Shah, there were no mass uprisings.

For centuries in the Islamic world the vast majority of traditional religious leaders—the high-ranking clerics, or ulama—were an integral part of the political establishment. They either supported the status quo, or chose ‘quietism’ vis-à-vis corrupt despotic rulers; the small minority that confronted such rulers were tortured or eliminated. The implicit social and political contract between the sovereign and the ulama meant that the clerics would sanction the ‘divine’ absolute rule of the king and secure the allegiance of the umma (the followers) to the sovereign in return for control of religious endowments, the judicial system and the education system.

This division of labour, a sort of church – state concordat, worked well for rulers and clerics in the societies of the time, until the traditional social and economic fabric of Islamic societies began to fall apart, as European expansionism—or the conjoint expansion of capitalism and imperialism—reached the regions of Islam in the late 19th century and particularly in the mid-20th century. With the ensuing defeat and humiliation of the Muslim world by the West, Muslim religious leaders—apart from the traditional establishment clerics who continued their opportunistic or quietist politics—followed two other broad strategies. One was to reform and modernise, the other was to rehabilitate Islam and return to the fundamentals. The creation of nation-states and national identities in these societies was accompanied by both reform efforts and the gradual emergence of militant Islamic movements challenging the political status quo.

**Muslim reformers**

Modern calls for reform, like liberal and rationalist interpretations of Islam, trace their lineage in the intellectual history of Islam back to the eighth century CE and the Mu‘tazelites, who relied on logic and attempted an allegorical, as opposed to a literal, reading of the scripture. Later luminaries, such as Al-Kindi (796–873), Zakariya Razi (865–925), Farabi (872–950), Avicenna (980–1037), Suhrewdi (1155–1191) and many others in Persia and the Arab world tried to reconcile Greek and Islamic philosophies. Later great Andalusian thinkers such as Averroes (1126–1198) and Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) strengthened the rationalist approach, and were among the forerunners of ideas that influenced the European Enlightenment. Indeed, until the Age of Enlightenment, and despite the fact that the Islamic world had begun to decline by the 15th century, as Meddeb argues, developments in both Europe and the Islamic world paralleled each other. However, with the beginning of the Enlightenment, Europe advanced ahead of all other civilisations.

With European expansionism and colonialism much of the Islamic world came under the dominance of European powers and, in each of the three
countries under examination, we find powerful liberalising, modernising currents aiming to reform Islam and adapt its adherents to the new society that was emerging. In India early Muslim reformers such as Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869), the great Indian Shi'i poet, and Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) initiated reforms and called for modernism. The latter sought a ‘Muslim Renaissance’, calling for Western education and a move away from traditional religious education led by the backward-looking ulama. The graduates of Aligarh Muslim University, founded by Syed Ahmad Khan, formed the bulk of the new Muslim middle classes that later came to play a significant role in the movement for independence and the creation of, and subsequent politics within, Pakistan and India. His modernising politics, however, were neither appreciated by the ulama, nor could they attract a large following in a still largely rural society. In late 19th century British India the minority status of the Muslim community within the predominantly Hindu subcontinent, and Sir Syed’s clear recognition that Muslims were falling behind in their adaptation to the challenges of modern life relative to Hindus, gave his politics a certain pro-British and pro-Western bias. But by the early 20th century such biases were discarded in subcontinental reformist and modernist politics. Mohammad Iqbal (1877–1938), the prominent poet, philosopher and political figure, more closely resembled the modernism emerging in the Islamic world beginning in the late 19th century. He and other founders of the Muslim League, which later established Pakistan, were mostly secular Muslim modernists.

In Iran Sayyid Jamal al-Din Assadabadi, known as al-Afghani (1838–97), vigorously sought to revitalise Islam and Muslims for the new challenges. This prolific Iranian Shi'i scholar and activist, and the founder of pan-Islamism, became the most influential proponent of Islamic modernism. However, unlike his contemporary Syed Ahmad Khan in India, his modernism was clearly anti-imperialist and his pan-Islamism based on the idea that the unity of Muslims would increase their power against the Europeans. He also approved the use of violence to push colonialists out of the Islamic world. He emphasised the need to reform and reinterpret Islam, and to adjust it to modern conditions. During the 1905–11 Constitutional Revolution, other Muslim reformers in Iran, such as Mirza Hussein Na'ini and Mulla Abdul-Rasssul Kashani, engaged in theoretical arguments about the relations between religion and the state.

