



## The trail of political Islam

### Gilles Kepel

*Gilles Kepel, one of the world's foremost experts on the modern Middle East, has written Jihad: the Trail of Political Islam, the first comprehensive attempt to follow the history and spread of Islamist political movements. In a talk given in London as part of a collaboration between European cultural institutes on the relationship between Europe and Islam, he gave a deeply insightful analysis of the past, present and possible future of a new and frightening politico-religious phenomenon.*

**I**n the mid 1990s, when I was Visiting Professor at Columbia University, a rather simple question arose which, in spite of its simplicity, was still unanswered at the time: "Why did Islamist movements succeed in seizing power in places, such as Iran, whereas in the majority of cases, such as Algeria, they failed?"

I hoped that, by addressing this question, we would be able to find some clues to understanding Islamism, a subject that produces more value judgments than cool analysis. There are a number of writers hostile to the movement; a number who have become favourable to it; some who say that it is the embodiment of the identity of the Muslim people; and others who argue that, precisely for that reason, it should either be encouraged or fought against.

I was interested in being able to find a device

which would allow me to analyse these movements in social and cultural terms, just as I might have analysed social democrat, fascist, communist or liberal movements.

I wrote my first book, based on my doctoral thesis, in the early 1980s. It focused on the Egyptian Islamist movements in the Sadat era. Twenty-five years later, I thought it was time to take stock and assess the record of these movements. When I had started, they were to a large extent 'Utopian' – none of them had yet taken power or even played a significant political role. But, from the mid 1990s onwards, they did of course start to become much more significant.

Islamist movements are in fact clusters of different social groups with different social agendas. They are strong when they manage to mobilise or coalesce these different components,



until they actually seize power. What has interested me is their capacity to mobilise different social groups with different social agendas, to keep them united, to reconcile them. There might be violence or even the 'semi-Islamicisation' of a society, but the Islamist groups will never seize power if they cannot unite these social groups.

**The first literate generation**

So what are these groups? I singled out three. The first group was the one I dubbed the Young Urban Poor. These people in the 1970s became the most important demographic newcomers in this part of the world.

The 1970s were a watershed decade in the Muslim world, and what then came to be known as the 'Third World' as a whole. The first generation from the demographic explosion of the post Second World War era was reaching adulthood. There was a tremendous population increase. In the populations in some countries of the Middle East and North Africa, 70–75% were under twenty-five years of age. The base of the age pyramid was extremely wide. This was a totally new phenomenon – from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of the population in the Muslim world had been rural. Now, due to the fact that the countryside could not feed its children, it became urban or semi-urban. There was a mass migration from the countryside to the outskirts of the big cities.

Thanks to the education policies of the newly-independent states, this generation was the first in the region to be literate *en masse*. For males at least (though for many females too), young adults had access to literacy in the national language – written Urdu, Arabic or Farsi – which meant that they could read and interpret religious texts without mediation. They would no longer have to refer to the authority of an *ulam*, a doctor of law, or a *sheikh*.

The significance of literacy was that it created a [www.openDemocracy.net](http://www.openDemocracy.net)

*Islamist movements are clusters of different social groups with different social agendas*

tremendous cultural gap between this generation and its parents. The latter were often rural and illiterate. Their offspring had migrated to the outskirts of the big cities, where the reference points that the parents used to mark their life were of very little use.

Yet the younger generation, in facing the challenges that confronted them in this strange environment, could hardly draw on their newly-acquired written culture. Because they had acquired this cultural capital, they had 'great expectations' – which were not met – and this led to social deprivation on quite a new scale.

Such experiences were all the more bitter in the 1970s, as this was also the first generation to reach adulthood without any living memory of the colonial era. As a result, they tended to take the political elite in power at its word. The latter, young people believed, was accountable for what it had delivered (or, in most cases, not delivered). This created a huge feeling of disarray, of relative deprivation, of social frustration – and, in consequence, a desire to find a language which would be able to decipher the evils of society, and to bring about an alternative.

**The pious middle...and the intellectuals**

A second group, which would become part of the Islamist cluster, was the one I call the Pious Middle Classes. Most regimes in Islamic countries in the post-war era were in one of two categories. In the first were regimes aligned to the Soviet bloc, military regimes with a socialist tendency and a strong tribal, regional or ethnic minority base; this was the case in Algeria, Syria, Iraq, South Yemen and Egypt. In the second category were regimes leaning more towards the West, as in the monarchies of the Arab peninsula such as Morocco and Jordan.

