

Rethinking Islamism beyond jihadi violence

Fighting ideas leaving the sword aside

Edited by

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Abstract

The terms Islamism and “jihadism” are often considered synonyms not only in the media but also by relevant scholarship and policymakers. The confusion around the two terms and their over-use in different contexts can lead to social anxiety towards specific religious trends, especially to Islamophobia. This volume stands as an original contribution clarifying the difference between Islamism and jihadism as two different – even if related – concepts. The volume opens with a section unravelling the origin of Islamism and continues with an exploration of Islamism as a powerful ideology leading to non-violent resistance. This section zooms on the aggregative power of Islamism as a banner for Muslims to come together and resist foreign oppression and influences in different parts of the world. The volume then provides an analysis of five non-violent Islamist groups operating in various national contexts, which work as living evidence of the existence of Islamism as separated from violent jihad. Finally, this contribution engages in current debates on the role of Islamism as a conveyor belt to terrorism, acknowledging the possible path some Islamists can undertake towards violence. However, this study strongly rejects any given-for-granted assumptions that all Islamists will sooner or later become terrorists. Instead, this volume promotes the difference between the two terms, identifying Islam as an ideology and *jihad* as a methodology for action.

Foreword

Salafism, jihadism, Islamism, political Islam. And then al Qaeda, Daesh, Tabligh, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood. Over the last 20 years, these terms have been frequently discussed in the West and what was until September 11, 2001, a debate limited to a few specialized milieus (Middle East experts, parts of the law enforcement and intelligence community) has become quite mainstream. Sadly, this conversation has more often than not lacked nuance. Terms are regularly confused and used interchangeably, often creating one giant hodgepodge that often encompasses not just the different streams and groups that compose Islamism, the political ideology, but also Islam, the faith. Of course, exceptions abound, but, sadly, after two decades, the general level of understanding of the admittedly complex world of Islamism is quite limited.

If most - one would at least hope - do understand the crucial difference between Islam and Islamism, there is still a lot of confusion in relation to Islamism. In the mind of many, Islamism means violence, terrorism, equating the movement with groups like al Qaeda and the Islamic State. No analytical mistake could be more counterproductive to a sound understanding of the movement. Violent groups, often referred to as jihadists, are indeed part of what can legitimately be described as Islamism, but they represent only a part - and arguably not even the largest one - of the movement.

To be fair, the relationship between non-violent Islamists - like the Muslim Brotherhood and many cross sections of the Salafist movement - and violent jihadist groups is extremely complex, varying over time and context. It is accurate to state that the two have common roots and most scholars, no matter what position they take on the relationship, do see in the writings of Muslim Brotherhood thought leader Sayyid Qutb the starting point of the Salafi-jihadi movement. Since then, the points of both convergence and divergence are many. To some degree, the end goal is the same, as both strive to establish an Islamic society. Yet it is fair to say that the Islamic state envisioned by the Brothers and other non-violent Islamist groups would be quite different from that aspired by jihadists. A key difference is also in tactics, as non-violent Islamists have chosen ballots over bullets, while jihadist groups argue that participation in the political process is heretical. At the same time, though, it would be a mistake to think that the Brothers have fully abandoned violent *jihad* as a strategy to achieve their goals, as the examples of their involvement in violent actions, even in recent years, abound.

These differences and similarities translate into a complex relationship. Violent and non-violent Islamist movements are in constant competition between themselves for attracting the most conservative segments of the Muslim population and that the two regularly attack each other with vitriolic diatribes. Yet, at the same time, there are many circumstances in which Brotherhood and jihadist groups cooperate, therefore defying any unidimensional analysis. These are just some of the analytical complexities that this book seeks to tackle.

Dr. Elisa Orofino has managed to assemble a diverse team of experts that dissect different aspects of the less discussed but unquestionably largest part of Islamism: the non-violent one. And the book does so in a sound, analytically deep and engaging way. Several chapters focus on more theoretical aspects of Islamism, approaching it from very different angles, from how it can be perceived as a Western counterculture to how Islamist intellectuals themselves see the movement. Other chapters provide in-depth looks at how Islamists operate in disparate locales such as Tajikistan, Spain, Iran and the UK. When seen together, the contributions provide interesting glimpses into Islamism. The reader, including those with a background in the subject, is likely to come away with more clarity about what is Islamism but also with a “healthy confusion” over the extremely complex and ever-evolving facets of the movement. This is exactly what makes it a precious contribution to the library of laypeople and experts alike.

