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## It's Not the Economy, Stupid

*What the West Needs to Know About the Rise of Radical Islam*

By Daniel Pipes

FUNDAMENTALIST MUSLIMS are again in the news—again associated with violence. This time, some apparently tried to kill Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak. Fundamentalists are engaged in a near-civil war with the authorities in Algeria. They have turned Kashmir into a living hell. They blow up buses in Israel. They attack Western targets in New York, London and Buenos Aires.

These killings raise two questions: Why are Muslims attracted to so extreme and violent a movement? What, if anything, can the West do to stem their aggression?

In both the Middle East and the West, the most common explanation for Islamic extremism is economic. Indeed, it has become an article of faith that poverty has caused the surge in fundamentalist Islam; and only its relief will cause radical fundamentalism to subside.

Secularist Muslims routinely make this point. For example, Turkey's Prime Minister Tansu Ciller, echoing similar statements by her predecessor, says that fundamentalists did so well in Turkey's March 1994 elections because "people reacted to the economy." Fundamentalists themselves concur with this connection between poverty and radical Islam. In the words of a fiery sheik from Cairo, "Islam is the religion of bad times." Mahmud az-Zahar, a leader of the radical Hamas group in Gaza, says, "It is enough to see the poverty-stricken outskirts of Algiers or the refugee camps in Gaza to understand the factors that nurture the strength of the Islamic resistance movement."

The poverty argument has also won nearly universal support in the West. Israel's foreign minister, Shimon Peres, says that "fundamentalism's basis is poverty." It's "a way

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of protesting against poverty, corruption, ignorance and discrimination." Interior Minister Charles Pasqua of France finds that it "has coincided with despair on the part of a large section of the masses, and young people in particular." Martin Indyk, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, says that those wishing to deal with fundamentalist Islam must first solve the economic, social and political problems that constitute its breeding grounds.

If poverty causes fundamentalist Islam, economic growth is the way out. In Algeria, when the government pleads for Western economic aid, it implicitly threatens that without it, the violent fundamentalists will prevail.

This new emphasis on jobs has caused a basic shift in understanding the Arab-Israeli conflict. For decades, its resolution was thought to lie in finding mutually acceptable borders and winning acceptance of the Jewish state; these days, building Palestinian wealth is seen as the key. Toward this end, Western states have committed billions of dollars in aid to the Palestine Liberation Organization. They hope that a jump-start to the Gazan and West Bank economies will give Palestinians a stake in the peace process, and thereby reduce the appeal of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

The Israelis have followed the same approach; Peres explains that "Islamic terror cannot be fought militarily but by eradicating the hunger which spawns it." So eager is the Rabin government for Yasser Arafat to receive foreign aid that it has contributed Israeli funds to the PLO.

But is poverty truly the motor force behind fundamentalist Islam? A close review of the record shows little correlation between economic misery and radical Islam:

■ *Wealth does not inoculate against fundamentalist Islam.* Although Kuwaitis enjoy a Western-style income, fundamentalists took 40 percent of the seats in the October 1992

elections. The West Bank is far more prosperous than Gaza, yet fundamentalist groups enjoy more popularity there.

■ *Poverty does not necessarily beget fundamentalism.* Bangladesh, the international basket case, has not exactly been a hot bed of virulent fundamentalism, nor have Yemen or Niger. Also, as an American specialist rightly notes, "economic despair, the oft-cited source of political Islam's power, is familiar to the Middle East." Why wasn't fundamentalist fervor an even stronger force in years past, when the region was poorer than it is today?

■ *A flourishing economy does not impede radical Islam.* In the 1970s, precisely when oil-exporting states enjoyed riches beyond avarice, today's fundamentalist movements got going. That's when Moammar Gadhafi developed his eccentric version of fundamentalism; when fanatical groups in Saudi Arabia violently seized the Great Mosque of Mecca; and when Ayatollah Khomeini took power in Iran. In the 1990s, several countries that excelled economically—Turkey, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco—experienced a fundamentalist boom.

■ *A declining economy does contribute to radicalism in general but not necessarily to fundamentalism.* Iranian incomes have gone down by half since the Islamic Republic came to power in 1979: Yet, far from increasing support for the regime's fundamentalist ideology, this impoverishment has caused a severe alienation from Islam. Iraqis have experienced an even more precipitous drop in living standards: While the country has witnessed an increase in personal piety, there is no sign of a surge in fundamentalism.