Both types of regime had one thing in common. In order to have access to political or even



economic power, it was necessary to have some sort of kin relationship to the ruling elite. If you were not the nephew of a general or a member of the royal family, it was very difficult for you even to have access to credit, to import anything or become an entrepreneur.

This led to very strong frustrations among the 'bazaar people', and those young professionals who had gone to the oil-exporting countries, made a lot of money and returned home only to find themselves exploited by the ruling elite. They were not as violently deprived as the Young Urban Poor, but they also longed for a different type of governance.

The third important social group – you must add a third – is that which I call the Islamist Intelligentsia. These were the militant ideologues who delivered a discourse of political mobilisation to the first two groups; one that the latter would understand and translate quite differently into their social practice. They would talk about an Islamic state, and the implementation of *sharia* (religious law).

The Young Urban Poor hoped that the Islamic state would give them what they had been deprived of: respect, a job, a house, marriage. More often than not they would translate Islamic law into an attempt at revolutionary upheaval – an overturning of social hierarchies.

In contrast, the Pious Middle Classes were mainly interested in ousting the ruling incumbents, encouraging the masses of Young Urban Poor to take to the streets, and withstand the violence from the regimes, in order that they might take the place of the elite. They were not really interested in a significant upheaval of social hierarchies. They just wanted to repaint the system green, and to repay the Young Urban Poor with moral rather than social rewards and retribution.

So the Islamic Intelligentsia, when they were successful, were extremely careful to downplay the social content of their message. They were extremely ambiguous, socially. If they had not kept it very vague – had they been revolutionary

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in their discourse – they would have pleased the Young Urban Poor, but displeased the Pious Middle Classes. Had they been too soft in their desire for social change, then the Young Urban Poor would not have 'bought it'. They were strong on political, religious and moral slogans, but they downplayed the social dimension that would divide groups. This is how that ideology shaped up and progressed the demands of two completely different groups with very different social agendas.

### **Three phases of Islamism**

Now, a few words about this discourse itself. By the 1960s, there were a number of ideologues and thinkers in the Muslim world who had taken up the challenge of the independent states, and tried to delegitimise them in the name of Islam: Sayyid Qutb in Egypt (who was hanged by Nasser in 1986), or Sayyid Maududi of Pakistan (who died in 1979), or Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran (who died in 1989). In spite of their differences, they held in common the conviction that the world today was not a Muslim world, that even those countries professing themselves Muslim were actually what the Qu'ran calls *Jahiliyya* – that is, the age of ignorance which prevailed in the Arabian peninsula before the revelation of Islam to the prophet Mohammed.

To them, the modern age was a sort of 20<sup>th</sup> century remake of the *Jahiliyya* of ancient times; it had to be destroyed as Mohammed the prophet had destroyed its predecessor. There were a number of ways of seeing how this would come about. In Egypt, Sayyid Qutb and his followers favoured a revolutionary understanding of the need for the radical mobilisation of something they referred to as 'the Movement' to bring about an Islamic state. In Pakistan, Maududi was active mainly through elections, and legal and institutional modernisation. In Iran, it was different again, because the movement used the peculiar language of Shi'a Muslim to achieve its aims. What they had in common, however, was the use of the paradigm of *Jahiliyya* to analyse why



these states were no longer Muslim, and the resulting commitment to destroying those states.

This supplied the would-be members of the Islamic cluster with what they wanted: a way to describe and decipher the present state of Islamic society explaining why it had deteriorated; and also, an alternative, something to fight for – a target.

The last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were crucial decades for this movement. Behind them lay one pivotal moment – the  *jihad*  in Afghanistan in the 1980s. In my view, the formation, expansion and decline of the Islamist movements correspond to three distinct phases.

The first phase, from September 1970 to 1 February 1979 is the formative one. In the Arab world, the first date epitomises the demise of Arab nationalism, coinciding with the death of Nasser and civil war in Jordan. This opened a huge window of opportunity for an alternative ideology. The second date, 1 February 1979, is the day when Ayatollah Khomeini agreed to return from his exile in Paris.

