

Is It Islamic or Islamist?

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Oct 23, 2010

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

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



Articles & Testimony

Now that even the tolerant, liberal Swedes have elected an anti-Islam party to their Parliament, it's pretty clear that such controversies are mounting because both the left and the right are confused over the politics of Islam. The left is wrongly defending Islamism -- an extremist and at times violent ideology -- which it confuses with the common person's Islam, while the right is often wrongly attacking the Muslim faith, which it confuses with Islamism. Western thinkers must begin to recognize the difference between Islamism and Islam, or we are headed toward an ideologically defined battle with one quarter of humanity.

At least a few on the left are defending Islamism because they think that they are defending Islam. Recently, a European policymaker told us that she had become sympathetic to Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) because "in the post-September 11 world, I wanted to defend Islam." Well, the AKP, and other Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world, do not represent Islam. These Islamist parties, even when not using violence, stand for an ideology that is illiberal to its core -- for instance, its refusal to recognize gender equality. In the same way that communism once claimed to speak for the working class, Islamism claims to represent Muslims. By defending radical Islamist movements, the left is helping only to give Muslims a bad name. The left ought to side not with so-called moderate Islamist parties, but rather with liberal Muslim movements, such as the Republican People's Party in Turkey and the pro-democracy movement in Egypt, which support gender equality.

The right, on the other hand, often targets Islam while thinking that it is attacking Islamism. Banning the building of minarets, as Switzerland did, is exactly the wrong thing to do. The problem is not a mosque; the problem is a mosque used to promote violence, jihadism, and illiberal Islamism. The crimes of Al Qaeda, Hizbullah, and other groups are rooted in jihadist Islamism, which advocates violence to impose extremist dogma on Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In response, right-wing Dutch politician Geert Wilders and other nativist politicians in Europe have suggested a ban on Islam itself by criminalizing the Islamic holy book, the Quran. Wilders should take note that not even Stalin was able to ban religion. It's hard to believe that a politician in liberal Europe can suggest outlawing a faith, but that is what the confusion over Islam has come to. What is more shocking is that Wilders's anti-Islam party emerged as the third-largest political force in the latest Dutch elections. The group has proposed responding to acts of Islamist terror by taxing Muslim women's headscarves. What a shame for the right, which is supposed to stand for religious

freedom and should stand for freedom of Islam, even while targeting jihadist Islamist groups.

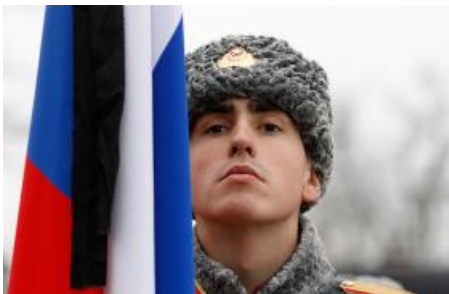
The confusion over Islam has real consequences. When was the last time you read a piece by a leftist intellectual criticizing how the AKP is trampling media freedoms in Turkey? Or the Muslim Brotherhood's refusal to recognize equal rights for women and Christians in Egypt? By defending Islamism, liberals are strengthening one of the biggest threats facing Muslims and Western liberalism alike. Meanwhile, by targeting the Muslim faith, the right is alienating potential allies in the Muslim community: conservative Muslims who want to practice their faith and despise Al Qaeda's vision. As they try to promote religious values in the secularized and quite often atheistic or agnostic West, right-wing politicians will find natural allies in conservative Muslims.

If Western intellectuals do not get rid of this confusion now, we are headed down a dangerous path. Common people in the West will start to bundle all Muslims with Islamists, picking a potentially losing battle with one quarter of humanity. This clash of civilizations is what Al Qaeda wanted to trigger with the attacks on September 11. The West and its intellectuals should be smarter than Al Qaeda.

Hayri Abaza is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. [Soner Cagaptay](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC10.php?CID=3) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC10.php?CID=3>) is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

Newsweek

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆
Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)