

# Fundamentalism in Islam

## Intellectual Output 2, Unit V



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|-------------|--|------------------|
| 2           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Renaud Rochette, Institut <i>européen en sciences des religions</i> – <i>Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, PSL</i></li> <li>- Massaoud Kouri, <i>Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, PSL</i></li> </ul> | 12/10/2018       |

## IERS Digital Modules on Islam and Fundamentalism

- [Religions and Fundamentalism](#)
- [Introduction to Islam I. History](#)
- [Introduction to Islam II. Themes](#)

Muslim fundamentalism is based on an **explanation of Islamic history** that **fuses religion and history** and revives a historical experience that is considered **pure and perfect**.

### The good old times

#### Hadith on Salaf

*In Arabic, salaf means “ancestor”, “predecessor”. In Islam, the expression al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ (the pious ancestors) refers to the three first generations of Muslims. They are often thought to be the best Muslims because of the following hadith.*

Abdullah ibn Mas’ud reported: The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said, *The best people are those of my generation, then those who come after them, then those who come after them.*

*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6065*

*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2533*

As an **Abrahamic religion**, Islam is based on a **revelation**. There is a tendency to think that it was the time of the **true religion** and a **purier faith**, hence the will to **go back to this ideal past**.

Within **Sunni Islam**, the **Salafi movement** is based on the idea of **looking back to the beginnings of Islam** in order to know the **right beliefs and practices** against the spreading of what they saw as **non-Islamic beliefs and practices**, such as **Western ideas and habits** or **evolutions within the Muslim world** considered as religious innovations. Salafis are often divided into three groups:

- the **pietists/quietists**: a bottom-top strategy avoiding politics; their interpretation of Islam is spread through **personal reformation** and **social action**;
- the **activists**: a top-bottom strategy; the Salafi activists **engage in politics** in order to be sure that **political rule is based on Islamic principles**;
- the **Salafi jihadists**, whose goal is to **enforce through violence their interpretation of Islam on infidels (kufār)**, either **non-Muslims** or **bad Muslims** (declaring a Muslim as a non-believer is called *takfīr*).

**More information on:**

- [hadith](#)

## Against the Western World?

### The restoration of Islam

*Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) is an Egyptian intellectual whose works has been very influential in shaping the Jihadist movement. Although his best known book is In the Shade of the Quran, a thirty volume commentary of the Quran, his views are best summarised in the introduction to another influential book: Milestones.*

Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice, not because of the danger of complete annihilation which is hanging over its head — this being just a symptom and not the real disease — but because humanity is devoid of those vital values which are necessary not only for its healthy development but also for its real progress. Even the Western world realizes that Western civilization is unable to present any healthy values for the guidance of mankind. It knows that it does not possess anything which will satisfy its own conscience and justify its existence [...].

It is the same with the Eastern bloc. Its social theories, foremost among which is Marxism, in the beginning attracted not only a large number of people from the East but also from the West, as it was a way of life based on a creed [...]. On the whole this theory conflicts with man's nature and its needs. This ideology prospers only in a degenerate society or in a society which has become cowed as a result of some form of prolonged dictatorship. But now, even under these circumstances, its materialistic economic system is failing [...].

It is essential for mankind to have new leadership!

The leadership of mankind by Western man is now on the decline, not because Western culture has become poor materially or because its economic and military power has become weak. The period of the Western system has come to an end primarily because it is deprived of those life-giving values which enabled it to be the leader of mankind.

It is necessary for the new leadership to preserve and develop the material fruits of the creative genius of Europe, and also to provide mankind with such high ideals and values as have so far remained undiscovered by mankind, and which will also acquaint humanity with a way of life which is harmonious with human nature, which is positive and constructive, and which is practicable.

Islam is the only System which possesses these values and this way of life [...].

All nationalistic and chauvinistic ideologies which have appeared in modern times, and all the movements and theories derived from them, have also lost their vitality. In short, all man-made individual or collective theories have proved to be failures.

At this crucial and bewildering juncture, the turn of Islam and the Muslim community has arrived [...].

Islam cannot fulfil its role except by taking concrete form in a society, rather, in a nation; for man does not listen, especially in this age, to an abstract theory which is not seen materialized in a living society. From this point of view, we can say that the Muslim community has been extinct for a few centuries, for this Muslim community does not denote the name of a land in which Islam resides, nor is it a people whose forefathers lived under the Islamic system at some earlier time. It is the name of a group of people whose manners, ideas and concepts, rules and regulations, values and criteria, are all derived from the Islamic source. The Muslim community with these characteristics vanished at the moment the laws of God became suspended on earth.

