

Islam, Muslims, and Multiple Allegiances

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The intersection of views and interpretations, a lack of understanding of the issue, confusion regarding language or how to distinguish between different meanings along with less visible reasons, have all created confusion about terms relating to Islam and what it means to be a Muslim. Due to this confusion, many people evaluate Muslims by a single, harsh judgment, at the expense of the truth. The following is my interpretation of these terms and issues as leader of the Kurdistan Islamic Union.

Islam: A tolerant and heavenly religion. The last divine religion, whose adherents account for a quarter of all religious believers on earth. It has a holy book, the Quran, and follows the final prophet, Mohammad, and his path and teachings, which were preserved and documented by Muslims. The religion is 14 centuries old and remains dynamic, durable and in keeping with the age.

Muslims: All members of this religion since its first century (the sixth century A.D.) to the present day. Among them are those who observe their duties correctly and those who do so wrongly; those who are lax and those who go too far; the good and the weak; with various levels of adherence regarding knowledge and practice. Islamic history is, in essence, the history of the Muslims; thus it is not a justification for Islam, nor can Islam itself be judged on the behavior of its adherents.

Islamists: Proponents of political Islam. They belong to Islamic movements, take Islam as an ideological basis, and promote Islamic law as a primary source of legislation in their countries. They have produced conceptual projects and political movements and entered the political fray in their countries. They win their legitimacy from the people and democratic elections; they believe in civilian rule, not theocracy; they believe in a civil, political process, dialogue, coexistence, pluralism, and democracy.

Islamists who pursue the way of advocacy and religious education do not necessarily adopt violence or radicalism as a political path to reach power. There are, of course, variations between these groups regarding their levels of moderation and the practice of democracy within their activities and organizations, or in their dealings with other political parties and movements. Their level of involvement in education, Islamic teaching, and proselytization, as well as spiritual, political, and social activities also varies.

Some focus more on education while others focus on Islamic teaching and encouraging piety in others (da'wa) and others still focus more on politics - and so on. These movements and organizations are of course not flawless; they are human projects controlled by human minds, and their main distinguishing feature is their supreme ideological

reference point - Islam. They abide by the constants of Islam and operate freely within the variables, but the fact that their parties and movements carry the Islamic label is formal and customary rather than conditional or obligatory. The basis of these movements is that they are involved in politics within the broad lines set out by Islam and they share the political sphere with others, adopting a civilian and peaceful approach and a centrist methodology of moderation.

The prototype for these organizations is the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and other Arab countries. With the Muslim brotherhood I refer to the mainstream of the group not to radical groups which split from the Brotherhood such as Al Jihad and Excommunication and Emigration Pakistan's Jamaat al-Islamiyah and the Nur movement in Turkey – along with other Islamic movements that adopted political projects and were involved in the political process in Morocco, Algeria, Yemen, Iraq, and Jordan – also follow the peaceful and centrist Islamist model outlined above. Each of these movements has its own national and local characteristics, and none are bound to any organizational framework outside their countries.

These groups working in politics are targeted with hatred, persecution, and slander by their countries' regimes, as they rival other parties in the political process and usually play the role of opposition to the existing government. These governments oppose political Islamists and try to drag them onto dangerous ground, pushing them towards hostility and violence instead of peace and civility.

The reason these regimes hate Islamic movements is not only that of their thinking or practice, but because they are political rivals. Prisons, gallows, and cells in Arab countries have long hosted these groups' leaders and ordinary members. Repression, dictatorship, single-family rule, and tyranny characterize these governments, and these regimes use state violence against Islamist movements. If they were not afraid of the competition for power, centrist thinking would be the best solution for doing away with extremist thought, because simply crushing movements is not a cure. "Only iron can blunt iron," as the Arabic saying goes; only thought can change thought.

Traditional Islamists: There are other Islamists groups such as the Tablighi Jamaat and the Talaba schools in Pakistan and Al Salafya Al madkhalyia, which adopt the thinking, philosophy, ideology, or theory of Salafist or Sufi teachings. These trends have emerged throughout Islamic history and formed organizations, but are usually able to reach understandings with the ruling regimes. Their followers are peaceable and traditional, generally apolitical, and in many cases agreeable to the existing regimes in the Islamic world.

Of course, some violent groups have taken Salafist and Sufi ideologies as their ideological groundwork. In particular, the Salafist-Jihadist trend is born out of extremist Salafism which gives it the arrogance to think and judge others on any supposed violation of Islamic texts.

Violent terrorists: These groups believe in violence, extremism, and terrorism. They organize themselves into armed groups under the veneer of jihad, supported by heedless, rich individuals and infiltrated by regional and international intelligence services to create confusion and violent chaos, disfiguring the shining face of Islam in the process. They also distort the image of moderate, centrist Islamist movements.

This idea dates back to the first century of Islam. The Kharijites were characterized by their random acts of murder, killing Ali Ibn Abi Talib, fighting other Muslims, and spilling the blood of everyone who differed from them and did not follow their path.

Scholars and rulers stood up to them at the time, and their movements died, but new versions of them are resurrected from time to time. The final link in this chain is the al-Qaeda terrorist group led by Osama Bin Laden. Salafist by identity, doctrine, and affiliation, he was succeeded by the spiteful Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian who rebelled against the Muslim Brotherhood.

Afghanistan became a battlefield in the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. Extremist Salafist

thinkers exploited the situation in Afghanistan in the 1980s to create an environment for violence and claim it as permissible jihad. Armed groups fought the Soviet Union and forced it to withdraw from the country, on the verge of collapse, and then turned on the Islamic and western states and declared war on the world. Other groups broke away from this organization and spread throughout the world. Members carried out the 9/11 attacks and other terrorist operations.

Finally, they established the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, taking over Sunni cities in Iraq, spreading death and destruction. Everyone who follows and is interested in Islamic issues, from writers to journalists, researchers and academics, should pay attention to these differences and approaches, distinguishing between them and differentiating between labels and the things to which they are applied. Doing so should help avoid the error of making generalizations or neglecting objectivity and knowledge. All should heed the advice given by Allah in the Quran: “O ye who believe! If a wicked person comes to you with any news, ascertain the truth, lest ye harm people unwittingly, and afterwards become full of repentance for what ye have done.” (Surat Al-Hujuraat, 6) ❖

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