In Egypt the most prominent reformer was Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), the Egyptian jurist-scholar who later became the grand mufti of Egypt. He was a staunch modernist and a stronger proponent of reform. Abduh introduced Western sciences and thought into the curriculum of the influential Al-Azhar University, a move that angered the traditional ulama. While calling for a return to the fundamentals of Islam, he emphasised the need for reinterpreting the Koran, warning his followers not to imitate their forebears in interpreting the holy book, and to use ‘reason and reflection’ in its interpretation. Abduh’s follower, the Syrian Rashid Ridha (1865–1935), espoused modernist ideas, but gradually shifted to conservatism along the lines of the Hanbalite school; he supported the Wahhabi movement in Arabia.
and later influenced radical fundamentalists such as Hassan al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Whatever their differences, the most important and consistent component of the teachings of the Muslim reformers was that Islam was in harmony with modern sciences, and that Muslims could adapt to modernity and still keep their faith. Whether they were pro-Western or anti-imperialist, they all subscribed to modern ideals and argued either that they were, or could be made, compatible with the Muslim intellectual and political heritage. Ironically, however, it was the expansion of the West’s influence in the social, economic and political aspects of life in Islamic societies that, directly and indirectly, increased the power of obscurantist forces and diminished that of these reformers. Given continued Western domination, suppression, and other setbacks, the Islamic reformers could not easily attract more followers, and in the process lost many of their supporters to more radical perspectives.

One may briefly review the strong impact of colonial and imperial politics on the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. The British occupation of Egypt in 1882 culminated in the suppression of a nationalist movement that could have been a prelude to the formation of an independent country and a fledgling democracy. Later, in 1919, the British arrested the members of the Egyptian nationalist delegation who had supported British war efforts, exiling or detaining them. This led to major strikes and riots throughout Egypt. One of the students participating in the riots was Hasan-al-Banna, who in 1928 founded the Muslim Brotherhood, one of the most widespread and influential radical Islamic movements.

In the more complex environment of predominantly Hindu India, despite the pro-British policies of some Islamic reformers, particular British actions and, more importantly, the general results of colonial rule, undermined reformers’ influence among the Muslim masses. Examples of actions particularly offensive to Muslims included the brutal suppression of the 1857 rebellion and the exile of the last Mughal emperor, the creation, after two British defeats in Afghanistan, of the Durand Line in 1893 to divide Afghanistan and India, intentionally cutting through the lands of the Pushtun tribes, and forcing Indian Muslim troops to fight against their co-religionists in Turkey during World War I. More importantly, however, British rule rested on the empowerment of traditional obscurantist Islamic clerics in large parts of social life, including education and family law, and retarded the spread of education in the subcontinent more generally. The vast majority of the subcontinent’s Muslims remained rural and uneducated. Although the movement for Pakistan was, as already pointed out, led by secular forces, they originated from territories that remained, after partition in 1947, in India, while the the Muslim League’s hold over the territories which became Pakistan was very weak. It was not surprising, therefore, that British India’s Muslims became a breeding ground for radical fundamentalist movements such as the Jama’at-e Islami. Established by Abul Ala Mawdudi in 1941, it subsequently played a very important role in the subcontinent, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Although Iran was formally independent, Britain’s involvement in the country’s affairs began with its desire to stem Tsarist and later Bolshevik
influence there and with the contemporaneous discovery of oil in the early years of the 20th century and the concessions on it gained by a British company. Decades later, in 1951, a democratically elected parliament voted to nationalise the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), and called on Dr Mohammad Mossadeq to form a new government. In 1953 the Americans, promised a good share of Iranian oil by the British, orchestrated a coup d'état that toppled Mossadeq’s nationalist government.18 Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who had fled the country, returned to Iran, and with the help of US ‘advisors’, the CIA, Mossad (the Israeli secret service), and SAVAK (the shah’s own secret police), began a brutal dictatorial rule that lasted 26 years. Shah’s reforms in this period associated modernization with authoritarianism as well as imperialism. The Americans even went so far as to humiliate the shah, demanding capitulation-type immunity from prosecution for over 50 000 American advisors in Iran. Not surprisingly the people were against this sort of authoritarian yet craven regime and, with the suppression of progressive political forces, they soon became hostage to clerical ones: Seyyed Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, by then a middle-ranking cleric, had scolded the shah for granting the humiliating privilege to the Americans. He was also against land reform and women’s suffrage. Sent into exile, he was to return during the 1979 Iranian revolution that brought a radical Islamic regime into power.

