

## Intellectual (Neo-) Imperialism: The Examples of “Islam[ism(s)]” and “Jihad[ism(s)]”

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### Abstract

*In any scientific endeavour, or considered as such, methodology and epistemology are paramount, not to mention ontology: what is the nature of the reality that we are studying? What is the nature of the knowledge that is being produced and its rationality? What are the methods applied to the field of study? However, when it comes to “Islam”, the “Middle East”, or the “Orient”, the starting points are assumptions and truisms, particularly in “scientific” fields such as Political Science or International Relations, especially when the subject is the relation between politics and religion. In the last few decades, Islam has become a central point of reference for a wide range of political activities, arguments and opposition movements. The term “political Islam”, or “Islamism”, has been adopted by many scholars in order to identify this seemingly unprecedented irruption of Islamic religion into the secular domain of politics and thus to distinguish these practices from the forms of personal piety, belief, and ritual conventionally subsumed in Western scholarship under the unmarked category “Islam”. There have been tremendous, innumerable websites, voluminous publications and many projects on “Islamism(s)” and “Post-Islamism(s)”, the idea that political Islam had failed. However, when reality did not confirm that prediction, a new term was coined: “neo-Islamism”. This paper aims to explore the thesis that, as in other fields, these labels are nothing more than an attempt by Area Studies within Western academia to mould reality according to preconceived ideas and according to policy-oriented circles and funded by governmental organizations, and that, when dealing with “Islam” and “politics”, we are urgently in need of a different epistemology.*

### Keywords

Intellectual Imperialism;  
Islamism; Jihadism;  
Epistemology; Methodology



## I. Introduction

In any scientific endeavour, or considered as such, methodology and epistemology are paramount, not to mention ontology: what is the nature of the reality that we are studying? What is the nature of the knowledge that is being produced and its rationality? What are the methods applied to the field of study? However, when it comes to “Islam”, the “Middle East”, or the “Orient”, the starting points are assumptions and canards, particularly in “scientific” fields such as Political Science or International Relations, especially when the subject is the relation between politics and religion. The claim that contemporary Muslim activists are putting Islam to use for political purposes seems, at least in some instances, to be warranted, since although parties that base their appeal on their Islamic credentials appear to exemplify this instrumental relation to religion, a problem remains: in what way does the distinction between the political and non-political domains of social life hold today?

## II. Research Methods

In the last few decades, Islam has become a central point of reference for a wide range of political activities, arguments and opposition movements. The term “political Islam”, or “Islamism”, has been adopted by many scholars in order to identify this seemingly unprecedented irruption of Islamic religion into the secular domain of politics and thus to distinguish these practices from the forms of personal piety, belief, and ritual conventionally subsumed in Western scholarship under the unmarked category “Islam”. There have been innumerable websites, voluminous publications and many projects on “Islamism(s)” and “Post-Islamism(s)”, the idea that political Islam had failed. However, when reality did not confirm that prediction, a new term was coined: “neo-Islamism”.<sup>1</sup>

This paper aims to explore the thesis that, as in other fields, these labels are nothing more than an attempt by Area Studies within Western academia to mould reality according to preconceived ideas and according to policy-oriented circles, which are funded by governmental organisations, and that, when dealing with “Islam” and “politics”, we are urgently in need of a different epistemology, which can come from several areas or at the intersection of some or all of them. I list those from which I find some inspiration: critical thinking, critical theory, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, decolonial theory, and feminist theory.

Critical theory is a social philosophy pertaining to the reflective assessment and critique of society and culture in order to reveal and challenge power structures. With origins in sociology, as well as in literary criticism, it argues that social problems are influenced and created more by societal structures and cultural assumptions than by individual and psychological factors. Maintaining that ideology is the principal obstacle to human liberation, critical theory was established as a school of thought primarily by the Frankfurt School theoreticians. Postmodern critical theory analyses the fragmentation of cultural identities in order to challenge modernist-era constructs such as metanarratives, rationality, and universal truths, while politicising social problems by situating them in historical and cultural contexts. Practitioners implicate themselves in the process of collecting and analysing data, and relativise their findings.<sup>2</sup>

Cultural studies is a field of theoretically, politically, and empirically engaged cultural analysis that concentrates upon the political dynamics of contemporary culture, its historical foundations, defining traits, conflicts, and contingencies, generally investigating how cultural practices relate to wider systems of power associated with or operating through social phenomena, such as ideology, class structures, national formations, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and generation, viewing cultures not as fixed, bounded, stable, and discrete entities, but rather as constantly interacting and changing sets of practices and processes. A key concern for cultural studies practitioners is the examination of the forces within and through which socially organized people conduct and participate in the construction of their everyday lives. Cultural studies seek to understand how meaning is generated, disseminated, contested, bound up with systems of power and control, and produced from the social, political and economic spheres within a particular social formation or conjuncture. Important theories of cultural

