



## Understanding Political Islam: Acknowledging the Resistance

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After a long struggle with the Persian Safavid state, the Ottoman Empire finally collapsed from the weight of the various crises which had turned it into the sick man of Europe. Its collapse left in its wake heated sectarian conflict. Weighed down by this intra-sectarian fighting, stripped of its Islamic content and heritage, the Empire yielded the reins of power to the aggressive power of an expanding European colonialism.

Within this climate, Muslim society found itself facing its own sectarian conflict; but additionally and more seriously, it was confronted now with Muslim-Christian hostility, a blind imitation of the West [in states such as Turkey, Egypt and Persia], and a nationalist inheritance that surged into the Islamic domain looking to capture its very nature, role and position. This gave rise amongst Muslims to a grave concern over the very destiny of their society - and its seemingly limited future. Most importantly, Islamic civilisation and culture were being questioned, revealing society's self-despair. It was searching for a saviour, even if it were the devil himself. As a result, the true hero of this Muslim nation, at this desperate juncture, would of necessity be a 'bold soul' who could talk of hope. Such was Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani: a revolutionary who challenged the rottenness of introversion and who spoke out against Western aggression. With his innate confidence, he offered an alternative of an Islamic ideology to be understood as a way of living, which could oppose passivity and death. A group of men gathered around him who would become pioneers of the movement known as 'the Arab Renaissance'.

The main points of interest here are as follows:

**Firstly:** the Renaissance pioneers worked with every new Islamic issue and movement, because they believed this promised them hope of survival and because they believed that these movements constituted the beginnings of the enlightenment which had already permeated Europe. For example, when the Salafi movement arose it was adopted by men of standing such as

Rashid Rida. This was followed by other thinkers such as Malik Bennabi. From their leading ideological position, they believed that some Salafi opinions were expressions of independent thought and doctrinal corrections. They did not foresee any of the trends which would result from these ideas later on.

Those subsequent trends in this orientation of Islam illustrated the psychopathy which affected the Muslim world as a result of trying to combine a western 'consciousness' with an Islamic 'consciousness'. The strains of this pressure shook the cultural identity of the Islamic world.

**Secondly:** the interpretation and application of the Arab 'renewal' ideas conceived by movements and thinkers such as al-Afghani, took practical shape in forms very differently to how their founders would initially have imagined. Whilst Jamal al-Din al-Afghani was establishing an Islamic university, and taking up a stance against the aggressive cultural colonization of the country, the contamination of nationalism and sectarianism within the context of the closed Islamic society transformed al-Afghani's espousal of 'openness to the world' into sterile debates as to whether Jamal al-Din al-Afghani was Sunni or Shi'i, Afghani or Iranian, etc. This indicates the nature of the prevailing spirit of the time; and from which Islamic society continues to suffer today.

**Thirdly:** the introduction of Islamism as the successor to the Islamic 'renewal' movements focussed on the 'call' to faith, rather than the ideology and *ijtihad*<sup>1</sup> that had been proposed by men like Muhammad Abdou. Islamism also adopted organisational theories which used the partisan thinking practised by the Left. Both Sunni and Shi'i Islamist movements began to immerse themselves in issues such as the 'call' to faith, theories of a nation-within-a-nation and the on psychological isolation in societies that were 'unawakened' (in a state of *jahaliyya*). At this point, the call to faith began to be twinned with direct political aims, and with an Islamic spirituality that, despite its sincerity, was influenced by the European system of institutionalism and partisanism [competitiveness inherent to liberal market systems].

This created a divide between the Islamist elite and the people; it highlighted the role of religious educational institutions, and set in motion a conflict on two fronts with both regimes and non-Islamist parties. Two levels of partisan operations were established. The first of these is symbolised by Sayid Qutub's book *Milestones*, which has been adopted by the majority of Sunni and Shi'i Islamist movements. They were shaped by both the influence of this book and that of another book, *The Four Basic Quranic Terms* by Abul Ala Maududi, on the culture of active Islam. The second level is symbolised by the book *Preachers not Judges* by Hadibi, which proposes a cultural form of Islam which can adapt to a non-Islamic society and regime, and which concerns

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: independent judgement of legal issues based on a fresh interpretation of the religious texts

itself purely with spiritual matters. However, these two levels have opened the way for both vacuous liberal interpretations of Islam and destructive '*takfiri*' interpretations. This necessitated a serious review on the part of many of those who belong to these movements, even though they belong to the official Muslim religious establishment.

As events have unfolded, different Islams have emerged - an Islam seeking its identity in the military-security conflict, which gave birth to Al Qaeda and its brother organisations, a liberal Islam whose proponents are looking for a role in managing political and civil life, a cultural Islam of the intellectual elite and Islamist thinkers, and an *ijtihadi* Islam of resistance represented by Imam Khomeini – which, despite its close association with the Imam, has spread widely in both Sunni and Shi'i circles.

This latter '*ijtihadi*' form has suffered from internal Islamic conflict: The thinking it has generated differs in nature to the prevailing doctrine of both active Islamist groups and official Islam (institutes, universities and seminaries). This suggests that it is trying to construct ideas and institutions within Islam which differ from the norm – and inevitably this orientation often draws sharp criticism. *Ijtihadi* Islam also confronts the international will of societies, regimes and countries that are devoid of any independence of thinking or the self-assurance to renew their ideas.