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Notes on Language and Terms

This contribution uses several terms – sometimes interchangeably – that require prior clarification. First, the term “Islamist group” is used throughout the book to refer to specific groups reacting against modernity, colonisation, and the failure of political leaders in the Middle East. These groups advocate for a revival of Islam in all fields (political, economic, social, and religious), stressing the need to go back to the roots of the religion and its holistic implementation as a *din*, i.e., a way of life.

This volume does not consider Islamism as a concept intrinsically intertwined with violence. As a fact, this contribution aims to navigate the reader through the variety of expressions of Islamist activism that are not using violent *jihad* as a methodology. This volume also considers Islamism as a form of political Islam (but not as a synonym), as the term certainly includes a level of competition for political power and activism in different political opportunity systems. In particular, Islamism is here explored as a form of political Islam that does not necessarily include standard political participation techniques, such as running for elections and voting.¹

As a final note, several Arabic terms repeatedly appear in this volume. For this reason, a list of the most common words is provided below for the reader’s convenience. The Arabic terms are used in this book as they are used by the groups under analysis and their authors. The translations here provided are based on their understanding of such terms.

<i>Adan</i>	Islamic call to prayer
<i>Al-Wasatiyyah</i>	Middle ground or centrism
<i>‘Aqeedah</i>	“Matters of faith”, creed. The revealed truth Muslims hold with firm conviction
<i>Da’i</i>	A person who invites others to Islam
<i>Dar al-Islam</i>	Land of Islam
<i>Dar al-Harb</i>	Land of war
<i>Dar al-Kufr</i>	Land of unbelief

¹ See “The Tragedy of Islamism in Britain: A Fetishism for Politics. The Case of Hizb ut-Tahrir”, by Danila Genovese.

<i>Darajah</i>	Recognition
<i>Daris</i>	Student
<i>Da'wah</i>	Call to Islam
<i>Dawlah</i>	State
<i>Din</i>	Faith, way of life
<i>Fiqh</i>	Islamic jurisprudence
<i>Hadarah</i>	Civilisation
<i>Hadith</i>	Sayings and actions of Muhammad
<i>Halal</i>	Licit
<i>Halaqaat</i>	Study circles
<i>Haram</i>	Forbidden
<i>Hudan</i>	Guidance
<i>Ijma</i>	Scholarly consensus
<i>Ijtihad</i>	Scholarly interpretation
<i>Islah</i>	Reform
<i>Jihad</i>	Struggle
<i>Jahiliyyah</i>	State of pre-Islamic ignorance
<i>Khilafah</i>	Caliphate, Islamic state
<i>Kafir, Kuffar</i>	Unbeliever, unbelievers
<i>Majaal</i>	Area suitable to start re-establishing the caliphate
<i>Qiyaadah</i>	Leadership
<i>Sallallahu Alaihe</i>	
<i>Wassalam (SAW)</i>	Peace (of Allah) be upon him (referring to the Prophet Muhammad)
<i>Shari'a</i>	Islamic law
<i>Subhanahu wa ta'ala (SWT)</i>	Arabic expression to glorify God when mentioning his name. Literally "Glory to Him, the Exalted" or "Glorious and Exalted is He".
<i>Sukun</i>	Peace

<i>Sunnah</i>	Verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds and sayings, silent permissions (or disapprovals) of the Prophet Muhammad
<i>Tafsir</i>	Exegesis
<i>Takfir</i>	Excommunication of Muslims
<i>Tawhid</i>	Oneness (of God)
<i>Ulama</i>	The community of Muslim scholars
<i>Ummah</i>	Global community of Muslims
<i>Wasatiyya</i>	Moderation
<i>Wilayaat</i>	Provinces
<i>Wulah</i>	Governors