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on Islamism(s) and its derivatives is astronomical. For this paper, the following have been used for purposes of methodology and epistemology: Aftab, 1995; Ahmad, 2008 and 2009; Ayoob, 2008; Ayubi, 1991; Bayat, 2007; Brown, 2011; Burgat, 2004; Esposito, 1983, 1996, 1997, 1999, and 2010; Haddad, Voll, & Esposito, 1991; Hirschkind, 1997; Krämer, 1997; Mitchell & Hashmi, 2005; Said, 1979 and 2005; Schwedler, 2011; Shepard, 1987; Vatin, 1980; Zubaida, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> For further details on Critical Theory, see Bohman, 2019, and Byrd, 2020.

hegemony and agency have both influenced and been developed by the cultural studies movement, as have many recent major communication theories and agendas, such as those that attempt to explain and analyse the cultural forces related and processes of globalisation.<sup>3</sup>

Postcolonial and decolonial theories focus on untangling the production of knowledge from a primarily Eurocentric episteme, critiquing the perceived universality of Western knowledge and the superiority of Western culture, and seeing this hegemony as the basis of Western imperialism. As such, it is a critical academic study of the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on the human consequences of the control and exploitation of colonised people and their lands. Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical, fictional, or philosophical discourse, aiming to understand the nature of gender inequality, examining women's and men's social roles, experiences, interests, chores, and feminist politics in a variety of fields. Considering that colonised peoples were seen as "feminine", a "passive object", it makes all the sense to apply feminist theory in these contexts.<sup>4</sup>

However, a critical attitude should always be present, and that is why critical thinking is so important. One should always be aware of the background of the researcher (who tells what about whom, and why). It is odd to read books, essays, articles by people who consider themselves as "scientists", and who, more than doing science, what they do is theology, resembling what missionaries of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries wrote, trying to find in the *Qur'an*, or in whatever other text considered as sacred, the reasons or the grand theory that explains everything. Critical thinking is the analysis of facts to form a judgment, which generally include the rational, sceptical, unbiased analysis, or evaluation of factual evidence, and is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective, presupposing assent to rigorous standards of a commitment to overcome native egocentrism and sociocentrism.

### III. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 What is "Islamism"?<sup>5</sup>

"Islamism", "political Islam", "Islamic activism", and "Islamic fundamentalism" are perhaps the more popular terms of reference, all of them problematic, not least because all represent Western attempts to succinctly characterise a complex phenomenon for which there is no single agreed-upon term in the Arabic language. So, many decide to use "Islamism" due to its more generalised connotations and its current widespread usage in the public arena.

The word "Islamism", like any other word, is supposed to designate a *thing* upon which there is a consensus on what that thing is. For example, "chair" will not raise many problems: (almost) everyone knows how it looks like and what its purpose is. On the other hand, if we are talking about a "ring" while buying jewels, we will know that it is different from "ring" in a mathematical context. However, (post, neo)Islamism is used to designate

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<sup>3</sup> For further details on Cultural Studies, see During, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> For further details on Postcolonial and decolonial theories, see **Gandhi, 2019**, and for more on Feminist Theory, see McCann & Kim, 2017. Nonetheless, a word or two of caution: some postcolonial thinking fuels intellectually the Hindu nationalist movement and some of its fascistic aspects, while some feminists are nothing more than sounding boards and pawns of Western male sovereignty and its justifications for military interventions to "liberate women".

<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I have relied on, and developed further, previous writings of mine: Mohomed, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2016, and 2017.

Turkey's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) and the organisation al-Qaida, but it would not occur to anyone to label Poland's Law and Justice Party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) and the Lord's Resistance Army as "Christianism" or "Political Christianity". So, what is "Islamism"?

The vague, catch-all term "Islamist" belies the diversity of groups that seek to draw inspiration, values, and legitimacy from Islam, and there are enormous differences in thinking both between different Islamist groups and within them. It is always useful to use the genealogical method, especially when dealing with words, since it also helps us to better understand the content involved, the nature of the phenomenon itself. "Islamism" emerged in the late 1980s in French academia and then crossed into English, where it eventually displaced "Islamic fundamentalism" in specialised contexts. The term "Islamism" gained wider currency after 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, but it first appeared in French in the mid-eighteenth century. However, it did not refer to the modern ideological use of Islam, which had not yet come into being. Rather, it was a synonym for the religion of the Muslims, which was then known in French as *mahométisme*, the religion professed and taught by the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the usage became pervasive across Europe. In 1734, George Sale (1697-1736), whose English translation of the *Qur'an* set a new standard, referred to it as "Mohammedism". In the eighteenth century, the Western study of Islam made enormous strides, and it was known that Muslims called their religion "Islam". The thinkers searched for a way to reflect that understanding through usage and thus classify Islam as a religion appreciated in its own terms. It was the French philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778) who found the solution when he coined the term *islamisme*. The nineteenth-century French dictionary by Littré (1801-1881) defined *islamisme* as "the religion of Mahomet". It was in this sense, too, that "Islamism" appeared in the *New English Dictionary* (now known as the *Oxford English Dictionary*) in a fascicle published in 1900, defining Islamism as "the religious system of the Moslems; Mohammedanism". Even the word "Islamist" appeared there, defined as "an orthodox Mohammedan". However, "Islamism" and *islamisme* did not completely displace "Mohammedanism" and *mahométisme*, even in scholarship. In 1890, Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921) published his two-volume study of the Muslim oral tradition (*hadith*) under the title *Muhammedanische Studien* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1888-1890).

