

CLASSIFICATION OF CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

(Analytical Study of Western Discourse)

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Abstract: Although, an immense discussion over the definition, perspective and classification of Islamic movements has been rendered by Western intellectuals, yet, it looks evident that they are having perplexity in their thoughts. Positive or moderate, Western thinkers sometimes dislike to attribute violent and ‘isms’ to the Muslims, while others hold the view that leads demanding forceful eradication of these movements and their effects. This paper actually deals with such trends that prevail among the western intellectualism regarding the study of contemporary Islamic movements.

Key words:

Islamic Movements, Classification of Movements, Western Trends, etc

Two basic trends in the Western world have emerged over how to understand and deal with Islamic movements and fundamentalism; a division which spilled over into policy making processes and institutions. For instance, the American Administration has had within it different attitudes. While the State Department was generally more prone, in theory at least, to co-opt Islamic political movements, the Defense Department looked at Islamic fundamentalism as an ideological and geopolitical threat that had to be

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eliminated. The trend that opposes inclusion of Islamic fundamentalism is the largest and includes most of the American press.

Even in research institutes, a lot of discussion is going on about the nature of the Islamic movements. A study, "The Green Threat", published by the Cato Institute in Washington by Leon Hardar, Bureau Chief for the *Jerusalem Post*, summarizes the need for creating a new enemy. The end of the cold war made the American Administration look for new enemies, including instability in Europe, the revival of European powers, new modern Russian imperialism and new nuclear terrorism. The "yellow threat" comes on the top of the new list of enemies, because of the economic threat that East Asia represents. Next come the "green threat" which is represented by Middle Eastern Islamic fundamentalism.

While studying these movements, western scholars always felt the word 'Ummah' because it has been the part of Muslims' history that always tied up every Muslim with each other throughout the history in the world. As Bernard Lewis states:

In the Western world, the basic unit of human organization is the nation, which is then subdivided in various ways, one of which is the religion. Muslims, however, tend to see not a nation subdivided into religious groups but a religion subdivided into nations.¹

According to Bernard Lewis, the life of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) set the division among Muslims' attitudes. He says that contemporary Islam is divided into two types, one is authoritarian and other is radical and activist.

The two phases in the Prophet's career, the one of resistance, the other of rule, are both reflected in the Qur'an, where in different chapters, the believers are enjoined to obey God's representative and to disobey Pharaoh, the paradigm of the unjust and tyrannical ruler. These two aspects of the Prophet's life and work inspired

two traditions in Islam, the one authoritarian and quietist, the other radical and activist.²

But the sense of being 'Islamic' always remained among the Muslims. Nevertheless, the movements of the Islamic world have always been in struggle to survive the dominance of religion in all sect of life. Several attempts have been made to classify Islamist movements since last few decades. A usual classification is worth mentioning which divides Islamists into moderates, radicals or sympathizers and militant activists. The trend to categorize or classify the Muslims is not new but it has been the methodological tactic of Western intellectuals to study and easily examine the Islamic attitudes and impressions. In recent years, especially after 9/11, this approach, to classify the Muslim attitudes, has been apparent. For instance, a famous American think-tank RAND³ corporation released a monograph entitled "*Civil Democratic Islam; Partners, Resources and Strategies*" by Cheryl Benard, in which the author divided the whole Muslims into four categories;

- ***Fundamentalists*** who reject democratic values and contemporary Western culture. They want an authoritarian, puritanical state that will implement their extreme views of Islamic law and morality. They are willing to use innovation and modern technology to achieve that goal.
- ***Traditionalists*** who want a conservative society. They are suspicious of modernity, innovation, and change.
- ***Modernists*** who want the Islamic world to become part of global modernity. They want to modernize and reform Islam to bring it into line with the modern age.
- ***Secularists*** who want the Islamic world to accept a division of church and state in the manner of Western industrial democracies, with religion relegated to the private sphere.⁴