The Cold War had turned most of the countries of the Middle East into pawns in the hands of the superpowers. The area became an integral part of US and Soviet global politics. The establishment of the state of Israel, the plight of Palestinians and the successive Arab–Israeli wars were additional sources of tension. The unconditional support of Israel and the protection of conservative, oil-rich Arab states by the USA angered succeeding generations of Muslims. The disastrous defeat of the Arab countries in the Six Day War in 1967 disillusioned and humiliated large numbers of the youth of these societies, who had put so much hope in the flawed developmental nationalisms of the Nasserist and Ba’athist regimes. Liberal Islamists and reformers now had less and less of a chance to compete with the rising tide of radicalism. The failure of modernisation programmes and the suppression of secular forces, particularly the left, as discussed below, further contributed to the emergence of Islamic radical movements.

Radical Islamism

If Muslim reformers attempted to re-found Muslim societies for the modern age in secular and rational thinking, a politically more powerful and potent—because vastly more popular—set of alternatives was proposed by radical Islamists who sought the way forward in the faith itself. In Egypt, Hassan Al-Banna (1906–49) had come to the conclusion that the weaknesses and humiliations of Islamic societies stemmed from their deviation from ‘true’ Islam, and he called for a return to the practices of early Muslim rulers. He considered Western civilisations immoral, materialistic and individualistic, and believed that their influences had had a negative impact on Islamic societies. The Muslim Brotherhood, which he founded, waged violent
campaigns against the British, and also against the secular Egyptian modernists. In the 1930s Al-Banna even flirted with the corrupt royal court of Farouk in an effort to ban secular political parties. In the early 1940s the Brotherhood established the ‘secret apparatus’ and in 1948 it assassinated the prime minister. In retaliation the police assassinated Al-Banna in 1949.

When a more popular phase of politics began in Egypt as the monarchy collapsed and the Free Officers came to power under Gamal Abdel Nasser, the popular space was for a time fiercely contested between the secular nationalist forces of Nasser and the Brotherhood. Initially supportive, the Brotherhood soon came up against the realities of this competition as Nasser’s authoritarian rule violently eliminated many of his potential rivals, including the secular left and liberals, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood, in 1954. Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), the most significant thinker of the Brotherhood, was sent to ‘camp’, where he secretly wrote *Signposts*, one of the most important reference books for many radical Islamists. He maintained that the Muslim world, as in the time of Jahiliyya (Arabia before the revelation to the Prophet), had become un-Islamic, and he called for establishing the sovereignty of God through the overthrow of government and its replacement with an Islamic regime based on *shari’a*. Qutb considered Western civilisation a complete failure, and was delighted when in his research he came across the works of Alexis Carrel (1873–1944), the French Nobel Prize–winning biologist—and later a Fascist collaborator—who had painted a gloomy picture of Western civilisation and the Enlightenment. As Choueiri notes, Carrel’s notion of ‘la barbarie’ exactly fit Qutb’s notion of Jahiliyya. Qutb shared much of Carrel’s biological and essentialist views, including those regarding the ‘inferiority’ of women. He was also impressed and influenced by a fundamentalist from the Indian subcontinent, Abul Ala Mawdudi, thus creating a sort of bridge between the two radical Islamist movements: the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jama’at-e Islami.

Nasser released Qutb from jail in 1964 but, when his underground network of terrorist cells was found to be preparing for a series of assassinations and acts of sabotage, he was tried and sentenced to death along with other Brotherhood leaders. Despite brutal suppression, the Muslim Brotherhood survived but divisions within it took it in different directions. Some resorted to mild reformism and parliamentary politics, some chose seclusion, and others moved towards more radicalism, creating a variety of terrorist organisations.