"Islamism" began to disappear from the lexicon from about the turn of the twentieth century. Many scholars simply preferred the shorter and purely Arabic term, "Islam". In 1913, Orientalists from many countries joined together to produce the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. By the date of its completion in 1938, "Islamism" had all but disappeared from usage, replaced simply by "Islam". There was no need for any other term, until the rise of an ideological and political interpretation of Islam challenged scholars and commentators to come up with an alternative, to distinguish Islam as modern ideology from Islam as a faith.

For a while, the expression "fundamentalism" gained wide currency but with many caveats. For example, William Montgomery Watt (1909-2006) commented on the term "fundamentalist" used for Islam or Muslim since it was more appropriate and applicable to Christianity. Watt realised that "although it is inexact" to use the term "fundamentalist" for Muslims, the term was retained in the title of his book because it was "convenient" and "popular journalistic usage". Watt acknowledged and stressed that the expression

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<sup>6</sup> For further details, see Carnoy, 1998. It should be stressed that the term "islamist", as late as the 1990s, was used to designate a social scientist who was an "expert" on Islam, just like the anthropologist, the psychologist, the physicist, and other *ists*, are experts in their respective fields.

“fundamentalist” was primarily an Anglo-Saxon Protestant term, especially applied to those who hold that the *Bible* must be accepted and interpreted literally. The nearest French equivalent is *intégrisme*, which refers to a similar but by no means identical tendency within Roman Catholicism. For him, in Islam, Sunni fundamentalists accept the *Qur’an* literally, though in some cases with qualifications, but they have also other distinctive features. The Shi’ites of Iran, who, according to Watt, in a very general sense, are fundamentalists (Watt does not explain why or how), are not committed to a literal interpretation of the *Qur’an*. Watt did not use the literal interpretation of the *Qur’an* as the basis to differentiate between Muslim fundamentalists and non-fundamentalist Muslims or between Islamic fundamentalism and non-fundamentalist Islam although the literal interpretation of the *Bible* was the basis for differentiating between Christian fundamentalists and non-fundamentalist Christians. Watt preferred to classify Muslim fundamentalists, conservatives and traditionalists in one category and Muslim liberals in another category. The two categories of Muslims were different because the fundamentalists, conservatives and traditionalists were “those Muslims who fully accept the traditional world-view and want to maintain it intact” while the liberals are those Muslims who see that the traditional world-view “needs to be corrected in some respects” (Watt, 1988, p. 2).

This shows that scholars have products and as such they have to be marketable and saleable. It is not uncommon to see would-be researchers, some of them without any knowledge of local languages and with no intent to learning them, doing work on some subjects just because there is a hype surrounding them.<sup>7</sup> It is useful to recall here Jillian Schwedler’s reflections regarding the study of “Political Islam”: much of the work done by researchers in specific fields, which enter under this broad categorization, have drawn little attention outside of academia despite the anxieties over Islam shared by policymakers and the general public. The many rigorous studies judiciously carried out by both academics and journalists, and grounded on extensive field research and use of primary sources in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, are bundled together with bestselling books more consistent with the existing obsessions and stereotypes over the “irrational, West-hating Muslim fanatic”, and the “oppressed” (veiled) woman. Serious scholarship on Islam cannot ignore the stereotypes and fear-mongering which dominate mainstream debate about Islam and the Middle East, but in responding to these discourses it often allows this mainstream to dictate the analytic starting point (Schwedler, 2011).

As Charles Hirschkind (1997) argued, terms such as “political Islam” frame the inquiries around a posited distortion or corruption of properly religious practice. In this way, the disruptive intrusions or outright destruction enacted upon society by the modernising state never even figure in the analysis. In contrast, the various attempts of religious people to respond to that disruption are rendered suspect, with almost no attempt to distinguish those instances where such a critical stance is warranted from those where it is not. It is not surprising, in this light, that militant violence and public intolerance have become the central issues of so many studies of *al-sahwa al-islamiyya* (Islamic awakening), while the extensive coercion and torture practised by governments get relegated to a footnote.