Introduction

For more than two decades, Islamism has been associated with jihadism and violent extremism both in academia and in contemporary political debates. 9/11 marked an indelible date in history and established a strong bond between the concepts of Islamism and “jihadism”. Although very different, the two terms soon started to be used as synonyms, implying important concerns for all matters related to Islam and the Muslims around the world. 9/11 also marked the raise of inflamed debates on the “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 2000, p.99), “Islamophobia” and “securitization” which implied an alleged incompatibility between the West and Islam and a level of insecurity for Muslims to live in the West.¹

Academia, think tanks, policymakers and experts in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) around the world seemed to agree on the need to better understand jihadi terrorism, the dynamics and the dangers posed by this rather new phenomenon to the Western world (Neumann, 2016; Neumann, 2008). However, slight attention has been devoted to Islamism per se as a concept separated from terrorism. Islamism has much deeper roots than jihadi terrorism and it stands as a powerful encompassing ideology inspiring thoughts, actions and groups all over the world. Emerging as a protest-for-justice ideology claiming freedom against Western colonisation of the Muslim world, Islamism has triggered both individual and collective action worldwide since early 1900s (Mozaffari, 2007; Rahnema, 2008; Esposito and Shahin, 2018).

Almost as a sacred ideology – based on the need to revive Islam as the only saving grace for Muslims around the world – Islamism started being widely associated with jihadi terrorism after 9/11. Before then, Islamism was not automatically related to terrorism but to resistance (Ali & Orofino, 2018; Mura, 2012; Orofino, 2015). As the section “Islamism as a form of non-violent resistance against perceived oppression” of the present volume will highlight, Islamism stood as the strong bond for Muslims to resist against colonial powers or external influences. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hizb ut-Tahrir in Palestine as well as Tabligh Jamaat in India all stand as instances of

¹ By the term “securitization” it is intended the process whereby citizens are transformed into a matter of security (Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & Wilde, J. d. (1998). *Security: A new Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers).

Islamist groups emerging as a form of protest to counter British occupation of specific territories. As historical evidence would suggest, before 9/11, Islamism was often related to groups of people (often highly educated) that would gather under the banner of their faith (Islam) to call fellow Muslims to unity and to resist against what they perceived as the oppressor (Orofino, 2020). While Islamism is an ideology fully based on the religion (Islam), *jihad* stands as a specific (violent) methodology used by some individuals and groups to fight against the enemy.

It is not uncommon to associate Islamism with other ideologies, such as Communism, Fascism and Nazism (Mozaffari, 2007). As an ideology, Islamism stands as a “set of ideas by which men explain and justify the ends and means of organised social action, with the aim of preserving or reconstructing a given reality” (Sternhell, 1982, p.329). Similar to the totalitarian ideologies mentioned above, Islamism proved to be a very effective tool for mass mobilisation and legitimisation of national leaders. Nevertheless, when comparing it to Communism or Nazism, Islamism appears to be much more inspiring as it stands as sacred ideology. Islamists’ duties and tasks are often regarded as religious obligations and this is a main point of difference between Islamism and other ideologies. While a Nazi is responsible to his Führer alone (who is a man after all), Islamists are not only responsible to their leaders, but they are ultimately accountable before God (Ali & Orofino, 2018; Orofino, 2020a).

The holistic approach of Islamism as an ideology and the strong religious bond between the tasks performed and what is perceived as a religious duty make Islamism the main force governing the life of the individuals who espouse this ideology. Islamism provides a precise system of values that determine specific patterns of behaviour together with stable, long-lasting loyalties to groups. Given its religious character, for many Islamists leaving a certain group also implies betraying God (Mozaffari, 2007).

The term “Islamist” refers today to both organisations and single individuals who present a well-defined set of ideas involving the rejection of modernity, Western values, capitalism and expose the corruption of political leaders in the Middle East (An-Nabhani, 1998). Islamists advocate for a revival of Islam in all fields (political, economic, social and religious), stressing the need to go back to the roots of the religion and its holistic implementation as a *din*, i.e., a way of life. Islamists usually have a very harsh opinion about the West as a

homogeneous predominant system² having specific religious values and practices that are strongly in contrast with Islam (such as abortion, the use of alcohol and same-sex relationships) and therefore need to be rejected as *haram* (illicit) (Al-Banna, 1978).