Similarly, economic factors do not explain on the individual level who will become a fundamentalist Muslim. The Egyptian social scientist Saad Eddin Ibrahim interviewed radicals in Egyptian jails and concluded in a 1980 study that the typical member is "young (early twenties), of rural or small-town background, from the middle or lower-middle class, with high



achievement and motivation, upwardly mobile, with science or engineering education, and from a normally cohesive family." In other words, Ibrahim concluded, these young men were "significantly above the average in their generation"; they are "ideal or model young Egyptians."

Other researchers confirm these findings. Galal A. Amin, an Egyptian economist, concludes a study on the country's economic troubles by observing "how rare it is to find examples of religious fanaticism among either the higher or the very lowest social strata of the Egyptian population."

The same applies in other countries. Fully one-quarter of the members in Turkey's fundamentalist organization, called the Welfare Party, are engineers. Indeed, the typical cadre in an Islamist party is an engineer born in the 1950s in a city to parents who had moved from the countryside. Khalid M. Amayreh, a Palestinian journalist, finds that "a substantial majority of Islamists and their supporters come from the middle and upper socio-economic strata." In the Jordanian parliamentary elections of 1994, for example, the Muslim Brethren did as well in middle-class districts as in poor ones.

What motivates Egypt's young radicals, Ibrahim concludes, is not poverty but an acute sense of Egypt in crisis due to "foreign encroachment." Ibrahim's findings have been confirmed many times: Those engaging in violence on behalf of Islam are motivated by a desire for power, not prosperity. Khomeini captured this sentiment with his usual pungency: "We did not create a revolution to lower the price of melon." To be sure, economic strength is important, for it strengthens Muslims in their battle against the West; but fundamentalists see wealth as a means, not as an end. Money is to train cadres and buy weapons, not to enjoy the good life.

If fundamentalists rarely mention prosperity, they talk incessantly about power. In a typical statement, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, the leading Iranian hard-liner, predicts that "Ultimately Islam will become the supreme power." Similarly, Mustafa Mashhur, an Egyptian fundamentalist, declares that the slogan "God is Great" will reverberate "until Islam spreads throughout the world."

Like fascism and Marxism-Leninism in their heydays, fundamentalist Islam attracts highly competent, motivated and ambitious in-

dividuals seeking access to the palace. Abdesalam Yassine, a Moroccan fundamentalist, asserts, "We demand power"; the man standing in his way, King Hasan, rightly concludes that for fundamentalists, Islam is "the elevator to take power."

This pattern prompts four observations. First, the mistake of seeing fundamentalism as a function of economics reflects a materialist bias in our thinking. We are all Marxists now—assuming that economic circumstances motivate humans more than beliefs, seeing religion as a cover for some other self-interested motive. This is Marxist analysis at its most superficial. To dismiss the impassioned beliefs of fundamentalist Muslims as mere window-dressing completely misses their cultural and moral significance; it is also an act of stunning cultural arrogance. Fundamentalists must be taken seriously on their own terms.

Second, analysts are unlikely to be able to predict when and where fundamentalist Islam will gain strength. Similarly, in the 1950s, Americans made a massive effort to discern why some individuals or societies welcomed communism and others not, without ever reaching a satisfactory answer. Forty years later, the mix of factors that turn an individual or a people toward radical Islam may again contain too many factors—personalities, traditions, institutions—for an observer to predict what will happen where.

Third, if poverty is not the driving force behind violent fundamentalism, then it stands to reason that prosperity will not take care of this problem. In some cases (for example, Algeria), it might help; in others (Saudi Arabia), it might hurt. Also, while prosperity may reduce mass support for fundamentalism, it will have no effect on the core activists—precisely those individuals most likely to engage in violence. Foreign aid clearly cannot be the outside world's main tool to combat fundamentalism.

Instead, those intent on stopping the fundamentalist wave, whether Muslim or not, should confront the fundamentalists head-on. That means accepting fundamentalism as an end in itself, focusing on its logic and goals, refuting its errors (especially those about the West) and countering its organizations (breaking up gangs, stopping the flow of money from abroad, retaliating when they harm us). Only in this way will the scourge of fundamentalist violence be stopped.