The resurrection and redefinition of “Islamism”, like its birth, took place in France. In the late 1970s, the French grappled with the problem of how to describe the new Islamic movements that had moved to the fore. *Islamisme* appealed to French scholars for two reasons: 1) it had a venerable French pedigree going back to Voltaire. *Fondamentalisme*,

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<sup>7</sup> For a recent assessment on (the lack of) ethics and knowledge, see Hallaq, 2018.

the loan word from American English, had none; 2) there was a certain reluctance to deploy the only French alternative, *intégrisme*, because it remained too embedded in its original Catholic context and too implicated in ongoing debates about authority in the church. *Islamisme* in any case had been retired from daily use as a synonym for Islam. Soon *islamisme* was cropping up in the titles of articles and books. The retrieval of *islamisme* and its deployment to describe the new movements did not pass without criticism, most notably by Maxime Rodinson (1915-2004). “In the dictionary, *islamisme* is given as a synonym for Islam”, Rodinson reminded his colleagues. “If one chooses this term, the reader may become confused between an excited extremist who wishes to kill everyone and a reasonable person who believes in God in the Muslim manner, something perfectly respectable” (quoted by Burgat, 1988, p. 14).<sup>8</sup>

However, by the mid-1980s, *islamisme* was no longer simply, or even primarily, a synonym for the religion of Islam in contemporary French usage. Increasingly, it was understood to mean only one thing: Islam as a modern ideology and a political programme. As Islamism gained currency, it too became associated with benighted extremism, from the Taliban to the Algerian Armed Islamic Group, culminating in al-Qaida. Critics of Islamism found it easy to add it to the list of dangerous twentieth century “isms” that had defied the liberal West. The entry of “Islamism” into common English usage did not improve the image of these movements and paradoxically made it easier to categorise them as threats of the first order. As fundamentalists, these Muslims might have claimed some affinity to Christian and Jewish fundamentalists, who were generally tolerated. As the Muslim equivalent of fascists or bolshevists, they were clearly marked as the enemies of democracy and freedom.

The same French scholars who had defined *islamisme* came to the conclusion that it had failed, since it never succeeded in seizing power. Where there had once been *islamisme*, there was now only *postislamisme* or *néofondamentalisme*.<sup>9</sup> Alain Roussillon claimed that the concepts of *islamisme* and *postislamisme*, were impositions of ethnocentric Western sociology. Orientalist in effect, they made Muslims into exceptions and postulate one “truth of Islam” that supposedly defined Muslims from one end of the Islamic world to the other. And the inevitable confusion between Islam and *islamisme* reduced the analysis of contemporary Muslim societies to the discourse and practices of their most radical and marginal components (Roussillon, 2001). With a different opinion, Oliver Roy (2001), one of the chief interpreters of the new movements (and father of the term *postislamisme*) admitted that *Islamisme* may be a construct, but Muslims themselves

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in Portuguese, *Islamismo* is used to designate the religion of *Islam*, while *Islão*, Portuguese for *Islam*, is used to designate *a culture, a civilisation*, and even *a geographical space*... Due to the poverty and peripheral nature of Portuguese academia regarding these issues, and the ignorance of the media, a field dominated by “experts” on everything, without a shred of original thinking (on one day they will be commenting the situation in the Middle East, and the next day they will be analysing, with the same scientific acumen, a football match or witchcraft), there was an importation from the English and from the French of *Islamism(e)* to designate the contemporary political movements, being translated as *Islamismo*. At the same time it is taught at schools, and universities, that *Islamismo* is the name of the religion, not being very difficult to foresee all the ensuing confusions propagated by the media, by the so-called scholars, and even by the school system.

<sup>9</sup> In 1999, Olivier Roy edited a special issue of the French journal *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée* (Volume 85, Numéro 1) devoted to *post-islamisme*. By reading the summary the reader would think that it would find information about several Muslim-majority countries, but out of eight articles, four are on Iran and one on Egypt, and the other three are more or less theoretical. The reason given by Olivier Roy was that there were difficulties in finding researchers working on other countries... In the meantime, in 1992, Roy had already published a book on the failure of political Islam: *L'échec de l'islam politique* (Paris: Le Seuil).



constructed it. In the meantime, Gilles Kepel had published in 2000 his book *Jihad. Expansion et déclin de l'islamisme* (Paris: Gallimard) translated into English in 2002 as *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*. The book is very symbolic for several reasons: it conflates “jihad” and “islamism”, and defends the thesis that Islamism was declining, all this a year before 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001.

