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Islam or Islamist?

Is our trouble with a religion or an ideology?

Islam or Islamist? That is the question. Is the term “Islamist” a politically correct fabrication to dodge the inconvenient truth that Islam itself is inherently and inevitably chauvinistic and totalitarian? Or is it a necessary distinction to draw: denominating supremacist Muslims striving to impose on societies a classical, rigid construction of Islamic law, distinguishing them from authentic Muslim moderates who elevate reason, embrace pluralism, and take sharia as spiritual guidance rather than the mandatory law for civil society?

I think we have to separate Islamists from Islam. My friend Robert Spencer disagrees. As NRO readers may know from my reviews of some of Robert’s books and my frequent references to his invaluable work at Jihad Watch, I hold him in high esteem. On this question, however, he is mistaken. And because how we answer the “Islam or Islamist?” question critically affects how we respond to the profound threat posed by supremacist Muslims, we must answer it correctly.

A little background is in order. My [column](#) last weekend was a defense of Robert, and of David Horowitz, against the “Islamophobia” charges recently leveled at them by the Center for American Progress. There, I pointed out that “I regularly use the term ‘Islamist’ rather than ‘Islam’ to draw a distinction between the ideology of the enemy and Islam as it is practiced by most American Muslims, and by millions of Muslims throughout the world.” I added that Messrs. Spencer and Horowitz do likewise — an assertion I made because, among other reasons, I was sure I’d seen the term “Islamist” or “Islamism” in the September 30 essay they jointly published here on NRO. In fact, it is in the title of that essay, “[Rational Fear of Islamism](#)” — but titles are often the work of editors, not authors.

As [recounted](#) in the Corner earlier this week, Robert e-mailed me after the column appeared to offer this correction: He does not use the term “Islamist.” In his view, the “Islam/Islamism distinction is an artificial one imposed by the West, with no grounding in Islamic history, theology, or law.” Coincidentally, it turned out that while I was busy writing my column for that weekend, Robert was penning “[Islam and Islamists](#).” In it, he expanded on this very argument. To use the term “Islamist,” he asserts, is to incorrectly imply “that Islam itself, in its authentic form, has no requisite political aspect, and no incompatibility with Western values or democratic government.”

My seminal disagreement is with Robert's premise that there is and can be but a single authentic form of Islam. As readers of [The Grand Jihad](#) know, I struggled mightily with the "Islam or Islamist" question. It is the subject of my book's second chapter, which asks whether our challenge is appropriately labeled "Islamism" or whether that label is a cop out, side-stepping the grim reality that Islam itself is and will always be the West's problem.

Obviously, the West will never arrive at a successful defensive strategy unless we correctly identify the threat. So, should we focus our attention on those Muslims for whom imposition of sharia — Islam's supremacist politico-legal system — is an inseparable part of their ideology? Or, in the alternative, should we come to the reluctant conclusion that this mandate to impose classical sharia, with its laws governing all aspects of life, simply *is* Islam? As I concluded in the book, there are too many non-supremacist Muslims to write off Islam; our target must be the supremacists. "Islamist" is a label suitable to the essential task of distinguishing our Muslim enemies from our Muslim allies — declared and potential.

Lest you think I've secretly hit the Saudi-funding jackpot, there is no lushly endowed sinecure at Georgetown or Harvard in my future. My conclusion that our focus has to be Islamism, rather than Islam, is fraught with skepticism. Yes, there are hundreds of millions of moderate Muslim people; but have they really come up with a coherent *Islamic* ideology that separates mosque and state? Not a foot-stomping claim that Islam must yield to modern sensibilities, but an argument based in Islamic doctrine itself? And even if they have developed such a theory, or at least could conceivably do so in the future, will it be compelling enough to compete with, nullify, and marginalize supremacist, political Islam — which, however much this dismays us, has the advantage of reliance on clear scriptural commands?

Without question, Robert is correct that the political and supremacist aspects of Islamic doctrine, which flesh out the ideology many of us call "Islamist," trace their origins to Mohammed. As he further observes, they are taught by the classic schools of Islamic jurisprudence, which undoubtedly explains their power and endurance for over a millennium.