During this first phase, the Islamist Intelligentsia was built up mainly on college campuses, with the encouragement of powerful elements in the Muslim world who saw in these students of the Qu'ran a counterweight to leftists who were at the time prevalent. People such as Anwar Sadat, who was assassinated by the Islamists in 1981, at first thought that they could give expression to social frustration in a religious language that would not prove dangerous, that could be reigned in much more easily than that of socialists and radicals, at a time when the Soviet Union was still a reality.

The Islamic movement developed its intellectual and ideological dimensions through the 1970s.

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It was always ambiguous. From the October War of 1973 onwards, Saudi Arabia, which suddenly had an enormous amount of cash at its disposal after the price of oil skyrocketed, invested heavily in the movement. This was for several reasons: it was a means by which it could translate its financial clout into political power in the region, an opportunity to subsidise a movement which was turning its back on the Soviet Union, and a vehicle to spread the Islamic religious agenda into the social arena.

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There were various charitable programmes to buy a full Islamic outfit for Khomeini's students, and to subsidise bus journeys for female students. A wide network of charities allowed them to gain a strong following among the Young Urban Poor, providing an alternative to the derelict public services, which could no longer cope with the exploding population.

But, by the end of the 1970s, the Saudi nightmare of an Islamic revolution came true, in a country in which they had almost no influence: neighbouring Iran – a Shi'a country which the Saudis considered as almost non-Muslim.

### **The Iranian breakthrough**

How did Ayatollah Khomeini manage it? Initially, the movement against the Shah in Iran was not led by the clerics. But the Shah had broken the backbone of secular movements – they did not have the capacity to organise. Also, Khomeini was politically astute enough to work out that seizing power for himself would involve widening his constituency of followers, and isolating the Shah even more.

Khomeini was extremely careful to expand his constituency as much as possible. For example, he would address his would-be followers as *Mustazafin* – an Arabic and Persian word which



means 'the ones who are weak, disinherited, the enfeebled ones'. It is a Qu'ranic term, opposed in the Qu'ran by another word – *Mustakbirin* – meaning 'the ones who are arrogant'. These two opposing terms had been used by a predecessor of Khomeini's, namely Ali Shariati. He had lived in France during the Franco–Algerian war of 1954–62, where he sided with the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and translated Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* from its original French into Persian. Shariati thought that its Marxist categories for 'oppressors' and 'oppressed' would not be understood, and replaced them with the moral dimension of Islamic rhetoric. In doing this, he profoundly changed the scope of these terms.

Khomeini built on this change of scope, including in the category of *Mustazafin* not only the truly deprived, who had teemed in to southern Teheran from the countryside, but also the bazaar people and, by the end of 1978, even the secularists among the Intelligentsia (who also thought that Khomeini might be just the instrument to oust the Shah). The latter, of course, then expected him to disappear into retirement in Qom where he could write poetry or preoccupy himself with Islamic philosophy.

Khomeini's opening to new groups of followers was essential to the success of his revolution. Afterwards, these supporting groups were gradually eliminated until, in 1979, the hostage-taking at the American Embassy exposed the secularists, who were ousted from power.

The Young Urban Poor now occupied centre stage. At that point (as in the French Revolution when the *sans-culottes* were sent to Italy to plunder and were thereby expelled from the central drama back in France), the Iranian Young Urban Poor were sent to a terrible death in the Iraqi minefields. They might defend the Iranian revolution from the outside but, henceforth, they were cut away from its centre.

### **Exporting revolution**

The Iranian revolution took place in the Shi'a Muslim world, and employed intensively a [www.openDemocracy.net](http://www.openDemocracy.net)

peculiar Shi'a political parlance. But since the Shi'a constitute only about 15% of the entire Muslim world, in order to 'export' the revolution, this linguistic element had to be replaced by a more mainstream Islamic rhetoric.

Here opened a second phase of Islamist movements, running from 1979 to 15 February 1989. This was characterised by a terrific expansion of radical Islam all over the Islamic world; yet it simultaneously exposed the blatant contradictions that had been implicit in the Islamic movement from the beginning. These would be epitomised by the rivalry between the Islamic Republic of Iran on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia (backed by the US) on the other – each seeking hegemony over this very strong political movement.

Iran's view was that it must export the Islamic Revolution to the Muslim world in general. The new state was guided by a perspective which was extremely anti-Western, primarily targeted against the Great Satan (and even against the Little Satan, France – in spite of the hospitality that had been accorded Khomeini). Of course, this made it a worrying issue for the West.