### 3.2 What is “Jihadism”?

At that time, the use of “jihadism” was largely confined to the Indian and Pakistani media. But the attacks in the United States, the war in Afghanistan, and the battle against al-Qaida, facilitated the term’s migration to the West. At present, “jihadism” is used to refer to the most violent persons and contemporary movements, including al-Qaida or the so-called Islamic State.

As with “Islamism”, “Jihadism” is a designation not without controversy. For Jarret Brachman (2008, p. 4), “jihadism” is “a clumsy and controversial term”, not least because it does not bear any religious relevance to Muslims. Albeit aware of this, Deol and Kazmi (2012, p. 1, footnote 1) argue that they, in the absence of a better term and in common with its use in policy and academic circles, use it to denote forms of Islamist militancy defined above all by a commitment to violence ostensibly in the name of Islam, including al-Qaida and those inspired by it. Global jihadism thus denotes both the ideology of al-Qaida and the more differentiated landscape of violent Islamist thought and practice that asserts a presence in different parts of the globe.

For them, global jihadis are those individuals who espouse or operationalise global jihadism, using the term “jihadi” on its own to describe other national or regional militant Islamist groups which have used Islam as a justification for violence (or their followers), whether or not they share close affinities with or pay allegiance to al-Qaida and its ideas. At the same time, the editors assert that the volume aims to bridge existing disciplines and areas of study to create a framework for beginning to understand jihadi movements through the study of their ideologies, intellectual histories, political engagements and geographic contexts, probing the varied effects of al-Qaida’s interposition of its ideology onto a complex and differentiated global landscape.<sup>10</sup>

The thematic range of the book’s chapters captures some of the breadth of the jihadi intellectual world, embracing such varied topics as just-war theory, anti-globalisation protests, nationalisms, anti-colonial resistance, deradicalisation and the ethical construction of the individual self. In addition to studies of globalised contexts and ideologies, the volume also includes detailed studies of jihadi movements and responses to them in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, India, Pakistan, North Africa, South East Asia and the UK. The sources upon which the chapters are based are equally diverse, ranging from texts to audio-tape collections, internet-based material and techniques of self-fashioning.

However, it is always useful to remind those who are not acquainted with history that the idea of jihad had its apologists in the West.

The Ottoman Empire, under pressure from its ally Germany, declared a jihad shortly after entering the First World War. The move was calculated to rouse Muslims in the British, French and Russian empires to rebellion. Dismissed at the time and since as a “jihad made in Germany”, the Ottoman attempt to turn the Great War into a holy war failed to provoke mass revolt in any part of the Muslim world. Yet, as German Orientalists predicted, the mere threat of such a rebellion, particularly in British India, was enough to

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<sup>10</sup> In the meantime, another organisation popped-up: the so-called “Islamic State”. For further details on al-Qaida and I.S., and their differences, see Staffell & Awan, 2016.

force Britain and its allies to divert scarce manpower and materiel away from the main theatre of operations in the Western Front to the Ottoman front.<sup>11</sup>

More recently, another Western power used *jihad* for its own benefit. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 – the same year as Khomeini’s revolution in Iran – made the United States of America to fund and support the Islamic resistance. The U.S.A. spent a decade financing and arming the Afghan mujahedin, encouraging the recruitment and flow of foreign fighters, including jihadists (a neologism), into the war-torn country. The Carter and Reagan administrations hoped to harness the religious and ideological fervour of Islamic fundamentalists, paying little attention to the potential militarisation of Muslim politics or the rise of a new generation of warriors.<sup>12</sup>

Even in popular culture, the idea of jihad had its admirers. The English rock band Sisters of Mercy, after a contentious split in 1985-1986, released the album *Gift* which includes the song “Jihad”, used as a symbol of justice. But more popular was the novel *Dune*. Written by American author Frank Herbert (1920-1986) and originally published as two separate serials in *Analog* magazine, between 1963 and 1965, as “Dune World” and “The Prophet of Dune”, these two stories were then amalgamated in 1965 as the novel *Dune*, which won the first Nebula Award, shared the Hugo Award, both in 1966, and was made into two Hollywood movies directed by David Lynch in 1984 and more recently by Denis Villeneuve.

The book tells the story, in the far future, of two great dynastic families locked in a bitter feud, in an interstellar society in which noble houses, in control of individual planets, owe allegiance to the Padishah Emperor. The Duke of Atreides has been manoeuvred by his great enemy, Baron Harkonnen, into accepting the job of administering the planet known as Dune, or Arrakis, a vast desert, almost uninhabitable, where a drop of water is worth a fortune. But Dune is also a planet of fabulous wealth for it is home to a drug prized throughout the Galactic Empire. The planet is the only source of the oracular spice *melange*, the most important and valuable substance in the universe. There are several Islamic references, with many words, titles and names which are derived or taken directly from Persian and Arabic. The messianic name of Paul Atreides, the main character, is Muad’Dib (the one who will come, “bringing the Jihad, which will cleanse the Universe and bring us out of darkness”) and a large number of words in the language of the Fremen people are also embedded with Islamic terms (*jihad*, *Mahdi*, *Shaitan*) and the personal bodyguard of Paul Muad’Dib, Fedaykin, is a transliteration of the Arabic *Feda’iyin*. In *Dune*, Jihad is described as Holy War, and is given more of a realistic meaning: struggle for justice against oppression, a fight against evil by the masses, even by rebellion or armed resistance. The Harkonnen and the Emperor’s Sardukar are seen as oppressors, and the Fremen (especially the Fedaykin), use armed resistance against them. This is labelled by Frank Herbert as Jihad, and is very close to the real meaning of the concept.