Nevertheless, while many millions of Muslims adhere to these doctrinal components, it is also true that many millions of Muslims do not. Most of the latter simply ignore them, but others labor to develop theories aimed at countering and discrediting political, supremacist Islam. This is seen in the United States, for example, in the work of Zuhdi Jasser and the [American Islamic Forum for Democracy](#). At Princeton University's James Madison Program, Australian academic Abdullah Saeed recently delivered a lecture arguing that resort to the Koran and episodes in the life of Mohammed can eventually undermine the classical rendering of sharia. (The lecture has been published in *First Things*, under the title, "[The Islamic Case for Religious Liberty](#).") On the international stage, the LibForAll Foundation has just released an English translation of *The Illusion of the Islamic State*, a compendium edited by the late Islamic scholar Abdurrahman Wahid. Once the president of democratic Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country by population, the influential Wahid also led Nadlahtul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Muslim organization, with over 40 million members. NU and other Indonesian moderates are clashing directly with the Muslim Brotherhood, arguing that Islamic scripture does not require the establishment of a caliphate or the imposition of sharia jurisprudence (i.e., *fiqh*) as governing law. Sharia, they contend, is a matter of private conscience.

I am very confident that Robert is correct about classical Islam. I'll go further: When I read these competing works, I come away less than convinced. Sometimes it feels like I'm back at the Blind Sheikh trial, looking in vain for the scholar who proves that the emir of jihad has it all wrong: that authoritative Islamic scripture and recognized canons of *fiqh* do not really endorse the terrorizing of unbelievers, subjugation of women, and killing of apostates and homosexuals, and that all those well-meaning people who say the Blind Sheikh is lying about Islam — perverting it, hijacking it — have been right all along. Alas, you never find that scholar. Parsed closely, the negative critiques against Islamists accuse them of being “too literal,” of lacking nuance, or not appreciating that the horrific provisions of scripture need to be “contextualized” — understood as applicable to their time and place, of little or no relevance in today's very different world. Such critiques cede a lot of ground — too much for my comfort level. I want to believe these arguments will be enough someday to refute the supremacist, political Islam that has been endorsed for centuries by renowned Islamic scholars — the Islam that has been shrewdly developed as a practical political program for decades by the Muslim Brotherhood. But I am doubtful.

Still, it is presumptuous to imply that Muslims who don't adhere to classical Islam are not really following Islam. In the aforementioned “Islam and Islamists,” Robert insists that Islam is inherently and necessarily political, and that its political program has always been the “union of religion and the state.” The denial that this is and must be so, he contends, is “the wishful thinking of Western analysts who do not wish to face the implications of the fact that these ideas represent mainstream Islamic thinking.” I think that is wrong, and I say this as someone who has been about as adamant as one can be that we *must* face the implications of the fact that Islamism is a mainstream interpretation of Islam — in many places, *the* mainstream interpretation.

To be sure, there is a good deal of wishful thinking going on. As Robert says, too many Western analysts turn a blind eye to the palpable nexus between Islamic doctrine and supremacist, political Islam. But to say a set of ideas represents “mainstream” thinking is not the same as saying it is the only conceivable way of understanding a doctrine.

To take a fairly obvious example, the U.S. Constitution is a social compact in a single document — its four corners making it infinitely more easily knowable than Islamic doctrine, which comes to us from a variety of different sources (the Koran, hadiths, biographies of Mohammed, etc.). Yet, there are several different schools of constitutional interpretation, and a few of them (e.g., originalism and the “organic Constitution”) have enough of a following to be called “mainstream” even though they are quite different from — you might even say diametrically opposed to — one another.

While Robert is correct to point out that the classic schools of Sunni and Shiite jurisprudence promote supremacist, political Islam, that does not mean other understandings do not exist and cannot be developed. As noted above, Nadlahtul Ulama has tens of millions of members and pointedly rejects supremacist, political Islam. Whether one finds NU's theology persuasive is beside the point. These people are Muslims, and they sincerely believe Islam does not require a political dimension — indeed, they say politics disserves the spirituality they see as Islam's core. I don't believe it is our place to tell them they are wrong.

This is steeply uphill. The classical schools are the most influential, and their authoritarian sharia has a built-in fortification: It holds both that departures from consensus constitute apostasy and that apostasy is a capital offense — with the death penalty having been meted out enough times, with enough Islamic approbation, to put reformers and their followers on notice that their work is very risky indeed. Still, modification happens, and has happened, all the time with all manner of doctrines. Can it really be that Islam is the only doctrine in the history of the world that is immune from even the possibility of alteration and evolution? There is nothing I am more skeptical of than that proposition.