The most important current of radical Islamism to emerge from the Indian subcontinent was established by Abul-Ala Mawdudi (1903–79) in the form of the Jama’at-e Islami in 1941. Mawdudi advocated an interpretative reading of Islam aimed at the mobilisation of Muslims towards the creation of an Islamic state. He emphasised, however, the Islamisation of society before the creation of the Islamic state: ‘If the state were Islamized before society, then the state would be compelled to resort to autocracy and impose its will on an unwilling and unprepared population’. However, as Moghissi rightly suggests, this seemingly Gramscian concern for legitimacy in the relations between civil society and political society cannot be taken seriously when we observe Mawdudi in practice. While he was against the traditional *ulama*, he joined ranks with them to demand an Islamic constitution for

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Pakistan, something that the secular-minded Muslim League founders were trying to avoid. To pressure the new government of Pakistan, he singled out a Muslim religious minority, the Ahmadiyas, and mobilised the masses against them, causing major riots. Through this Fascistic strategy, repeated again and again, the Jama’at succeeded in incorporating many of its conservative Islamic demands into the constitution, and stood firmly in the way of any progressive reforms. Mawdudi eventually became a senior statesman in the brutal military regime of General Zia ul Haq in the late 1970s.

In Iran the authoritarian modernisation programmes of Reza Shah (1925–41), including the forcible unveiling of women, had angered the clerics. Their reaction led to brutal suppression, including a bloody assault by the police in 1935 on a holy mosque, in which many clerics were killed and wounded. In 1941, after the removal of Reza Shah by the allied forces and the political vacuum thereby created, Navab-Safavi (1924–56) founded the Feda’iyan-e Islam organization, with the aim of re-Islamising Iranian society. Khomeini had written his first major political work, *Kashf-al-Asrar* (*The Revealing of Secrets*) in 1943, and Navab Safavi, along the same lines published his *Rahmama-ye Haqayeq* (Guide to the Truth), which became the handbook of radical Feda’ian-e Islam. Among other things, he called for the application of Islamic laws and punishments, the re-veiling of women, segregation of the sexes in schools and workplaces, and the execution of those who were against Islamisation. The adherents of Feda’iyan-e Islam began assassinating not only top officials, including two prime ministers, but also secular intellectuals—most notably the prominent historian, Ahmad Kasravi. Although they were later brutally suppressed by Muhammad Reza Shah’s regime and Navab-Safavi, and three of his associates were executed in 1956, their followers regrouped and came to play a significant role in pressuring the traditionalist ulama to support Khomeini and in mobilising the powerful bazaar merchants during the Iranian revolution of 1979.

The Muslim Brotherhood, Jama’at-e Islami and Khomeinism, along with other major radical Islamic movements, were founded in the 1930s and 1940s. However, the period of their most rapid growth came only decades later, when the developmental nationalisms (in Iran’s case, for the most part, an especially authoritarian and repressive one) began to fail, as much economically as politically. Despite many differences in the patterns of social and economic development in the three countries under study, the outcomes of the period of developmentalism were more or less similar. These included rapid urbanisation (less for Pakistan); rapid population growth; development of a new, salaried middle class; a growing gap between rich and poor; the growth of shantytowns and a lumpen proletariat; and, at the political level, growing authoritarianism along with expanding repressive apparatuses. The failure of modernisation programmes and developmentalist policies carried out by inefficient and corrupt state bureaucracies led to growing economic and social problems and political unrest, particularly among the youth, who constituted roughly 55% of the population in these societies.

Add to this the failure of other political forces, the left, and the nationalists to provide popular alternatives to radical Islamic fundamentalism. The left,
equipped with a powerful ideology and radicalism, attracted a growing number among the newly educated middle classes, particularly in Iran and Egypt. Universities were the main domains of political activity under the leadership of socialist and communist students. Considering the left’s anti-imperialism, anticapitalism and anti-authoritarianism, it not only came under attack by the repressive regimes, but also by other opposition forces, including nationalists and liberal Islamists. In fact, governments seemed much more fearful of the challenge from the left than of that coming from the radical Islamists. The brutal suppression of the left only meant that radical Islamic students and their organisations could flourish and expand unopposed.