As Peter Mandaville argues (2012, pp. 31-32), many observers have sought to understand the ideational impulses that animate “jihadist” groups in relation to various shifts in the discourse on jihad in modern Islamic thought. Such an approach permits some

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<sup>11</sup> For further details, see Aksakal, 2011; Rogan, 2016; and Zürcher, 2016. More than a century before, when invading Egypt in 1798, Napoleon (1769-1821) too tried to use the “Muslim” card to win the “hearts and minds” of the invaded, but that would be beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>12</sup> The idea of *mujahedin* as someone who fights for justice or for a just cause even lured Marxist organisations: in Iran there is the People’s Mujahedin Organisation of Iran, or the *Mujahedin-e Khalq*, still active; also left-wing is the Organisation of Iranian People’s Fadaian, which also uses an expression with religious connotations, *fadai* (*self-sacrificers*) to designate itself: both want the overthrow of the Islamic Republic.



of the cruder practitioners of contemporary “jihadology” to read history backwards. For instance, they think that they find the origins of bin Laden ideas in Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), who was inspired by Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab (1703-1792), who was inspired by Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) who was inspired, obviously, by the *Qur’an*<sup>13</sup> – according to this reasoning, today’s global jihadism is hence irrational and disconnected from any meaningful worldly considerations. Others have focused on debates about the meaning and parameters of jihad but have done a better job of understanding them as products of the colonial, postcolonial and geopolitical histories of Muslim societies.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Islamism and Jihadism as Resistance*

Almost ten years had passed since the events of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, and “Islam” and “Muslims” were again under the spotlight, this time due to a series of events which showed that political reality was changing. As the twenty-first century dawned on the Arab World, the region grappled with a profound clash between inherited deep rooted traditional ideologies and the distinct calls globalisation was putting forward both economically and culturally. Uprisings were a clear evidence of this collision as well as a reflection of the latent inconsistencies of the international system.

Starting in Tunisia in December 2010 and waving out to Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Libya, and other places, the revolutions, known as the “Arab Spring”<sup>15</sup>, ushered in profound changes in political processes in the Arab world and in our understanding of them. Not only did they give the lie to a widespread assumption amongst policy analysts and, to a lesser extent, amongst academic commentators, that these processes differed fundamentally from what had occurred elsewhere, they also showed that popular ambitions in the Arab world differed little from that elsewhere as well.

Taking into account the various transformations occurred in the past decades in economic conditions, social imbalances, cultural and mental outlook, political change was something predictable, but to see it coming would have been to see something at odds with the way in which the “Middle East” and “Islam” were thought of. It would also have meant acknowledging that methods and theories seeking grand universal explanations (“the Muslim character does not permit change”; “in Islam, tyranny is preferred to no power”; “the Middle Easterners are incapable of managing their own affairs without Western assistance”; “Muslim women are silenced and oppressed”) were in danger of failing to match real situations (“change is happening”; “people do not want tyrants”; “they are organising change themselves”; “women are actively participating in what is happening”).

In view of the endless analysis of politics in the Middle East and North Africa in recent years, commentators turned out to be generally ill-prepared to respond to these momentous events<sup>16</sup>, which did not prevent a flurry of books, articles, opinions, and so on. It became evident that the demonstrations themselves were merely the prologues to complex and lengthy processes of transition that may take years to be completed, and

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<sup>13</sup> Although there are some passages in the Bible which can be considered as a justification for paedophilia (Luke 18:15-17; Matthew 19:13-15; or Mark 10: 13-16), or the fact that Christianity is considered as the “religion of love”, it would be unthinkable to have a whole “scientific” industry, with books, theses, articles, papers, think-thanks, and so on, about the “religious and cultural origins of paedophilia in Christianity and the West”.

<sup>14</sup> For an example of the latter, see Gerges, 2006 and 2009.

<sup>15</sup> The expression “Arab Spring” had already been used to designate the events of 2004-2005 in different countries.