Robert coined the marvelous phrase “[stealth jihad](#).” Well, the reason the Muslim Brotherhood must be stealthy in conducting its sharia campaign in the West is its awareness that there would be widespread rejection, including by Muslims, if it were completely open about its supremacist designs. Even in Islamic countries, sharia regimes often back down when Islamic law’s most noxious features surface. Afghanistan quietly reversed course when the West expressed outrage over its efforts to [put two apostates to death](#). The Iranians are still [threatening to stone](#) a woman for alleged fornication, but they haven’t done it yet — public opinion has brushed them back. When King Abdullah was embarrassed several weeks ago by the [revelation](#) that a woman had been sentenced to scourging for driving a car, the sentenced was quietly vacated. The Saudis, it is worth noting, outlawed slavery in 1962 even though (as Robert [observes](#)) the practice is explicitly approved in the Koran. Yes, slavery is still quietly practiced, but the formal ban in a country where sharia is the law of the land demonstrates that sharia can be changed, just as it can be (and has historically been) mitigated or suppressed by factors like culture and law.

We do not have to be delirious optimists to grasp these things. After all, change is not a one-way street — it can be regressive, too. As I argued in *The Grand Jihad*, President Wahid grossly underrated the numbers and influence of Muslims who subscribe to supremacist, political Islam. He also ceded significant ground in arguing that the “virulent” ideology of the Wahhabists and Salafists is “literal” and “simplistic.” It is hard to discredit something as a perversion of Islam when you are conceding its basis in written scripture, even if you add, as Wahid did, the caveat that its rendering of scripture is “selective.”

That virulent Islam is ascendant in the world today. Despite the good work of Nadlahtul Ulama, it is gaining strength in parts of Indonesia. It is rolling over Europe and making inroads here in America. It is a profound threat. To assert that there can be other interpretations of Islam — constructions that adapt to Western norms — is not to claim that such constructions will inevitably succeed or that Islamism’s sharia agenda will cease to be a profound threat. It is not to give Islam a pass: Even if Islam is capable of benign interpretations, it quite naturally spawns supremacist interpretations — interpretations whose influential adherents, such as Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, [echo](#) Robert’s conclusion that their Islam is the only Islam. To draw the Islam/Islamist distinction is not to claim that everything is coming up roses or that this story must eventually have a happy ending.

Nevertheless, the question raised by Robert’s unyielding position is whether there are, and can be, other viable interpretations of Islam. The answer is yes. They are not as cogent as we’d like them to be, and they do not compete with classical Islam as effectively as we wish. Most of the time, they are less a refutation of classical Islam than a choice — conscious or unconscious — to

ignore its supremacist, political elements. But even a passive choice can change a doctrine or a social system, and can do so even if the ignored elements remain on the books.

We see that with our own law: political decisions about which statutes get enforced and which do not can effectively nullify the latter over time. Repeal is more often achieved by inaction than by a formal process — inaction does not require an airtight theory why some law or standard is no longer honored; all you need is inertia. Once the political will to enforce a standard has evaporated, most any post facto rationalization will justify abandoning it — even one that barely passes the laugh test. If Muslims came to a consensus position that mosque and state would henceforth be separated, or that aggressive jihad was no longer an acceptable way to impose sharia, it would be immaterial that these positions represented a less than compelling exegesis of their scripture.

My argument with Islam’s Western apologists is not that this kind of evolution is out of the realm of possibility. It is with their absurd insistence that it has already happened. Not just that it could conceivably happen — about which there are lots of reasons for pessimism — but that it *has already happened*. This is not only self-evidently untrue; it may be fatally counterproductive. By failing to shine the light of inquiry on supremacist, political Islam — by failing to force Islamists into the position of publicly acknowledging and defending their noxious beliefs — we deprive pro-Western Muslims of the platform they need to promote reform and marginalize the supremacists. This only empowers faux moderates like the Muslim Brotherhood, enabling them to push sharia as if it were unthreatening and promote Hamas as if it were an ordinary political party.

That, however, is a different problem from the one Robert’s position poses. He is essentially saying that if it is not supremacist and political, then it is not Islam. That not only closes the door on any potential reform, it risks antagonizing pro-Western Muslims. There are many of them and they have no desire to impose sharia on civil society — even if they are less vocal about that than we’d like. Given that they nevertheless see themselves as faithful Muslims, I do not see what purpose is served by telling them that Islam is incorrigibly supremacist and political.

From a tactical standpoint, we want such Muslims as our allies, and we certainly want to see them make inroads against the Islamic supremacists. That makes the Islam/Islamist distinction a worthy accommodation. It does not deny that classical Islam is the source of Islamism. But it does two important things. First, it identifies as “Islamist” those Muslims who hold to the supremacist and political aspects of Islam — and it is very useful for us to see those people for what they are. Second, it acknowledges interpretations of Islam that reject these political and supremacist elements: They are plausible, they are legitimately called “Islam,” and we want them to thrive. That is not a prediction of success, but it is a significant show of support.

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