

Are Muslims Islamists?

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Conflating Islam with Islamism has sparked a dangerous discourse in which the majority of Muslims, who are not Islamist, bear the brunt.

The recent attack on the Muhammad cartoon contest in Dallas and the subsequent suggestions by pundits and politicians, including Dutch legislator Geert Wilders, that Islam should be banned in the West has reignited a recurring question over the past decade: Is Islam incompatible with the West?

However, such a question is grounded on a fundamentally misguided assumption. Islam is not Islamism. Islam is a faith; Islamism is an extremist, and at times violent, ahistorical ideology that seeks to ground its legitimacy in Islam and focuses its recruitment efforts on Muslims. Islamism aims to create a new illiberal world order grounded in the imagined and austere past of 7th century deserts.

The relationship between Islam and Islamism is akin to the relationship between the working class and communism in the Cold War. The communist ideology attempted to derive its legitimacy from the working class and sought to speak on their behalf. Islamists try to do the same. Yet, just as communism did not represent the millions of working-class men and women who did not identify with communists, today, Islamism does not represent Muslims.

Current manifestations of Islamism include a variety of Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Although these groups employ different tactics, at their core, they share a common illiberal ideology that will neither respect nor adopt universal values.

At the extreme end of the Islamist spectrum are jihadi-Islamists, such as al-Qaeda and ISIL, who use violence to spread their message and terrorize populations into submission. ISIL, for example, uses brutality and savagery to force millions in Syria and Iraq to submit to its distorted ideology and totalitarian style of government.

On the other side stands the Muslim Brotherhood, who, although nonviolent, will not shy away from using political

power to impose their austere ideology on unwilling masses. Following the election of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi in 2012, the group launched a campaign to impose its non-egalitarian ideology on the Egyptian population; the Brotherhood took over the media and the courts and signaled its intentions to implement Sharia law. This prompted massive demonstrations across most major cities in the country, as Egyptians revolted against what they correctly saw as a burgeoning Islamist autocracy.

The jury is still out on how the West should interact with nonviolent, authoritarian Islamist movements. The Tunisian model, for example, is encouraging. In the wake of Tunisia's revolution in 2011, the country's primary Islamist movement, Ennahda, received the plurality of votes in the country's Constituent Assembly elections. But Tunisia's secular constitution, powerful secular voting blocks, unions and business lobbies helped the party avoid Morsi and the Brotherhood's rapid decline in Egypt, and in January 2014 the party stepped down from the government.

However, in Turkey the opposite has happened. The Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came to power in 2002, delivered a decade of phenomenal economic growth and, in doing so, built a strong popular base. It has since exploited its popularity to subvert the democratic checks and balances, including the country's secular constitution, media, courts and business lobbies.

This question aside, one thing is clear: Be it the Brotherhood or ISIL, Islamists do not represent Islam. Conflating Islam with Islamism has sparked a dangerous discourse in which the majority of Muslims, who are not Islamist, bear the brunt. The pundits' caustic claims that Islam and Muslims are inherently flawed bear too similar a resemblance to ISIL's radically bigoted messages on Judaism and Christianity.

Attacking Islam, and not Islamism, is dangerous, and it only feeds the "clash of civilizations" narrative advocated by groups like al-Qaeda and ISIL who exploit such divisions. In labeling all Muslims as Islamists, we only lend credence to their worldview in suggesting that Islamists are the sole representatives of Islam. The West cannot and should not sink to their level.

I wish there was a different term to refer to the ideology of Islamism, which would avoid some of this confusion. But there is not. In its absence, we need to identify.

Imagine what would have happened during the Cold War if pundits and policymakers suggested that all working-class people were communist and we had targeted all working class people in the West. Fortunately, this did not happen. Instead, the United States worked with social democrats, socialists and democracy-respecting unions, peeling working class majorities away from communism. Targeting Islam is not the cure for Islamism.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ♦

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