Saudi Arabia – backed by the US, and others such as Saddam Hussein (at that time the darling of the West) – took it upon themselves to contain and repel the Islamic Republic. Iraq attacked Iran in September 1980, leading to an eight-year war in the trenches, ultimately with millions of casualties. The Islamic Republic was contained on its western flank.

But the most important development was the *jihad* in Afghanistan, following the Soviet invasion of 1979. This was a decoy, planned and used by the US and the Saudis to kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, it would marginalise Iran, rendering Saudi Arabia the recognised leader of the Islamist movement worldwide, particularly in the Sunni world. On the other hand, this 'counter-fire' to the Islamic revolution would direct the energies of the radical Muslims away from the Great Satan, and



against the Soviet atheists that had invaded a Muslim country. For the US,  *jihad*  in Afghanistan was a way of inflicting a Vietnam on the USSR, accelerating its demise.

The day that the Red Army pulled out of Kabul, 15 February 1989, ultimately led to the fall of the Berlin wall in November that year. Afghanistan, to a large extent, was the graveyard of the Soviet Union. For the US – or so it was perceived at the time – the  *jihad*  in Afghanistan was a bargain. It cost only around \$600 million a year. Moreover, no US troops were required. Not only were Afghan  *mujahedin*  trained and equipped (under CIA supervision) by the ISI, Pakistan's intelligence service – more importantly, recruits came from many Muslim countries, such as Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan, the southern Philippines and Turkey. These people were, in a way, members of Islamist International Brigades.

This brought about a significant change within the Islamist movement itself. In the 1970s, the recruits would read books by Sayyid Qutb or Maududi. These were easy to read, written in an accessible language, and well adapted to cater for this newly-educated, literate generation. Anyone with a high school qualification could read these, and make up their own minds whether they agreed or not.

In contrast, the training camps in Afghanistan and eastern Pakistan provided a very different type of training for their militant recruits, of two kinds. Firstly, total brainwashing and indoctrination. People were not taught to discuss texts or think about them. They were force-fed the writings of medieval  *ulema* , which they did not understand, but which they knew granted full authority to those in charge of the camps to direct their actions. Secondly, they were trained and equipped in refugee camps for combat, again through Pakistan's ISI via the tutelage of the US.

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Out of these camps (whose students included a then darling of the CIA, Osama bin Laden) developed a new culture of Islamist radicalism, combining the brainwashing, which shaped a very cohesive structure of forces on the ground, and the military training, which induced a particular fascination for  *jihad* . This, in turn, would lead to the creation of a network called  *al-Qaida* . In Arabic, the name means 'base', and indeed bin Laden and his like, who were already post-modernists, had put all the names and

addresses of foreign militants on their database. This network was both a state-of-the-art system, which could easily link up militants scattered all over the world, and yet extremely cohesive, because of the deep level of commitment.

#### **The key year: 1989**

The year 1989 was a turning point. Iran effectively lost the war, Khomeini having been obliged to sign a ceasefire with Saddam Hussein in the summer of 1988. Nobody remembers 15 February 1989 because, on 14

February, the  *fatwa*  against Salman Rushdie was issued. Khomeini launched it on that precise day, because he wanted to be perceived as the herald of the Muslims, defending Islam against the insults of Rushdie's book – something the Saudis had been unable to do. But, at a symbolic level, it distracted people from the important event at the level of  *realpolitik* , the Soviet pull-out from Afghanistan – in Islamic terms, a Saudi victory, not an Iranian one.

The year 1989 is, then, in my view the peak year of these decades: one which saw not only the victory of  *jihad*  in Afghanistan, which would open the way to the post-Soviet emergence of a number of new Islamic countries on the southern fringe of the former Soviet Empire and the Balkans; but also the Rushdie affair and of the 'veil' fracas in France. It was the year when

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the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) were created in Algeria; when Hassan Turabi seized power in the Sudan; when Kashmir became a hot issue; and when, during the first *intifada* in Palestine (which started in December 1987), Hamas started to significantly challenge the former hegemony of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO).

Many people thought at the time that, with the demise of the Soviet Empire, the last secular messianism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there might now be room for a new Islamist messianism. From a US and Saudi point of view, the movement seemed to be under control. Yet from 1990, when Saddam Hussein tried to gobble up Kuwait, a third phase opened, one which continues up to and beyond 11 September 2001.