<sup>16</sup> In 1978-79, the events and Revolution in Iran too caught everyone by surprise. Considering that one of Science’s characteristics is its (supposed) ability to predict, social and political scientists are very good at *not* predicting anything, but this does not impede them from continuing to label themselves as “scientists”, leaving unanswered the question: in what consists their expertise?

assumptions about the role of political Islam, a phenomenon not explicitly prominent in the actual challenges to regimes but which played a major role in the political transformations that followed them, as good electoral results by different parties embracing various shades of Islamist ideology showed, had to be revised.

Another widely held myth that was debunked was that the denial of legitimate resistance and revolt by normative Islam left people without any but sectarian means to justify revolt. Comparison with pre-modern Europe would be useful. Did main-line European Christianity provide any more justification for revolt than did Islam? Although leading Muslim thinkers spoke and wrote against revolt, considering it worse than an evil ruler, there were ways around this in the Islamic tradition. It was almost unknown to speak of one's own movement as a revolt, and the words we translate as "revolt" were pejorative, as in Europe.

In fact, in 2009 a book on *Civilian Jihad* had been published (Stephan, 2009), describing how peoples throughout the Middle East had waged conflict using nonviolent, non-military means, risking death but unwilling to take lives to achieve their objectives. The subject of nonviolent struggle in this part of the world had not received much attention in or outside the academy, with an exception being *Arab Nonviolent Political Struggle in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishing, 1990), an edited volume by Ralph E. Crow, Philip Grant, and Saad Eddin Ibrahim. It shows that mass-based Islamist groups and parties, those with grassroots support and religious legitimacy, had transformed the political landscape of the Middle East and continued to do so. As Shadi Hamid describes in his chapter (pages 65-78) on Islamists and nonviolent action, the largest of these groups, including Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Jordan's Islamic Action Front, and Morocco and Turkey's Justice and Development Parties, had taken violence off the table in entering the political mainstream. Although these groups had focused their efforts on building parallel structures and institutions, (a form of nonviolent intervention), they had also avoided the use of more confrontational forms of nonviolent direct action when dealing with their respective autocratic regimes. Hamid describes how strategic calculations made hitherto by Islamist groups, combined with a lack of external support for them, had influenced their views on civil resistance as a means of advancing their goals.

Rami G. Khouri's chapter (pages 79-89) elaborates on Islamists' recent turn to civil resistance by examining the powerful role played by religious discourse, leadership, and organisation in popular struggles for basic rights and freedoms throughout the Middle East. Comparing the role of religion in the U.S. civil rights movement with the "Islamist awakening" in the Middle East, Khouri argued that the "single most pivotal element in both instances was the manner in which religious values and political activism naturally converge. Religion became a vehicle—the only one available—for political transformation." The author also contends that the popular yearning for freedom in the region had been thwarted by decades of U.S. and Western-backed interference and foreign occupation and called for greater understanding of and solidarity with those fighting non-violently for rights and dignity in the region.

It is vital that scholars and practitioners make an attempt to understand the objectives and strategies expressed by the groups which are labelled as Islamists and/or Jihadists. It is also imperative to acknowledge that they are not a monolithic phenomenon, but are characterised by factions and voices that diverge on their approach to major themes such as the nature of society, the preferred relationship between Islamist activists and the political system, methodology for alleviating socioeconomic frustrations and spiritual laxity, and the temporal framework within which Islamist goals are to be achieved. The more "radical" or militant of these groups insist upon revolutionary change that is to be imposed

on the masses and political system; whereas the more moderate groups call for gradual change that is to be undertaken from within the political system and with the enlistment of the Muslim masses. Hostility and violence are not inherent in all the factions of the Islamist movement and most of them resemble Catholic Liberation theologians who urge active use of original religious doctrine to better the temporal and political lives in a modern world, besides providing education, health care and welfare services.<sup>17</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

“Religion” means different things to different people: it can be an identitarian affiliation, a spiritual affirmation, or just faith, and all these factors have an impact in society, in the political process, which does not exhaust itself in the “State”. Muslims themselves have often considered Islam a total world view comprising religion and politics, however little this unity has been realised. This view on the totalising aspect of Islam appears especially in periods of instability, rather than during stable political environments. Although the Islamic revival of recent decades is in many ways novel, it has some important resemblances to revolts of the past. Among these resemblances is a return to the early (idealised) combination of religion and politics, with the enforcement of Qur’anic and legal provisions. Looking at several unconnected Islamic militant movements suggests ideological similarities that owe something to a widespread belief in what relations between religion and politics in Islam should be. As Irfan Ahmad argues (2009, pp. S147-148), the debate on the Islamic state has been conducted mostly in the field of Islamic studies or area studies and, not surprisingly, theological factors have weighed heavily in these debates. While sensitive to theology, social scientists should have an approach that gives primacy to the political factors and historical context in which philological interpretation is made and unmade, and critically subject theological arguments to the historical-political matrixes that shape them and, more importantly, the product of interpretation. An exclusively theological approach to the canonical texts, for example the *Qur’an*, has serious limits. It is not a pristine text that yields meanings on its own and by itself; it is rather the distinct social condition and the biography of the person reading the text which produces its meanings. As the contemporary Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943-2010) observes, “the *Qur’an* is at the mercy of the ideology of its interpreter. For a communist, the *Qur’an* would thus reveal communism, for a fundamentalist it would be a highly fundamentalist text, for a feminist it would be a feminist text, and so on” (quoted in Ahmad, 2008, p. 551).

