

Study on the Reason why Radical Political Islam not Appear until the Late Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the historical and socio-political catalysts behind the rise of radical political Islam in the second half of the 20th century, tracing its evolution from early Islamic thought to a global ideological force. Rooted in 9th-century Hanbali traditions emphasizing scriptural fidelity, Islamism transitioned from theological discourse to militant practice in the modern era. Four interrelated factors drove this radicalization: First, the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 dismantled a unifying Islamic authority, sparking fragmented efforts to revive Islamic governance, which later shifted toward radical movements. Second, intensified Western colonial influence post-World War II—particularly the establishment of Israel—exacerbated anti-Western sentiment, transforming geopolitical and religious tensions into catalysts for extremism. Third, the dissolution of alliances between Islamists and secular nationalists after decolonization created internal strife, as seen in Egypt's conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and Nasser's regime. Finally, technological advancements enabled cross-regional mobilization (e.g., Afghan jihadists) and globalized propaganda (e.g., digital dissemination of radical ideologies). The convergence of these factors facilitated radical Islamism's ascendancy, providing ideological and logistical frameworks for transnational extremism. The essay concludes that while Islamist thought has deep historical roots, its 20th-century radicalization emerged from specific post-colonial realities, geopolitical conflicts, and technological innovations, reshaping it into a pervasive global movement.

Keywords: Political Islam; Islamism; Fundamentalism

INTRODUCTION

The theory of “respecting the Quran and restoring the past” in modern Islamism can be traced back to the 9th century when Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and his Hanbali school emphasized the Quran and Hadith as the source of divine revelation and strictly

restricted the use of analogies and public discussion. In the 19th century, highly systematic and theoretical Islamic thought began to emerge. However, it was not until modern times that Islamism gradually became radical and violent,

and further transformed from a simple religious academic theory into practice in the second half of the 20th century, becoming the guiding ideology of radical fundamentalist political Islam around the world and providing an ideological basis for contemporary extreme Muslim terrorism.

This essay argues that the rise of radical political Islam in the second half of the 20th century has complex historical and social reasons. Firstly, in the early modern period, the national salvation movements of Muslim countries often revolved around the theoretical highest leader, the Caliph (Turkish sultan). It was not until the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the failure of the efforts of the Sharif of Mecca, the King of Egypt, and others to revive the caliphate system that the focus of the Pan-Islamist movement shifted to a direct return to the fundamentalist Muslim Ummah system. Secondly, Although Western colonists began to invade the Muslim world in the 19th century, it was not until the 20th century that their political, religious, and cultural influence deeply affected Muslim countries, sparking an anti-colonial and anti-Western social wave. In particular, the establishment of Israel with the support of the West after World War II led to the rise of radical anti-Western movements within the Muslim world. Thirdly, In the first half of the 20th century, Islamist movements often allied with secular nationalism to fight against Western colonizers. In the second half of the 20th century, the conflict between secular governments that successfully achieved national independence and Islamism became the main contradiction in Muslim society. Finally, technological advances have made large-scale cross-regional Islamist propaganda and even mobilization possible, which has intensified the radicalism and influence of political Islamic movements in the second half of the 20th century.

The Collapse of the Caliphate System

The Sultan of the Ottoman Empire has been the protector of the Two Holy Places since the Ottoman Empire eliminated the Mamluks and conquered Egypt in 1517. At the same time, the Sultan claimed to have inherited the position of the Abbasid Caliphate and regarded himself as the common leader of Muslims, or at least the common leader of Sunni Muslims, worldwide. The Sultan had used

the title of caliph to assert their right to protect Muslims living under the rule of other countries, such as Russia. In modern times, faced with Western colonial invasion, some Muslims first placed their hopes of resistance on the Ottoman Caliphate. This Islamist advocacy that relies on the existing national government is relatively mild compared to contemporary radical Islamic movements. For instance, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, a representative of early Islamism, went to Istanbul and was appointed to the Ottoman Council of Education in 1869. Al-Afghani hoped to save the Muslim world from the Westerners by participating in the Ottoman Empire's modernization reform (the Tanzimat). Even in the 20th century, the Ottoman Caliphate could still gain support from Muslims outside the empire. After the defeat in World War I, the Ottoman Empire faced the crisis of being dismembered by the Allied Powers, and Indian Muslims launched the anti-British "Khilafat Movement" under the slogan of defending the Caliphate. Before the Turkish Republic government officially abolished the Caliphate at the legal level in 1924, early Islamic movements represented by the Khilafat Movement had a wide influence and played a certain role in defending the rights of Muslims in India, Turkey, and other countries and resisting Western colonial powers.

After the Ottoman Caliphate was deposed, some Muslim monarchs also hoped to become caliphs and take over the leadership of Muslims around the world. For example, Husayn bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, claimed to be the caliph in March 1924 based on his bloodline as a descendant of the Prophet and his status as the ruler of the holy land but was immediately defeated by Ibn Saud. Later, King Fuad I of Egypt planned and convened the 1926 Pan-Islamic Congress in Cairo, trying to gain the support of the entire Muslim world to make himself the Caliph. The well-known Islamist theorist Muhammad Rashid Rida was deeply involved in the preparations for the Pan-Islamic Congress. From the above examples, it can be seen that many political Islamic movements in the first half of the 20th century and before relied on the existing Muslim rulers and ruling order, and were more moderate than the radical Islamist movements that started from scratch in the second half of the 20th century.

¹ Finkel, Caroline. *Osman's Dream: The History of the Ottoman Empire*. Hachette UK, 2007, p. 111.