The author of the monograph put the Radicals in fundamentalists' category dividing it into two sub-categories; Scriptural Fundamentalists in which he pointed out Iranian Shi'ati revolutionaries as well as Saudi-based Wahhabies. Whereas the *radical fundamentalists*, the second strand, are much less concerned with the literal substance of Islam, with which they take

considerable liberties either deliberately or because of ignorance of orthodox Islamic doctrine. They usually do not have any “institutional” religious affiliations but tend to be eclectic and autodidactic in their knowledge of Islam. Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, *hizbut-Tahrir*, and a large number of other Islamic radical movements and diffused groups worldwide belong to this category.⁵

Amazingly, although Mr. Benard portrays the fundamentalists’ as one group which occasionally is acceptable to the West especially to U.S., but besides he insists to declare all of them ‘incompatible’ for the West. He wrote:

Not all fundamentalists embrace or even endorse terrorism, at least not the indiscriminate type of terrorism that targets civilians and often kills Muslims along with the “enemy,” but fundamentalism as a whole is incompatible with the values of civil society and the Western vision of civilization, political order, and society.⁶

Whereas, according to Bernard Lewis, the Muslim fundamentalists, unlike the Protestant groups whose name was transferred to them, do not differ from the mainstream on questions of theology and the interpretation of scripture. Their critique is, in the broadest sense, societal. The Islamic world, in their view, has taken a wrong turning. Its rulers call themselves Muslims and make a pretense of Islam, but they are in fact apostates who have abrogated the Holy Law and adopted foreign and infidel laws and customs. The only solution for fundamentalist, Lewis added, is a return to the authentic Muslim way of life, and for this the removal of the apostate governments is an essential first step. Fundamentalists are anti-Western in the sense that they regard the "West as the source of the evil that is corroding Muslim society, but their primary attack is directed against their own rulers and leaders. Such were the movements which brought about the overthrow of the shah of Iran in 1979 and the murder of President Sadat of Egypt two years later.⁷

A most recent study of Islamist movements in North Africa suggested that Islamsits belong to one of five categories:⁸

