

Distinguishing between Islam and Islamism

by Daniel Pipes

Center for Strategic and International Studies

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Translations of this item:

- Danish
- Indonesian
- French
- Japanese

This is a very auspicious date to discuss the subject of Islam and the West, for it was exactly 200 years ago today, by the usual reckoning, that Islam's pre-modern era came to an abrupt end. Tomorrow, on July 1, 1798, Napoleon landed in Egypt. That was the date when the Muslim world became far more aware of Europe, and after which Europe had a more dramatic and direct impact than ever before. If any single date can delineate the beginning of a new era, this one does.

We've been asked to address the question, "Is Islam incompatible with Western civilization?" I can easily say "no" in response. There is as such nothing incompatible about two religions or two religion-based civilizations. They are very broad, they have many strains, and we would have a fairly tame hour were we only to discuss at that level of generalization.

Instead, I would like to focus on the clash of ideas and ideologies. This confrontation was clearly shown in the aftermath of the *fatwa* by Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie. Contrary to popular expectation, the lines in 1989 were drawn not between Muslim and Westerners, but between those who supported the ayatollah, or in some fashion sympathized with him, and those who were against him. One found many Muslims and Westerners on both sides. This illustrates how it is ideas that count, not religion.

The ideas that have most importance in this context are those of Islamism, otherwise known as fundamentalist Islam. So, I shall take the liberty slightly to adjust the question asked of me and make it "Is Islamism incompatible with Western civilization?" Now I can say "Yes." A very difficult and hostile relationship exists between the two. To elaborate on this point, I would like quickly to cover three topics: (1) Islam (2) Islamism and (3) the proper response to Islamism by Americans and the U.S. government.

Islam

Regarding Islam, one must begin with an understanding of the deep and abiding appeal of traditional Islam, a religion which today has close to a billion adherents. Their loyalty to Islam is quite amazing: Muslims almost never leave their faith in favor of another one. What one scholar, Patricia Crone calls "the world of men and their families," is intensely appealing. Similarly, Ayatollah Mohammed Imami Kashani of Iran has said that "Any Westerner who really understands Islam will envy the lives of Muslims." I, myself, took lessons in Cairo years ago with Sheikh Ahmad Hasan al-Baquri and through the course of those studies had some direct understanding of the accumulated wisdom, logic, and appeal of the religion.

But the problems that we must address began 200 years ago, minus one day. The religion of Islam is essentially a religion of success; it is a winners' religion. The prophet Muhammad fled the city of Mecca in A.D. 622. By 630, only eight years later, he was back in Mecca, now as ruler. The Muslims began as an obscure group in Arabia and within a century ruled a territory from Spain to India. In the year 1000, say, Islam was on top no matter what index of worldly success one looks at -- health, wealth, literacy, culture, power. This association became customary and assumed: to be a Muslim, was to be a favorite of God, a winner.

The trauma of modern history that began 200 years ago involved failure. Failure began when Napoleon landed in Alexandria and has continued since then in almost every walk of life -- in health, wealth, literacy, culture, and power. Muslims are no longer on top. As the mufti of Jerusalem put it some months ago, "Before, we were masters of the world, and now we're not even master of our own mosques." Herein lies the great trauma, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith pointed out forty years ago in his ground-breaking book *Islam in Modern History*.

There have been three main responses to this trauma -- three main efforts to make things right again: secularism, which means openly learning from the West and reducing Islam to the private sphere; reformism, which means appropriating from the West, saying that the West really derives its strength by stealing from Muslims, therefore Muslims may take back from them, a middle ground; and Islamism, which stressed a return to Islamic ways but in fact takes hugely and covertly from the West -- without wanting to, perhaps, but still very much doing so.

Islamism

Islamism is an ideology that demands man's complete adherence to the sacred law of Islam and rejects as much as possible outside influence, with some exceptions (such as access to military and medical technology). It is imbued with a deep antagonism towards non-Muslims and has a particular hostility towards the West. It amounts to an effort to turn Islam, a religion and civilization, into an ideology.

The word "Islamism" is highly appropriate, for this is an "-ism" like other "-isms" such as *fascism* and *nationalism*. Islamism turns the bits and pieces within Islam that deal with politics, economics, and military affairs into a sustained and systematic program. As the leader of the Muslim Brethren put it some years ago, "the Muslims are not socialist nor capitalist; they are Muslims." I find it very telling that he compares Muslims to socialists and capitalists and not to Christians or Jews. He is saying, we are not this "-ism," we are that "-ism." Islamism offers a way of approaching and controlling state power. It openly relies on state power for coercive purposes.