Equally tragically in some cases the left was responsible for its own demise. With strong links to the USSR, parts of the left acted as arms of Soviet foreign policy. Obvious examples are the Tudeh Party in Iran and the self-dissolution of the Egypt Communist Party in the wake of Nasser’s nationalism. On the other end of the leftist spectrum were the ultra-radical organisations that followed extremist projects without considering the actual realities of their societies. The best case in point was the Afghan Communists’ coup d’état against Daud Khan in 1978, and the subsequent forceful implementation of unworkable radical reforms by the Taraki government. Although this was a response to secret operations by the USA in Afghanistan, with the help of Pakistan and the fundamentalist mujahedeen—a fact now admitted by the US authorities—nonetheless it was a mistaken move by the left that led to other coups and to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, with disastrous consequences for the USSR, for Afghanistan, for the region and the world.

It is also important to note that developmental nationalist regimes in Pakistan (where they were weakest), Egypt and Iran, despite their varying characteristics, were all less fearful of radical Islamists and, formed as they were by national capitalists and the new upper-middle classes, more fearful of leftist radicalism. Liberal Muslim reformers were also more concerned about the left and less about the radical Islamists, to whom they were closer ideologically. Hence, when the left was suppressed by dictatorial and undemocratic regimes, these opposing forces either remained silent or openly supported the suppression.

Moreover, whenever the nationalist governments were faced with a crisis or entangled in ethnic and other national conflicts, they would resort to the tenets of Islam and seek the support of the Islamists. In Iran Mossadeq and his National Front maintained a strong link with Feda’ian-e Islam and sought the support of the clerics led by Ayatollah Kashani, who, at the critical hour of the CIA coup, left Mossadeq and sided with the military and the shah. In Pakistan the developmental nationalist military regime of General Ayub Khan had initially taken power to push back Islamic fundamentalist encroachments, and had put many of the agitators in jail, but when faced with the conflicts in Kashmir, Khan begged Mawdudi, the leader of the fundamentalist Jama’at-e Islami, to declare a jihad against India. Later, when the Islamist mujahedeen’s plot against Dawud Khan failed in Afghanistan and they fled to Pakistan, Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto gave the conspirators sanctuary and supported their war in Afghanistan. In Egypt the decline of developmental
nationalism, which had already begun before the presidency of Anwar Sadat, was clearly signalled in his appeasement of the Muslim Brotherhood and re-legitimization of its political activities. Indeed, there are numerous cases of dictators in Iran, Egypt and many other countries of the region appeasing Islamists in order to maintain their own power. Short on the resources of legitimacy, they resorted to those of Islamism, more congenial to their increasingly conservative purposes, and suppressed the left and women’s movements. However, in doing so, it soon turned out, they had married the devil. The Shah of Iran fell in a revolution that Ayatollah Khomeini came to lead; Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged in Pakistan by a brutal Islamist general; and Anwar Sadat was assassinated in Egypt by a group of fanatical Muslim radicals.

The appeasement of fundamentalists for short-term gains has not been limited to the authoritarian regimes and nationalist movements of the regions under consideration. It has also been true of foreign powers, particularly the USA. The most obvious cases include FD Roosevelt’s deal with Ibn Saud to protect his kingdom in return for a monopoly over Arabian oil; Reagan’s arms deals with the Khomeini regime with the aim of releasing hostages in Lebanon (and fighting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua: hence the ‘Iran – Contra’ Affair); and before that, the USA’s quiet endorsement of Islamists at the time of the 1979 revolution because of their fears of a leftist revolution. The same policy was put in place in a much earlier period in Iran by the British. After the removal of Reza Shah by the allied forces in 1942, the British, fearful of the growing strength of the Tudeh communist party, pushed for the return of the exiled arch-conservative Ayatollah Qomi to Iran. Later through their agents in the Iranian cabinet pushed for the release of the Feda’ian-e Islam’s assassin of the anti-cleric historian, Kasravi, in order to appease the Islamists.27 In Afghanistan one notes the Reagan administration’s support of the mujahedeen and Bin Laden in Afghanistan, along with the CIA’s direct support of the Islamic international brigade against the Soviets; Clinton’s affair with the Taliban with the hope of building oil pipelines for Unocal;28 and George W Bush’s collaboration with the Islamist Northern Alliance (comprising ex-mujahedeen).