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<sup>17</sup> Regarding the use of violence, it is hard to understand all the outrage towards organisations such as Hamas or Hizbullah. Israel’s former prime-ministers, Menachem Begin (1913-1992) and Yitzhak Shamir (1915-2012), were respectively the leaders of the terrorist organisations Irgun and Lehi (a.k.a. Stern Gang), the former responsible for the bombing of King David Hotel in Jerusalem and the Deir Yassin massacre, and the latter even sought an alliance with Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany (curiously, the first country to fully recognise Israel *de jure* was Stalin’s Soviet Union). In the United Kingdom, for many years, the Irish Republican Army was considered a terrorist organisation, carrying out several attacks in the name of the Catholic community, and supported by many Irish-Americans. Sinn Féin, which has been historically associated with the I.R.A., is nowadays one of the most important political players and recognised as such. On the other hand, the massacres of Catholics by Protestants were not considered as terrorist acts but only killings by extra-legal paramilitary organisations, which had, most of the time, the backing of the official powers. It seems that if an organisation takes control of the state, or is considered as being part of it, a miracle is performed: terrorist organisations and its members are no longer considered as such, and all their past sins are washed away. Since they are now part of the state or acknowledged by the “International” community, the violence that they now practise, not very different from what was before and even magnified by the use of all the state apparatus, as is the case of Israel, is considered legal and even legitimate.

As Mahmood Mamdani (2004) argues, we must make a clear distinction between religious and political identifications and understand that the two can (and often) operate at different levels for different persons. When we are mindful of this distinction we can approach the discussion of Islam and politics with the appropriate mindset, namely one that recognises the importance of various interpretations of Islam about a particular issue. Furthermore, including a range of other individual, social, economic, and political factors, we can realise the complexity in what makes a person hold (or not hold) a particular position. Therefore, in the discussion of Islam and politics, the role of religion and religious interpretation may be minimal or highly relevant, depending on the circumstance. We need to be aware of how religious interpretations are also used politically. Within that space, it is important to examine the different religious interpretations that do exist, as well as interpretations that can exist, and from that, attempt to analyse the political, economic, and societal effects of this on politics, and vice versa.

It is important to illustrate to students and social scientists that different interpretations of *Shari'a* (and thus Islam) can, and do, exist. Not only do political scientists occupy key positions in academic institutions, they also have a strong relationship with the political decision-makers as well as tacit solidarity with the most powerful media. There are several think-tanks and similar organisations devoted to scholarship that helps on the development of policies that advance U.S. and other countries national interests. However, the move from classical Islamology, dominated by the classical Orientalist *episteme* and epistemology, to the pragmatic, factual, too often ideological practice of the social sciences by the political scientist, has had little material effect in improving the intellectual shortcomings of scholarship applied in the Islamic sphere of influence in research and teaching. In fact, one wonders how the advancement of national interests can be compatible with scholarly endeavours.

While academic discourse and Western media alike have produced reified views of Islam and Muslims in abundance, such views have also emerged from within Islam itself, via Muslims' interpretations and representations of their own religion as unitary, timeless, and unchanging. Representations are never simply reflections on or descriptions of reality, of social and religious processes, necessarily already "out there" in the world; they have generative power. In reshaping conceptual categories, they are oriented towards producing something which is given concrete ground, thereby intensifying a reality already alluded to in discourse itself. It is imperative to pay attention to the genealogies of discourses (academic, state, "official", global, as well as of those in this article), which might become authoritative and normative, and through which politics in Muslim societies is comprehended, experienced, legitimated, or contested. It must also be remembered that seemingly authoritative discourses and disciplinary practices are neither totalising, nor are their outcomes necessarily easily predictable. And it is also important to heed the warning of those who have argued against automatically privileging religion as the principal – or perhaps unique – foundation for Muslim identity and political practice (Soares & Osella, 2009, p. S2).

As Mandaville (2012, p. 49) argues, to contextualise radicalism and jihadism as an expression of cumulative historical trajectories of exclusion serves not only to de-exceptionalise radical Islamism in analytically useful ways but also points to new ways of thinking about the global backdrop of ongoing interplay between power, culture and history that gives potency to Islamism as an alternative to prevailing structures of power.

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