When King Fahd of Saudi Arabia (the 'Custodian of the Two Holy Places') called US and Western troops to his rescue on 7 August 1990, this directly led to a deep split in the Islamist movement. On the one hand, the Pious Middle Classes consented to the Saudi line. On the other hand, the rebels who had fought in Afghanistan attempted to build up a guerrilla movement that could duplicate the successful jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. It was successful there, they argued, so it should be successful in Algeria, Egypt, Bosnia and Chechnya in bringing about the Islamic state they longed for. Thus, the movement, having remained largely united under Saudi guidance since the 1970s, started to fragment. There was dissent within Saudi Arabia itself. And then the guerrilla movements came into being in those different places.

### **From Afghanistan to Algeria – and New York**

The people who started these movements were fascinated by the Afghan experience. They thought it unnecessary to waste one's time and energy building charities that could reach out to the grassroots. Theirs was a fantasy of the Afghan jihad, where it seemed violence was enough. It was enough to strike a military blow

at the regime, which would cave in, and the local population would then welcome the new Islamic state.

But it did not work out, despite the easy beginnings of *jihad* in Algeria. There, the Islamists had a promising start, managing to mobilise enough people to enable the FIS to run in the 1990 local elections, and to achieve a fair majority in the first round of the parliamentary elections in December 1991. This movement was split up, however, in the course of the subsequent civil war, and failed in its attempt to cease power.

The military coup of January 1992 deprived the FIS of their electoral victory. Many of those deprived of their democratic rights backed armed insurgency, at first. But after a while, they split along familiar lines. On the one hand, there was the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), former Afghan guerrilla fighters who mainly recruited among the Young Urban Poor, with a very radical agenda, which involved ousting the military and changing the structure of society from top to bottom. On the other hand, there was the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), which catered to the needs of the Pious Middle Classes.

Both collided with the military. But then, bloody confrontations took place between them, eventually leading to the military's successful 'divide and conquer' strategy, which defeated both GIA and AIS in 1997–98. There is a lot unknown about the conduct of this war in Algeria, but it is necessary to remember that from the early to mid 1990s, this split in the movement – when the radical wing embarking on its guerrilla strategy caused an alienation of the middle class constituencies – ultimately led to military defeat.

From the mid 1990s onwards, the bourgeois Islamists tried to find a way out of this impasse, by forging new alliances with secular-minded liberals or the middle classes, on the basis of some mix of Islam and democracy. In short, the Islamic Movement continues to exist, but it is deeply divided and militarily defeated.



And this is where terrorism enters the picture. The masses have simply failed to join the guerrilla movement. Leave aside the first attempt at bombing the World Trade Center in 1993, which is still very mysterious. The first attack traceable to the bin Laden group came in June 1996, an attack on US troops in Saudi Arabia – precisely when it was beginning to be clear that the guerrilla route was a failure. Then came the Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania on 7 August 1998, the very anniversary of the day King Fahd called the West to his rescue. Then came the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000, and, lastly, 11 September 2001.

It seems clear that al-Qaida's aim was to engineer a very spectacular attack, which would prove that the enemy was weak and not worthy of being feared. The masses they wanted to reach out to, it was hoped, would join in the *jihad* against the West to liberate themselves. But the problem is that such a closely-knit conspiratorial movement is both the basis of their success and, at the same time, the reason for their ultimate failure. They have no way to reach out to the masses. They have no charities. They do not spread the word. They have no way to deal with grassroots politics. So, they cannot mobilise. They can only use the exemplarity of symbols, and the media, to convey a message to the masses. Bin Laden became a mastermind in using the media – particularly after he singled out the new Arab media, such as the al-Jazeera channel, as the main medium of his political message.

This led to a striking phenomenon. I have travelled widely in the Middle East since 11 September, and I have frequently noticed a widespread enthusiasm for Osama bin Laden – the man who 'stood for us' – particularly among the youth, in (for example) Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and the Emirates. They were not sure about the massacre of civilians at the World Trade Center; it could not be him, 'it must have been Mossad, probably'. The suicide attacks against Israel were a different matter, because Israel is a country that has invaded Muslim lands. But what is crucial is that they were not convinced by the 'violence argument' as such. They did not go for that.

In my view, this is a sign that in spite of the appearance of strength in the violent events of 11 September, with many people massacred, and the very visible threat to the West of these Islamist movements – in spite of this, the very violence of these movements is not a symbol of strength, but precisely shows that they cannot reach out to the constituencies they need to mobilise, in order to seize power.

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