Grounded on the assumption of the intrinsic corruption of Western lifestyle, Islamist groups often urge their members to live separate lives from the *kuffar* (unbelievers) and *jahili*, i.e., ignorant people who do not have any knowledge about Islam. Instead, Islamists encourage their fellows to try and emulate the example of Prophet Mohammed, his companions (the Sahabi), and the pious ancestors, i.e., *salaf al-* (Amghar, 2007; Wali, 2013). Particular attention is devoted to the pious ancestors by specific groups, which are known as Salafi. These groups hold a very strict mindset and stress the need to be uncompromising - as the Prophet was - towards the integrity of Islam (Costanza, 2012; Orofino, 2020a; Orofino, 2021).

Jihad as a methodology

Although some elements of Islamism can sound extreme, it stands as an ideology that deeply differs from *jihad*, which instead is a methodology. The origin of this term *jihad* can be traced in the holy scriptures of Islam as both the *Qur'an* and *hadiths* speak about *jihad*. As highlighted by Gabriele Marranci (2006, p. 192), “the term *jihad* is derived from the Arabic root *jhd*, “to strive” (p.192). The same *jhd* serves as the root for other verbs emphasizing effort and struggle to “achieve perfection in difficult tasks” (Marranci, 2006, p.17). Either in physical battles or intellectual ones, *jihad* stresses the need to make an extraordinary effort to do what is appreciated by God.

According to David Cook (2009), it is possible to distinguish between different *jihad*s when reading *Qur'an* and the *hadiths*. More precisely, *jihad* as a method – which is certainly moved by Islamism as an ideology – can be divided into three categories: 1) *jihad* of the hand (or the sword) which is the military struggle; 2) *jihad* of the tongue which implies the effort of verbal opposition to what is not right/acceptable for Islam (e.g., an unjust ruler or a corrupt society); 3) *jihad* of the soul which entails the inner struggle of every believer should engage to achieve purification and to reject sin.

Despite the variety discussed by Cook, it is rare to read about non-violent forms of *jihad*. Especially after 9/11, *jihad* has been strongly connected to

² Islamists do not make any distinctions among the various states (and national specificities) that make up the West. Instead, they tend to consider the West as a corrupted super-system willing to assimilate Muslims and their religion (An-Nabhani, T. 2007. *Concepts of Hizb ut-Tahrir* (English Translation ed.). Al-Khilafah Publications).

violence and armed attacks so that the only category the media, academia and often policymakers refer to category one, i.e. *jihad* of the hand. Over the last 20 years, Sunni groups have instrumentalised this term to depict their armed struggle against the state and against what they perceived as corrupt institutions at the service of a corrupt West. This hostility started to arise in the Middle East after the end of WW II and was strongly motivated by Western colonial policies and the massive exploitation of local resources. The occupation of Palestine, the creation of the state of Israel, the interference of Western former colonial powers in several national contexts where their economic/strategic interests were visible has certainly motivated the will to use the *jihad* of the hand to revive Islamism as a powerful ideology to bond the *ummah* (Muslims around the world) together (Ali & Orofino, 2018).

It is a fact that during the first half of the 20th century, several transnational Islamist groups emerged as a result of this hostility towards the West. Some well-known examples are the Muslim Brotherhood (1938), Jamaat-e-Islami (1941) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (1953), who are still active today and who have worked as forefathers of contemporary Islamist activism. While most of these groups follow Islamism as an ideology and use jihadism in category two and three as a methodology, some splinter groups have used category one of *jihad*, advocating the need to use violence. Taking the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as an example, although the group claims to be a peaceful and democratic organization rejecting the use of violence³ - and therefore pursuing *jihad* of the tongue and soul - violence has characterised their activities since their inception (Ataman, 2015; Orofino, 2020).