Islamism is, in other words, yet another twentieth-century radical utopian scheme. Like Marxism-Leninism or fascism, it offers a way to control the state, run society, and remake the human being. It is an Islamic-flavored version of totalitarianism. The details, of course, are very different from the preceding versions, but the ultimate purpose is very similar.

Islamism is also a total transformation of traditional Islam; it serves as a vehicle of modernization. The ideology deals with the problems of urban living, of working women and others at the cutting edge, and not the traditional concerns of farmers. As Olivier Roy, the French scholar, puts it, "Rather than a reaction against the modernization of Muslim societies, Islamism is a product of it." Islamism is not a medieval program but one that responds to the stress and strains of the twentieth century.

In this, Islamism is a huge change from traditional Islam. One illustration: Whereas traditional Islam's sacred law is a personal law, a law a Muslim must follow wherever he is, Islamism tries to apply a Western-style geographic law that depends on where one lives. Take the case of Sudan, where traditionally a Christian was perfectly entitled to drink alcohol, for he is a Christian, and Islamic law applies only to Muslims. But the current regime has banned alcohol for every Sudanese. It assumes Islamic law is territorial because that is the way a Western society is run.



I also wish to note that Islamism has few connections to wealth or poverty; it is not a response to deprivation. There is no discernible connection between income and Islamism. Rather, this movement is led by capable people coping with the rough and tumble of modern life. The ideology appeals primarily to modern people; I am always fascinated to note how many Islamist leaders (for example in Turkey and Jordan) are engineers.

Islamism is by now a powerful force. It runs governments in Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan. It is an important force of opposition in Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority. (By my understanding Saudi Arabia and Libya are not Islamist.) I estimate that some 10 percent of the Muslim population world wide is Islamist. But it is very active minority and it has a reach that is greater than its numbers. Islamists are also present here, in the United States, and, to an stunning extent, dominate the discourse of American Islam.

The Islamists' success in Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan, show that were they to come to power elsewhere, they would create enormous problems for the people they rule, for the neighborhood, and for the United States. Their reaching power would lead to economic contraction, to the oppression of women, to terrible human rights abuses, to the proliferation of arms, to terrorism, and to the spread of a viciously anti-American ideology. These are, in short, rogue states, dangerous first to their own people and then to the outside world.

Policy Implications

There is a great battle under way for the soul of the Muslim world. This battle is not between the West and the Muslim world; we in the West are bystanders. It is essentially a battle between Muslims, between the Khomeini and Atatürk dispositions. Which one is likely to prevail? It is strange to observe that the lively, new ideas in Kemalist Turkey are Islamist ones, whereas the lively, new ideas in Islamist Iran are secular ones. This points to the turmoil and the dynamic developments taking place in the Muslim world.

Despite the fact that the West is a bystander, we on the outside must protect our interests. To start, in devising strategy towards Islamism we must very specifically and very repeatedly distinguish between Islam and Islamism. I am talking about developing a policy toward Islamism, not Islam. States do not have policies towards religions, but they do respond to ideologies. The American government and the American people must be clear about this distinction.

This said, the U.S. government should take a number of steps:

- Support states that contain Islamists and encourage them to do so. Keeping Islamists out of power is in their interest and in ours.
- Pressure those states that are already Islamist to reduce their aggressiveness toward their own populations and toward the outside world.
- Celebrate and support those brave souls who stand up to the Islamists.
- Label the Islamist groups that engage in terrorism as such.
- Do not work cooperate with Islamists, thereby encouraging them. Dialogue with Islamists tends to enhance their stature.
- Be very careful about pushing for elections. The spread of democracy is of course a permanent American aspiration. But it includes much more than ballots. Elections are a capstone to a deep and usually long-term process of change that includes an effective rule of law, minority right, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and much more. To hold premature elections, as happened in Algeria, is in no one's interest. It requires 10, 20, 30 years of evolution before full-fledged democracy can come into existence. In a sense, this process recapitulates what took place in the first democratic country, in England, over centuries.

Because it takes time for full enfranchisement, the U.S. government should encourage democratization, first on the level of civic society, and then, only after that has been established, on the level of political leaders.

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