Ideologies and social bases of radical Islamisms

Radical Islamisms not only gained strength in the context of failed developmentalisms, their aspirations and demands were strikingly similar to those of cultural nationalism elsewhere. Though they were articulated in terms of an ostensibly universal and transnational discourse of Islam, in reality there were distinct national versions. Their adherents all believed that Islamic societies had been corrupted by Western cultures and values as well as by foreign domination; to solve this problem, they advocated a return to the imagined practices of the Golden Age of Islam, eliminating existing political regimes and establishing an Islamic state based on shari’a laws.

The most fundamental demand of all radical Islamists was the establishment of Islamic states. Since the linkage of religion and politics is so widely considered to be stronger in Islam than in other religions, it bears a little examination. The Prophet himself was both religious leader and head of the
Islamic state, as was the case with the four Rashidun caliphs. Even if in these early phases of the Islam relations between the perceived pious ruler and the *umma* were clear as is so often claimed, such a clear alignment of religion and politics was never experienced again. Muslim thinkers seem to agree that the ruler, or caliph, should apply the Koranic rules in order to be considered legitimate; the question, however, has been how to achieve this. At least four different interpretations of the relationship between religion and state have evolved in the Islamic world and radical Islamism represents only one of these four.

The first interpretation contends that the ruler should be guided by the juris-consults, the learned *ulama*. For centuries the vast majority of traditionalist establishment clerics in both the Sunni and Shi’i worlds have followed this perspective. In practice, this has meant the collaboration of spiritual leaders with political leaders.

The second interpretation, in sharp contrast to the first, believes that the *ulama*, rather than advising a sovereign, should issue a *fatwa* (a juridical ruling based on *shari’a*) for a *jihad* (holy war) against him. The reference here is Ibn Taimiyya, the 14th-century Syrian who issued a *fatwa* against the sovereign appointed by the Mongols. The more extreme versions of radical Islamism, such as the Fedai’yan-e Islam and the mainstream of Islamic regime in Iran inspired by Khomeini, the Jihad faction of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and most other new Islamic fundamentalist movements, share this perspective. Ayatollah Khomeini invented a new twist on this perspective claiming that, until the appearance of Mahdi (Messiah), the politics in a Muslim society should be led by the learned juris-consults (*wilayat-e faqih*). Abu Ala Mawdudi and his Jama’at movement, without directly calling for a *jihad*, believed that sovereignty and legitimacy reside only in God.

The third perspective, while taking a stand against the sovereign, also believes that the *ulama* are the source of corruption and should be eliminated. The Shukri faction of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Forgan group in Iran are representatives of this perspective.

Finally, the fourth interpretation posits that, until the coming of the Mahdi, there cannot be any hope for the establishment of a just Islamic regime. Some adherents of this theory produced their own messiah, including the Druze in Fatemid Egypt, followers of Mahdism in Sudan, Bahais in Iran and Ahmadis in India and Pakistan. Others, such as the Hojattieh in Iran, are also waiting for Mahdi’s appearance. There are also those who have embraced isolationism and passive seclusion until the appearance of the Mahdi.

Of all these interpretations, it is the second group, the radical Islamists, who have been most successful in creating a mass political base. They have extreme and violent wings and constitute a strong and reactionary political force in each country. Their pre-modern, even atavistic, ideology stands in rather ironic contrast to their class basis.

The three main social currents within modern Islamic politics discussed here—the traditional establishment *ulama*, the liberal Muslim reformers and the radical Islamist fundamentalists—have historically had different social
bases. The traditional establishment *ulama*, although it does not form a single social class, is mostly made up of well-to-do landowners or merchants, who usually have sizeable incomes through the donations of followers or earnings from governments. These clerics have always had close relations with, and have represented, the merchants of the bazaar and the well-to-do, urban, traditional middle classes. In the absence of a church-like hierarchical institution, each member of the *ulama*, particularly in the Shi‘i world, has his own circles and students (*talibs*). The tutees are paid a salary by the *ulama* and, in addition to learning, they act as spiritual labourers in finding more followers in the city neighbourhoods and rural areas for the cleric concerned.29 The faithful followers have to pay part of their earnings to the ayatollah or imam of choice. The more followers a tutee can find among the Muslim masses, the higher is his salary. The vast majority of the Muslim population in the societies under study follow the traditional establishment clerics and, considering the latter’s conservative or quietist politics, there has historically been relative calm in different parts of the Islamic world. (It should be noted that the post-revolutionary *ulama* in Iran and the Taliban of Afghanistan, who came to power and became part of the new establishment, should not be confused with the traditional establishment *ulama*. Radical Islamists and not quietist clerics, they became sovereigns themselves.)