Hasan Al-Banna – the founder of the group – was strongly focused on the importance of learning as a kind of *jihad* and envisaged the MB to stand as an educator of the masses, able to enlighten the people on the right Islamic concepts (Al-Abdin, 1989; Al-Banna, 1947, 1975; Al-Banna, 1978). As the years passed and the organisation expanded in different national contexts, diverse positions on core issues such as *jihad* and political participation emerged.

Today, Islamism, as understood by the Brotherhood, coexists with the three categories of *jihad* mentioned above. Political parties having a parliamentary setting and calling for reformism (such as the Movement of Society for Peace in Algeria) cohabit with groups that are considered terror organizations (like Hamas) within the Brotherhood's big “umbrella brand” (Orofino, 2020, p.11). Going into more detail, the MB have four main wings to date: the political wing, the paramilitary wing, the women's wing, and the youth wing (Friedland, 2015). All four wings adopt Islamism as an ideology, but their

³ See the MB official statements on their website <https://www.ikhwanweb.com/>

methodology is based on different categorisation of *jihad*: while political parties that actively participate in national elections (democratically) run for power, other splinter groups use *jihad* of the hand to physically attack political authorities (Ali and Orofino, 2018; Orofino, 2020a). Women and youth also play an essential role within the Brotherhood: while the women are very active in recruiting peers and discussing topics like “femininity and Islam”, the youth wing is in charge of providing education, training, and social activities for young people in order to build MB-inspired Islamic personalities (Orofino, 2020b; Nasution, 2017; Vidino, 2010).

This volume explores the Brotherhood in-depth and the reader will have the possibility to delve into the organisation, practices, understanding of Islamism and use of *jihad* as a methodology. This volume also shows how controversial the use of these terms can be even when referring to the same group across different time and space.

Aim and Structure of the Book

This analysis started with a dissatisfaction towards the misuse of the terms Islamism and “jihadism” as synonyms and aims to provide an alternative view on the two concepts rooted in historical and political evidence highlighting the differences between Islamism and violent *jihad*. More precisely, this edited volume aimed to provide a clear conceptual understanding of Islamism and “jihadism” as two different concepts although deeply intertwined and explore the origin of Islamism as the intellectual response against colonisations and oppression of specific populations in the Middle East and South-East Asia.

This volume was also conceived to offer an in-depth analysis of the groups having an Islamist ideology but who do not use violent *jihad* (or *jihad* of the hand) as a methodology. This edited collection also aims to explore current debates on the role of Islamism as an alleged conveyor belt to violence. In order to fulfil the above-mentioned aims, this publication is organised into four main sections, each one addressing a specific aim. The first section, *Exploring Islamism*, is devoted to the conceptualisation of Islamism across time and space. Two contributions shed light on the ambiguity of Islamism as well as the evolution of its significance over the centuries.

Section two explores the role of *Islamism as a form of non-violent resistance*. Four chapters discuss the power of Islamism as a bonding ideology for Muslims around the world to come together and fight the oppressors/invaders. From Egypt to Sri Lanka and India, Islamism has worked as a powerful trigger for organised Muslim action to emerge in the form of Islamist groups, such as the Islamist Movement, Muslim Democrats and Jamaat-e-

Islami. After explaining the rise of Islamist groups, this volume focuses on their methodology for action by analysing specific case-studies. Section three, *Non-violent Islamist groups at work*, presents studies on a variety of groups, including Progressive Islamists in Tunisia, the Islamist Movement in Spain and the Transnational Islamic Feminist Movement. This section does not only explore different collective Islamist actors around the world but also stresses the national differences and specificities.

Last but not least, section four zooms on the much inflamed and still ongoing debate on the role of non-violent Islamist groups as a conveyor belt to violent *jihād*. This section presents findings from analyses focused both on single groups as well as on wider conceptual debates exploring the ideological elements of Islamism that can work as triggers to violence. All the studies included in this section show that there is no universal truth on a theoretical natural path proceeding from Islamism to violent *jihād*. Undoubtedly, those who join violent jihadist movements have an Islamist mindset, but the majority of people having an Islamist mindset will never engage into violent actions, as proved by the existence of long-living Islamist groups analysed in this volume.

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