The Deepening of Western Colonial Oppression

It was not until the late 19th century and even the 20th century that Western colonists penetrated deep into the heartland of the Muslim world (such as the interior of the African continent, the central desert of the Arabian Peninsula, the deep grasslands of Central Asia, etc.); on the other hand, many Western colonists tended to cooperate with local traditional Muslim nobles to indirectly rule these colonies. Therefore, for the vast majority of colonial people, the image of Western Christian colonists was relatively vague compared to the local rulers who exploited them every day. The typical representative in this regard is the British Empire. After destroying the Sokoto Caliphate, the British colonial government delegated local administration in northern Nigeria to local chiefs, and British colonial officials usually only appeared in front of local people as "advisors" to the chiefs; In British India, until the eve of India's independence, there were still 140 princely states of varying sizes ruled by local nobles who managed the local people on behalf of the Governor-General of India. These local nobles who were dependent on the Western colonists absorbed the first wave of the anger of the locals, making the conflict between the Muslim civilians and the Christian Western colonists not so sharp and direct. In addition, European colonists also formed many Muslim vassal armies (The most famous of these include the Tirailleurs Algériens in French Algeria, the Askari in Italian Eritrea, and the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army, which was mainly composed of local indigenous Muslim soldiers, etc.) and used Muslim soldiers to suppress Muslim uprisings, which also weakened the direct hatred of the lower-class Muslims towards the Christian colonial government.

After World War II, the situation changed a lot. With the advancement of communication and propaganda, ordinary Muslims were able to learn about the details of Western colonial rule through newspapers, radio, and other means. What was even more significant was that in 1948, Israel was

founded and immediately went to war with neighboring Muslim countries. More direct religious and ethnic conflicts promoted the further radicalization of Islamist thinking. The long-standing geopolitical, religious, and ethnic conflicts such as the Palestinian-Israeli issue were not resolved after World War II. This is a major reason why radical political Islamic movements have become more attractive in the Middle East.

The End of The Islamist-Secular Nationalist Alliance

In the early and mid-twentieth century, Islamism and secular nationalism shared the same anti-colonial goal during this period. Facing the colonial invasion of Western powers, secularists who pursued national and state independence and Islamists who called for the establishment of a fundamentalist Islamic order stood in the same trench. For example, due to their common goal of resisting British colonial rule, the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist organization in Egypt, secretly allied with the secular Free Officers Organization. In the revolution launched by the Free Officers in 1952, the Muslim Brotherhood was responsible for helping to manage the streets before the coup soldiers completely controlled Cairo; after the victory of the revolution, Hassan al-Hudaybi, the supreme leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, personally visited Mohamed Naguib, the leader of the Free Officers, and the two sides held consultations on further cooperation, confirming the friendly and cooperative relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the new government.

Of course, this cooperation did not last long. After the Western colonizers were driven away, the contradiction between secularism and Islamism emerged. In 1954, Egyptian President Nasser launched a large-scale raid on the Muslim Brotherhood and imprisoned thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members. In such a fierce confrontation, the Islamists' ideas of resisting the secular government became more radical.

² Mishra, Pankaj. *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt against the West and the Remaking of Asia*, Penguin Books. p. 70.

³ Khan, Shafique Ali. "The Khilafat Movement." *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 34, no. 1 (1986): 33.

⁴ Teitelbaum, Joshua. *The rise and fall of the Hashimite kingdom of Arabia*, New York University Press, 2001, p. 197.

⁵ Kirillina, Svetlana A., Alexandra L. Safronova, and Vladimir V. Orlov. "Caliphate in the Ideological dialogue of the Islamic World: The Case of Pan Islamic Congress in Cairo (1926)." *RUDN Journal of World History* 14, no. 1 (2022): 7-19.

The accelerating effect of scientific and technological progress on the spread of ideas

Another reason why radical political Islamist movement became more influential in the second half of the twentieth century was technological progress and globalization. In 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, with the help of modern advanced transportation technology, jihadists from all over the world quickly gathered in the mountains of Central Asia to join the jihad against the Russians. They honed their military skills and Islamist ideas there and brought these skills and ideas back to all around the world after the war in Afghanistan ended. The "best" among them included Osama bin Laden from Saudi Arabia and Ayman al-Zawahiri from Egypt.

The advancement of modern recording and imaging technology has also made it possible for radical political Islam to spread rapidly and widely. Mohammed Qutb, the younger brother of Sayyid Qutb, a well-known Islamist theorist of the Muslim Brotherhood, is a university professor in Saudi Arabia, spreading many of his and his brother's Islamist ideas in the classroom. He recorded his lectures on tapes and distributed them everywhere, and after the rise of the Internet in the late 1990s, he began to spread his lecture videos on online websites, providing sufficient and convenient theoretical ammunition for radical Islamists around the world since the end of the Cold War.

CONCLUSION

Although Islamist thought has deep historical roots, it was not until the second half of the 20th century that radical Islamism became the

mainstream thought in the political Islamic movement and had the conditions to spread widely around the world.

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⁶ Crowder, Michael. "Indirect rule—French and British style." *Africa* 34, no. 3 (1964): 197-205.

⁷ Bhargava, Rajeshwar Prasad. *The chamber of princes*. Northern Book Centre, 1991, p. 313.

⁸ Calvert, John. *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2009, p.181.

⁹ Barbara H.E. Zollner, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Hasan al-Hudaybi and Ideology*, Routledge, 2009, p. 27.

¹⁰ Olivier Carré and Gérard Michaud, *Les Frères Musulmans. Egypte et Syrie(1928-82)*, Paris: Gallimard Julliard, 1983, p. 68.

¹¹ Kepel, Gilles. *Jihad: The trail of political Islam*. Harvard University Press, 2002, p.51.