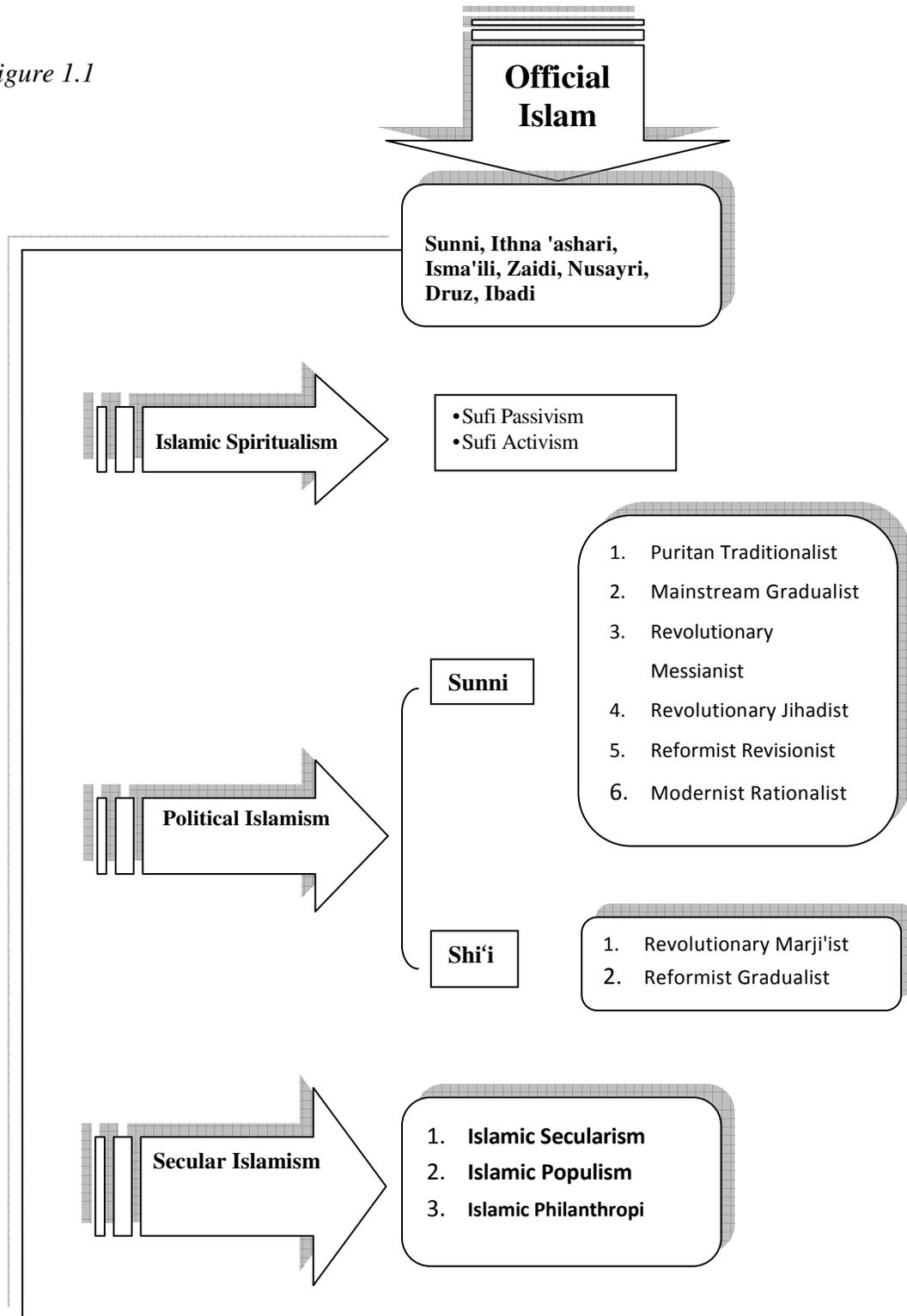
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1. *Salafiyyah Ilmiyyah* (Scientific Salafiyya) who are concerned with the re-establishment of the moral order that prevailed at the time of the Prophet Muhammed (ﷺ) and who do not engage in politics, but do not mind using violence in order to get other Muslims to observe truly Islamic practices.
2. *Salafiyya Jihadiyya* (Militant Salafists) who “attack Western targets in a campaign rationalized in traditional doctrinal terms as a conventional Jihad in defense of Islamic world against Western aggression”,
3. *Modernists* Political activists who are inclined towards peaceful action and who are willing to use modern ideas, techniques and organizations in order to reach their goal of an Islamist state.
4. *Militants* who believe that the only way to establish a truly Islamic society is through the use of armed struggle directed mostly against their own governments.
5. Finally, *Diaspora Muslim activists* who try to maintain an Islamic identity in non-Muslim countries to which Muslims have migrated in mostly Christian societies in Europe and North America.⁹

The authors of this classification used two criteria in classifying Islamist movements, mainly the substance of beliefs for adherents to these movements as well as their methods of action in pursuit of their specific goal. Fred Von Der Mehden, describing Islamists in Malaysia, he divided them into four categories: radicals, traditionalists, fundamentalists and facilitators.¹⁰

Another classification of contemporary Islam is sighted by R. Hrair Dekmejian, a professor of Political Science at the University of Southern California, who categorizes Islam under the title of ‘*Multiple faces of Islam*’¹¹. His presented classification is given below in the shape of diagram:

Figure 1.1



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Subsequently he categorized¹² the contemporary active Islamic movements under above mentioned classification:

Table 1.3 Political Islamism – Sunni

<i>Ideology type</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Country</i>
Puritan Traditionalist (Salafiyya)	Ahl al-Hadith (Wahhabi)	Saudi Arabia Gulf
	Salafiyyun	Saudi Arabia
	Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya	Egypt Sudan
Mainstream Gradualist	Ikhwan al-Muslimun	Egypt Arab World
	Islah al-Ijtima'i	Kuwait
	Harakat al-Nahda	Tunisia
	Jama'a al-Islamiyya	Lebanon
Revolutionary Messianist	Takfir wal-Hijra	Egypt
	Al-Ikhwan	Saudi Arabia
Revolutionary Jihadist	Tanzim al-Jihad	Egypt
	Jāma'a al-Islāmiyya	Egypt
	Hizb al-Tahrir	Arab World
	Hamas/Jihad al-Islami	Palestine
	Ikhwan al-Muslimun	Syria
	Jabha al-Islamiyya lil-Inqaz	Algeria
	Jabha al-Qawmiyya al-Islamiyya	Sudan
Reformist Revisionist	Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun	Sudan
	Hizb al-Umma	Sudan
Modernist Rationalist (‘Asriyyun ‘Aqlaniyyun)	Individual Thinkers, Scholars and Groups	

Whereas, the Political Shi‘a movements are stated¹³ as under:

Ideology	Group	Country
<i>Revolutionary Marji‘ist</i>	• Hizbullah	Lebanon
	• Hizb al-Da‘wa al-Islamiyyah	Iraq Gulf/ Lebanon
	• Jihad al-Islami	Lebanon
	• Jabha al-Islamiyyah li-Tahrir al-Bahrain	Bahrain
	• Munazzama al-Thawra al-Islamiyya lil-Jazira al-‘Arabiyya.	Saudi Arab
<i>Reformist Gradualist</i>	• I‘tilaf al-Islami al-Watani	Kuwait
	• Haraka al-Tahrir	Bahrain

Such classifications are not sufficient to depict the complexity of the Islamist movements; Dr. Kamal elaborates the objective to portray any movement:

They overlook the indirect contribution of two other strands in that movement, one coming from the ruling elites themselves, and the other is provided by apolitical Muslims. The first of these two groups help the Islamist movement by propagating through official media and institutional ideas glorifying a return to a “Golden Age of Islam,” thus unwittingly serving the cause of oppositional Islam by making some of the arguments of the later acceptable to the large masses. The second group provides sympathy to the

activists and militants as they are seen as good Muslims sacrificing their efforts and even their lives for a noble cause.

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About the types of Islamic Movements, Bernard Lewis argued:

It is difficult adequately and accurately to define these Islamic movements in a language that for many centuries has been fashioned by Christian practice and usage. Some of them have been described, by outside rather than by Muslim observers, as “reformists.” But in their own perception, their aim was not to reform, in the sense of modernizing, their faith, but rather to restore it to its pristine purity. There have been many such movements in the course of Islamic history and over the vast extent of the Muslim world, differing considerably in their doctrines, their methods and the degree of success that they achieved. Some were gradualists, some radical; some were victorious, and were able to seize power and thus to confront, in time, the same challenges and the same problems as the rulers whom they had overthrown.¹⁵

In the perspective of contemporary Islamic revival, this fact is established that the decline of Islamic power in the wake of European colonial expansion provoked two key schools of thought within Islam that continue to have relevance today. The traditionalist school believed that the cause for the decline of Islam could be traced to “moral laxity and departure from the true path of Islam.” As a result, their response was to call for an Islamic revival. Others, known as reformers, felt that the decline was due to “a chronic failure to modernize their societies and institutions.” The path of the reformers presents the question of whether it is possible to modernize without Westernizing. At its core this is a struggle over values: “... how to protect a society’s cultural heritage and traditional practices in an age of globalization and how to develop a creative coexistence between modernization and traditionalism without Westernization.”¹⁶

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Since the catastrophe of 9/11/2001, the word "Islamist" has been increasingly used by pundits and by the media to refer to terrorists and/or extremists. The biggest mistake US policy-makers did is to lump all Islamists together and consider them all extremists, terrorists, and enemies of the US. This has pit the US against Islam and the Muslim world, and leads to more misunderstandings, violence, and extremism on both sides of the divide. Today, more than ever before, it is need to understand Islam and the Islamists (or Islamic movements) better in order to isolate the extremists and encourage and support the moderates and those who advocate peaceful change and reforms.

Notes And References

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- ³ The corporation usually claims at inside title of the each release with; “The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.”
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- ⁵ Ibid., p. 4
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