The outcome of this is that each step taken by the adherents of *Ijtihadi* Islam are interpreted in terms of particular nationalist, sectarian or self-interested affiliations, with the aim of preventing them from influencing or having impact on the general Islamic environment. Moreover, those who criticise the taking of such steps as leading to the formation of a cultural 'modernity', persist with this criticism, oblivious to the fact that modernity is a form of internal cultural accumulation belonging to a specific Western culture which has been dubbed 'modernity'. Not every development which a nation undergoes necessarily corresponds to western 'modernity'. The causes and prospects of development in our case are based on two main issues:

**Firstly:** We use *ijtihad* as a means to guide and influence our reality and to understand its strengths and address its weaknesses - using a system of values, provisions and theories which are derived from this reality. This value system is not just one factor, amongst many; but as a revelation of a divine, human and holy eminence. The religious text expresses the moral implications of these values and provisions. By *ijtihad* I am not using the judicial sense of the term, but an *ijtihad* which seeks humanity's development at every level, and which aims to achieve a vision of faith based on the power of the Merciful on earth.

**Secondly:** using *Jihad* (endeavour) as a context for managing the issues of life, and organising the affairs of a country and subjects through jihad to build the individual self or the social self of the nation, and jihad to remove all obstacles hindering the progression of Muslims or other vulnerable groups. Imam Khomeini did not call for the defence of Muslims alone, but of all mankind. He therefore named the global front which he wished to form “the movement for the vulnerable on earth”.

This proposal has adopted for itself a form, or thesis that can adapt to fit with the establishment of a modern state (such as Iran), or a lived civil society existing in opposition (such as the Islamist opposition in Lebanon and Palestine). One of the distinguishing things about this thesis is that it contains an incredible degree of flexibility yet maintains the essential elements, despite the transformations made to its movement.

This is the proposal of *jihadi ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* means understanding the religious text well, and understanding the reality surrounding it well, and reconciling the religious text and reality to make this *ijtihad* a political *ijtihad*, or a political-societal-military *ijtihad* which can unite people with a unified understanding of Islam. Based on this, I would like to present the example of Shi’i thinking which I believe has passed through three phases:

- Understanding Islam and how the Shi’i view differs from Sunnism.
- Forming society through direct education. This is known as the ‘culture of active Islam’.
- Finally, the stage which began in 1979 under the leadership of Imam Khomeini, who believed that *ijtihad* must form a key part of the jurists’ movement, and that serious efforts must be made to lead the Islamic nation out of its stage of marginalisation to a stage of active effectiveness. This struggle will restore awareness – this time, not a received awareness, but an awareness that emanates from a general atmosphere of understanding Islam as a path of life. Khomeini therefore believed that politics expressed the root of the act of worship. He believed that a witness to life knows God better than a Sufi who is isolated from society. Khomeini thus sought to return Islam to the moment of its inception, to the Islam of Muhammad bin Abdullah. His final piece of advice was that we are adherents of the school established by Muhammad bin Abdullah, and that the true role of Imam Ali was to liberate mankind from slavery and servitude. Naturally he referred not only to Muslims here, but to all mankind. He therefore believed that creating an Islamic nation in Iran was more important than performing prayers. We should acknowledge here that this *ijtihad* was initially directed towards expressing the idea that every Muslim group must set up an Islamic state. However, it quickly grew to include a new conception of *ijtihad* for political operations which harmonised between the concept of citizenship and the concept of the Islamic nation. It became incumbent upon every member of the nation

to form their own model. Khomeini called for the establishment of Islamic unions, but developments then occurred in the context of the experiment and it became necessary to establish a state, i.e. this became the only valid choice and only option for *ijtihad*. He recognised the importance of the popular movement as an influence in the country, even though the people were not necessarily the group that would form the state. This understanding of *ijtihad* clearly has its origins in the experience of Hizbollah in Lebanon. At one point the idea of joining a government or parliament was not acceptable. However, *ijtihad* can adjust to reality and change over time, and so nowadays there is serious recognition that citizenship is a true value in Islam and that participating in building a society on the basis of the values of justice, equality, strength and power legitimises joining a government or government institution in a non-Islamic state, which has in common with an Islamic state the same humanitarian and nationalist issues.

Before I come to a conclusion, I would like to acknowledge that the experience of Hamas in Palestine has played a part in forming the following question about *ijtihad*: how can Islamist movements plan to establish a state within its restricted and wider sense, and also preserve their role in opposition? Confronted with these changes, what new reality are we facing? We are facing a struggle between two forms of civilisation – firstly, a civilisation which uses science and invades regions with tanks and aeroplanes to turn them into markets for consumer goods, and secondly a civilisation which wants to possess independent knowledge without denying others this knowledge, and which aims to make the nation state the true state in the region, in the manner of the Iranian and Turkish examples. The state connects people across the region, allowing them to participate in the world and in what is known as ‘world peace’. It does this without seeking permission from the aggressor, even when challenged by all types and means of opposition. The problem with Iran and the peoples of this region is not a problem of nuclear weapons but of the values which this country and peoples hold. Naturally, I cannot fail to mention here that many Islamist and political movements in the region are not particularly aware of this level of conflict. Even if these movements begin to grow weak at some point in time, they remain part of something which will not come to an end. They carry within them two dimensions which will ensure their continuity: the dimension of the state and the dimension of the call to faith. We therefore should not underestimate their significance for understanding Islam, whether they are Sunni or Shi’i. They are still the proposal posing the greatest obstacle to the progression of a jihadi *ijtihadi* culture built on the values of Islam.

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