If Islam is again to play the role of the leader of mankind, then it is necessary that the Muslim community be restored to its original form.

It is necessary to revive that Muslim community which is buried under the debris of the man-made traditions of several generations, and which is crushed under the weight of those false laws and customs which are not even remotely related to the Islamic teachings, and which, in spite of all this, calls itself the "world of Islam" [...].

I am aware that between the attempt at 'revival' and the attainment of 'leadership' there is a great distance, as the Muslim community has long ago vanished from existence and from observation, and the leadership of mankind has long since passed to other ideologies and other nations, other concepts and other systems. This was the era during which Europe's genius created its marvellous works in science, culture, law and material production, due to which mankind has progressed to great heights of creativity and material comfort. It is not easy to find fault with the inventors of such marvellous things, especially since what we call the 'world of Islam' is completely devoid of all this beauty [].

But this does not mean that we should neglect material progress. We should also give our full attention and effort in this direction, not because at this stage it is an essential requirement for attaining the leadership of mankind, but because it is an essential condition for our very existence; and Islam itself, which elevates man to the position of representative of God on earth, and which, under certain conditions, considers the responsibilities of this representative as the worship of God and the purpose of man's creation, makes material progress obligatory for us.

To attain the leadership of mankind, we must have something to offer besides material progress, and this other quality can only be a faith and a way of life which on the one hand conserves the benefits of modern science and technology, and on the other fulfils the basic human needs on the same level of excellence as technology has fulfilled them in the sphere of material comfort. And then this faith and way of life must take concrete form in a human society--in other words, In a Muslim society.

If we look at the sources and foundations of modern ways of living, it becomes clear that the whole world is steeped in *Jahiliyyah*\*, and all the marvellous material comforts and high-level inventions do not diminish this ignorance. This *Jahiliyyah* is based on rebellion against God's sovereignty on earth. It transfers to man one of the greatest attributes of God, namely sovereignty, and makes some men lords over others. It is now not in that simple and primitive form of the ancient *Jahiliyyah*, but takes the form of claiming that the right to create values, to legislate rules of collective behaviour, and to choose any way of life rests with men, without regard to what God has prescribed. The result of this rebellion against the authority of God is the oppression of His creatures. Thus the humiliation of the common man under the communist systems and the exploitation of individuals and nations due to greed for wealth and imperialism under the capitalist systems are but a corollary of rebellion against God's authority and the denial of the dignity of man given to him by God.

Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (1964)

\* *Jahiliyyah* ("ignorance") refers to the time before the advent of Islam. Some modern Islamic thinkers use it to criticise un-Islamic values, especially secular modernity, as opposed to Islam as the acceptance of God's will.

Most of the time, the rise of Muslim fundamentalism is considered as a **reaction to Western imperialism**. Western domination over the Arabic and Muslim world did add fuel to this

movement, but its roots can also be tracked to **Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab** (1703-1792), founder of **Wahhabism**, who lived in central Arabia and never saw a Western man. He saw many practices of his time as un-Islamic and preached a **return to the true Islam of the times of Muhammad**, without all the “religious innovation” that had been added with the passing of time. He made an **agreement with Muhammad ibn Saud** in order to bring the inhabitants of the Arabic peninsula back to the “true” principles of Islam: ibn Saud would take care of the political matters, Abd al-Wahhab would be in charge of the religious leadership. This pact is the foundation of the Saudi Kingdom.

Abd al-Wahhab wanted to avoid politics. However, the goal of other Salafi movements was to **take control of a state in order to build a new society based on Islamic values**. One of the oldest and maybe the most influential is the **Muslim Brotherhood**, founded in Egypt in 1928 by **Hassan al-Banna** (1906-1949). Unlike other Egyptian political parties, the Muslim Brotherhood did not want to westernise the country, but to **re-Islamise it**. In the beginning, the Muslim Brotherhood was influenced by **Islamic modernists** such as **Muhammad Abduh** (1849-1905) and **Rashid Rida** (1865-1935).