Liberal Muslims who emerged among the professional middle classes and small capitalists from the beginnings of modernity in the Islamic world advocated mild and tolerant interpretations of Islam compatible with the modern structures of society, law and government. Their power bases were, and remain, mostly in government institutions and small to medium-sized industry and service sectors. They look for moderate and gradual reforms of government, are less keen to agitate for change, and have less chance of becoming mass-based movements.

Developmentalist strategies, the modernisation of education, the growing role of the state and an expanding bureaucracy, as well as a degree of industrialisation and urbanisation, vastly expanded the size of the salaried middle classes in these societies and, with the failures of developmentalism there, new currents began to emerge within this expanded class. University students and graduates were now attracted to the secular left, to liberal Muslim activists and to radical Islamist movements. However, in political contexts already described, attractions to radical Islamism increased.

In radical Islamic movements the new salaried middle classes join forces with recent rural migrants, the lower echelons of the traditional urban middle classes, such as shopkeepers and small retailers, and the lumpen proletariat occupying the growing shantytowns surrounding large cities. With further deterioration of social, political and economic conditions, a growing number of these strata have become attracted to radical religious organisations, mostly through university students or graduates, or seminary students.

In contrast to the traditional establishment *ulama*, who have direct access to the masses of the faithful but do not normally want to mobilise them, and unlike the liberal Muslim activists, who neither have access to nor the intention of mobilising the masses, the third group of radical Islamists aims
directly at the mobilisation of the masses in order to change the status quo. To attract supporters and sympathisers, its members establish and operate schools and clinics, and turn mosques into multi-purpose social service organisations. The fundamentalists’ populism and simplistic explanations for the causes of problems in Muslim societies, along with their bold and violent tactics against the dictatorial regimes of their countries and the interests of foreign powers, have made them increasingly popular.

As long as their activities are limited to the middle classes, radical Islamists cannot pose a very serious threat to the status quo, except when resorting to terrorist activities. But when and if they succeed in mobilising the masses, they can violently move towards establishing their perception of Islamic states. In more recent times, in addition to their radical and violent politics, the fundamentalists have resorted wherever possible to democratic processes, and have participated in elections. By doing so, they have created new paradoxes: of inherently anti-democratic forces participating in, and claiming to respect, democratic politics. If they win the elections but are barred from forming a government, they become more violent. The most vivid example of this phenomenon was in Algeria, where, since the 1991 elections, tens of thousands of innocent citizens have been slaughtered by radical Islamists and by the Algerian government, which openly turned into a police state. On the other hand, if the fundamentalists are allowed to form a government, either through an electoral process or through revolution or civil war, they can easily use their powers to inflict their religious zealotry, intolerance and disrespect for human rights and democracy on the societies they come to dominate.

The intimate connection between imperialism and Islamist politics is evident not only in the failures of developmentalism but also in the surge of radical Islamism in their wake. The growing internationalisation of conflicts in Islamic societies, particularly after September 11, the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and their continued disastrous and failed occupations, the continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem and the unresolved Palestinian situation, have provided new breeding grounds for radical Islamists. The continued political repression imposed on Muslim-majority societies by authoritarian regimes has also pushed many of these radicals out of their home bases. One impact of the heightened confrontations between Islamic radicals and their opponents has been the increased suffering of the majority of people in Muslim-majority countries, and the further deterioration of the social, political and economic conditions of their lives. This situation in itself provides an ideal opportunity for the radical Islamists to recruit new followers and propagate their cause. The continued suppression of all other oppositional forces, particularly of secular progressive elements by authoritarian regimes, further enhances the fortunes of Islamic fundamentalist organisations, making them the only effective oppositional force in many Middle Eastern societies. It seems obvious that the mobilizing power and populist appeal of radical Islamists’ can be challenged effectively only if the social, economic and political factors that give rise to these movements in the first place are eliminated.
Notes

1. W Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998, p. 2.

2. For example, an authoritative source on Shi’a Islam identifies over 200 sub-sects. See MJ Mashkoor, *Tariqah-e-Shi’ah va Fergheh-hay Esalam ta Gharn Chaharom* (History of Shi’a and Sects of Islam until the Fourth Century), Tehran: Eshraghi Publishers, 2000.

