

Is Islamism Dead? The Future of Islamism in the Muslim World

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The most elaborate argument that political Islam is dead first came from Olivier Roy in 1992 in his book later translated as *The Failure of Political Islam*. Roy argues Islamism is political activism that aims to achieve political power. He claims Islamism has been eclipsed by neofundamentalism, which is the drive to create a miniature version of the "just society." Neofundamentalists, in his view, wish to change social, cultural, and economic life, without aiming to take over the state. He argues that because the neofundamentalist vision has only limited political influence, it does not pose any threat to the West and will not easily change the balance in the Middle East. The whole phenomenon of political Islam, as Roy sees it, is overrated. Were there to be any future Islamist political victory, it would change customs and some laws, not the social order.

Roy's optimistic analysis is wrong for four main reasons:

Islamism is not dead. On the contrary, in the twenty years since the Iranian Revolution, a considerable number of countries have fallen under the Islamists' control. The most ambitious manifestation of Islamism is the government of Hassan Turabi in Sudan; the most spectacular version is the Taliban in Afghanistan; and the most legitimate versions have been the Islamist governments in Turkey (briefly), Pakistan, and Indonesia. It is, moreover, premature to argue that Islamism will not sweep the Muslim world. The victory may lay in the future. Roy's thesis would be like saying in 1938 that the threat from the Soviet revolution had died out.

Islamism increasingly dominates societies. The last two decades have seen a dramatic Islamization of social, cultural, and political life in the Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East. A good example is the growth of Hizballah's power base in Lebanon. Hizballah started as a militia but has turned into a political force; more significantly, it has become a way of life that exerts an influence on every aspect of Lebanese society. Throughout the Muslim world as a whole, Islamism has had many successes. In the field of education, curricula are increasingly Islamicized, and there is a dedicated attempt to Islamize knowledge. In the legal domain, the shari'a has become more widely applicable. In the cultural area, the "Rushdie Rules" curtailing intellectual freedom have spread -- that is, no criticism of Islam or its practices are permitted, making impossible in most Muslim states discussion of the sensitive topics of Islam. In social relations, the sexes are increasingly separated (such as by the veiling of women), alcohol is less available, and the restrictions of Ramadan are imposed on the entire society. All of this is far different from the practices of twenty years ago, before the Iranian Revolution.

Islamists are strongest where governments are the most antithetical to them and are weakest where the governments are sympathetic to Islamism. Iran offers the best example of the latter phenomenon. Iranian youth are turning away from Islam, Iran may become an important source for anti-Islamist thought. A similar phenomenon occurred during the Cold War, when some of the harshest critiques of communism came from the Soviet Union, whereas anti-Americanism was most rampant not in the Soviet Union or China but in countries such as Italy or Greece.

Movements seeking to create authentic Muslim societies may cause substantial harm. Those movements may end up taking control over society and then the state. Where they are powerful, the result is more than a change of social practice: It is a dramatic economic contraction, a proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and an anti-American ideology.

The danger posed by political Islamism is very real and alive. As Bassam Tibi says in his book *The Challenge to Fundamentalism: Political Islam in the New World Order*, Islamism is indeed a powerful challenge to the existing international system of nation-states, not only to secularism.

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Iran during Muhammad Khatami's presidency is a reminder of when the Qajjar king, Nasser el-Din Shah, was assassinated, and his courtiers -- for fear of popular uprising -- put make-up on the dead king and paraded him in his carriage as if he were alive. The Iranian state and its institutions are trying to preserve their authoritative image even though, in reality, their strength has long faded. Furthermore, the state is trying to fix its tarnished reputation by projecting a false image.

The dominant perception of Iran in the West has little relation to the reality. Many in the West have accepted the

polarized view of Iranian society offered by the regime, which reduces everything to the fight between the hardliners and the moderates. In reality, however, the main contradiction is between the Islamic regime trying to impose an ideology in the name of religion, and a dynamic society resisting this imposition. President Khatami is a manifestation of the paradox at the heart of Iranian society: On one hand, he has to uphold all that the hardliners claim as the positions of the Islamic regime; on the other hand, to be popular, he has to claim an agenda that runs counter to that of the regime's. His rule of law is the same as that imposed by Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, the supreme leader against whom most of those who used to support the regime are now protesting.

It is worth noting that the Iranian mullahs are not purely Islamic. Many of their ideas are based in Marxism. The idea of a decadent Western culture, the division of the world between the imperialists and their internal agents and their colonial victims -- between the oppressed and the oppressor -- and even many of the plans, economic and otherwise, for the creation of an ideal state were lifted out of Marxist dictums. Many of President Khatami's supporters were ardent Islamist leftists who actively participated in the taking of the American hostages.

The Islamic regime in Iran is crumbling. Its downfall is caused by the Islamists' failings in three areas: minorities, women, and culture. It has created its own alternatives by systematically targeting almost every layer of society, attacking freedoms and expressions of individuality. The regime's excesses have resulted in the demoralization of the regime's own faithful supporters, and mobilization of the Iranian people. Iranians have started questioning the basic tenets of Islam as imposed by the Islamic Republic. The political system is fragile and, because of that, also very brutal. Practicing individual rights has become tantamount to using guns against the regime. Were three Iranian women bold enough to walk down the streets of Tehran without veils, it would mean the end of the system.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Sulay Ozturk.