Islamic modernism rejects the **blind following of tradition** and is a twofold revivalism:

- going back to the “true Islam” based only on the Quran and the most authentic *hadith*;
- promoting the use of *ijtihad* (interpretation) by all Muslims

The last point led to a **heavy criticism** of Islamic modernism for the use of *kalam* (philosophy/rationalism). After the Second World War, the Muslim Brotherhood became more and more influenced by Saudi Salafism and adopted a more conservative stance.

**Sayyid Qutb** was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, condemned to death in Egypt for a plot to murder Gamal Abdel Nasser. His opposition to Western and Communist worlds is a **condemnation of materialism and secularism**. He criticises Muslim countries in which secular values are so widespread that Muslims have *de facto* **forsaken their faith** and Islam has practically ceased to exist. Re-islamisation is a process of **individual return** to “true Islam” and a **destruction, even through violence, of the structures hindering the process**. He also adds a **strong anti-Semitic stance**: in *Our Struggle against the Jews* (1950), he wrote that since the time of Muhammad, there has been a Jewish plot against Islam.

Sayyid Qutb’s works are one of the **foundations of modern Islamism**, even **outside the Sunni world** — Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, translated them in Persian. One of Qutb’s most devoted followers, **Ayman al-Zawahiri**, went on to become the mentor of **Osama bin Laden** and a senior member of Islamist organisations such as the **Islamic Jihad** or **Al-Qaeda**.

**More information on:**

- [Islamic modernism](#)
- [Hassan al-Banna](#) (Source 1)

### **New trends (end of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. / beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> c.)**

During the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., fundamentalist organisations became more and more important and influential.

In 1979, the **Islamic Revolution** in Iran transformed the old monarchy in an **Islamic Republic** in which the state is **monitored by the religious institutions**. The Iranian regime sponsors Shi'a organisations outside Iran, such as the **Hezbollah** in Lebanon.

During the 1980s and the 1990s, **Saudi Arabia and Qatar became more and more influential** in the Muslim world and outside. These two states **support Salafism** and fund organisations and individuals promoting Salafism in the Muslim world and outside. The Saudi Kingdom was prompted to do so by the **1979 seizure of the Great Mosque of Mecca**, the holiest place of Islam. The attack was undertaken by a fundamentalist group claiming that the Saud family was too close to the Western powers; it also called for a return to the "true Islam". Although the surviving insurgents were shown no mercy, King Khalid considered that **the answer to religious discontent was to adopt a more fundamentalist stance**, and the **religious authorities were given more power**.

The **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan** gave birth to the Salafi Jihadism. Some Salafi thinkers and activists thought the invasion of a Muslim land should be met with a strong answer. **Abdullah Azzam** (1941-1989), with the help of **Osama bin Laden** and **Ayman al-Zawahiri**, organised the recruitment of **foreign (Muslim) fighters against the Soviets in Afghanistan**. He was also instrumental in redefining the *jihad*. The *jihad* was usually declared by **Muslim authorities**, and it **was limited by some rules**, especially concerning civilians.

Here some clarification may help. The word *jihad* (literally: "striving, struggling") appears frequently in the Quran **with and without military connotations**, often in the idiomatic expression "striving in the path of God. Jihad is classified into inner ("greater") *jihad*, which involves a struggle against one's own base impulses, and external ("lesser") *jihad*, which is further subdivided into *jihad* of the pen/tongue (debate or persuasion) and *jihad* of the sword. Recent surveys reveal considerable nuance in the conceptions of *jihad* held by Muslims around the world.

Islamic jurists and other scholars from the **8<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century** understood the obligation of *jihad* **predominantly in a military sense**. However, they **developed an elaborate set of rules pertaining to jihad**, including the determination of which authorities can declare it, prohibitions on harming those who are not engaged in combat and so forth. A person engaged in *jihad* is called a *mujahid* (plural *mujahideen*).

Abdullah Azzam defines *jihad* as an **individual moral obligation**: if Islam is threatened anywhere, every Muslim has a moral duty to fight the infidels. Moreover, he added that the objectives must be **reached at all costs**, including innocent lives.

After the **defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan** and the end of the Cold War, Salafi Jihadists turned **against their former sponsors**, now considered as oppressors of the Muslim world: the **United States**, and in general the **Western world**, and also **Muslim states they think are too close to them**.

**More information on:**

- [the mission of the Supreme Guide of Iran](#) (Source 4);