3. See A Al-Azmeh, *Islam and Modernities*, London: Verso, 1996.

4. See, among others, B Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, London: IB Tauris, 1999, pp. 151–152.

5. For an excellent expose of the evolution of rationalist interpretations in Islamic thoughts as opposed to literalist interpretations, see A Meddeb, *The Malady of Islam*, English translation, New York: Basic Books, 2003, pp 22–40.

6. Ibid., pp 26, 63.

7. See A Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Sub-continent*, Leiden: Brill 1980, p 186.

8. Alavi, ‘Pakistan and Islam: ethnicity and ideology’, in F Halliday & Hamza Alavi, *State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988, pp 89, 97–105. Alavi explains how the Muslim League, in order to gain the vote of Muslims in villages, gave serious concessions to the Muslim feudals who were controlling the populous rural areas.

9. For Iqbal, see Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Sub-continent*, pp 223–232.

10. F Adamiat, *Ideology Jonbesh-e Mashrouothar dar Iran* (The Ideology of the Constitutional Movement in Iran), Tehran: Payam Publishers, 1976, pp 229–249.

11. Sheik Muhammad Hussein Naini, *Tanzih-ul Umrah va Tanzih-al Mila* (State from the viewpoint of Islam), with introduction by S M Taleqani. Tehran: Enteshar Company, 1955.

12. Y Haddad, ‘Muhammad Abdus: pioneer of Islamic reform’, in A Rahman (ed), *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, London: Zed Books, 1994, p 47.

13. See, among others, A Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991, pp 282–283; and D Hopwood, *Egypt: Politics and Society, 1945–1984*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1990, pp 9–12.

14. H Munson, *Islam and Revolution in the Middle East*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988, p 76.

15. Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Sub-continent*, pp 216, 218.

16. See Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

17. For a detailed account of Jama’at-e Islami, see SVR Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama’at-I Islami of Pakistan*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994.

18. The shares of the AIOC were distributed thus: BP, 40%; five American ‘sisters’, 40%; Royal Dutch—Shell, 14%; and CFP of France, 6%.

19. YM Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1990, pp 140–149.

20. For the Muslim Brotherhood, see G Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and Pharaoh*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993; D Commins, ‘Hasan al-Banna’, in Rahman, *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, and C Tripp, ‘Sayyid Qutb: the political vision’, in Rahman, *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*.

21. SVR Nasr, ‘Mawdudi and Jama’at Islami: the origins, theory and practice of Islamic revivalism’, in Rahman, *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, p 106.

22. H Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: A Critique of Post-Modern Analysis*, London: Zed Press, 1999, p 69.

23. For *Kashfi-al-Asrar*, see V Martin, *SOAS Bulletin*, 56(1), pp 34–45, 1993. For the similarities between Khomeini’s book *Kashfi-al-Asrar* and N Safavi’s *Rahnama-ye Hasquey* see H Ahmad, ‘Beginning of the Cold War and the Formation of Fundamentalist Political Islam’, *Iraneshnasi*, 13(3–4), pp 758–760, 2002.

24. See A Rahman & F Noman, ‘Competing Shi’i subsystems in contemporary Iran’, in S Rahman & S Behdad, *Iran After the Revolution: The Crisis of an Islamic State*, London: IB Tauris, 1995, pp 79–83.

25. See Shaikh in this volume.

26. H Alavi, ‘Pakistan and Islam: ethnicity and ideology’, in Halliday & Alavi, *State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan*, p 106.

27. See, H Ahmad, ‘Beginning of the Cold War and the Formation of Fundamentalist Political Islam’.

28. For Uncol interests and competition with the Argentine oil company Bridas, see A Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil, and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, London: IB Tauris, 2002, ch 12; and P Marsden, *Taliban, War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan*, London: Zed Books, 1999, pp 129, 140.

29. H Moghissi & S Rahman, ‘Working class and Islamic state in Iran’, *Socialist Register*, 2001, p 217.

30. For example, see Q Wiktowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism: Salafis, and Muslim Brotherhood, and State Power in Jordan*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2001.

31. For the Algerian case, see F Bourgat & W Dowell, *The Islamic Movement in North Africa*, Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1993.