

God and Mammon: Does Poverty Cause Militant Islam?

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# God and Mammon

## *Does Poverty Cause Militant Islam?*

—Daniel Pipes—

THE EVENTS of September 11 have intensified a long-standing debate: What causes Muslims to turn to militant Islam? Some analysts have noted the poverty of Afghanistan and concluded that herein lay the problem. Jessica Stern of Harvard University wrote that the United States “can no longer afford to allow states to fail.” If it does not devote a much higher priority to health, education and economic development abroad, she writes, “new Osamas will continue to arise.”<sup>1</sup> Susan Sachs of the *New York Times* observes: “Predictably, the disappointed youth of Egypt and Saudi Arabia turn to religion for comfort.” More colorfully, others have advocated bombarding Afghanistan with foodstuffs not *along with* but *instead of* explosives.

Behind these analyses lies an assumption that socioeconomic distress drives Muslims to extremism. The evidence, however, does not support this expectation. Militant Islam (or Islamism) is not a response to poverty or impoverishment; not only are Bangladesh and Iraq not hotbeds of militant Islam, but militant Islam has often surged in countries experiencing rapid economic growth. The fac-

tors that cause militant Islam to decline or flourish appear to have more to do with issues of identity than with economics.

### *All Other Problems Vanish*

THE conventional wisdom—that economic stress causes militant Islam and that economic growth is needed to blunt it—has many well-placed adherents. Even some Islamists themselves accept this connection. In the words of a fiery sheikh from Cairo, “Islam is the religion of bad times.” A Hamas leader in Gaza, Mahmud az-Zahar, 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.” In this spirit, militant Islamic organizations offer a wide range of welfare benefits in an effort to attract followers. They also promote what they call an “Islamic economy” as the “most gracious system of solidarity in a society. Under such a system, the honorable do not fall, the honest do not perish, the needy do not suffer, the handicapped do not despair, the sick do not die for lack of care, and people do not destroy one another.”

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<sup>1</sup>Specific citations for all quotations are available at [www.danielpipes.org](http://www.danielpipes.org).

Many secular Muslims also stress militant Islam's source in poverty as an article of faith. Süleyman Demirel, the former Turkish president, says, "As long as there is poverty, inequality, injustice, and repressive political systems, fundamentalist tendencies will grow in the world." Turkey's former prime minister, Tansu Çiller, finds that Islamists did so well in the 1994 elections because "People reacted to the economy." The chief of Jordanian Army Intelligence holds, "Economic development may solve almost all of our problems [in the Middle East]." Including militant Islam, he was asked? Yes, he replied: "The moment a person is in a good economic position, has a job, and can support his family, all other problems vanish."

Leftists in the Middle East concur, interpreting the militant Islamic resurgence as "a sign of pessimism. Because people are desperate, they are resorting to the supernatural." Social scientists sign on as well: Hooshang Amirahmadi, an academic of Iranian origins, argues that "the roots of Islamic radicalism must be looked for outside the religion, in the real world of cultural despair, economic decline, political oppression, and spiritual turmoil in which most Muslims find themselves today." The academy, with its lingering Marxist disposition and disdain for faith, of course accepts this militant Islam-from-poverty thesis with near unanimity. Ervand Abrahamian holds that "the behavior of Khomeini and the Islamic Republic has been determined less by scriptural principles than by immediate political, social and economic needs." Ziad Abu-Amr, author of a book on militant Islam (and a member of the Palestine Legislative Council), ascribes a Palestinian turn toward religiosity to "the sombre climate of destruction, war, unemployment, and depression [which] cause people to seek solace, and they're going to Allah."

Western politicians also find the argument compelling. For former President

Bill Clinton, "These forces of reaction feed on disillusionment, poverty and despair", and he advocates a socioeconomic remedy: "spread prosperity and security to all." Edward Djerejian, once a top State Department figure, reports that "political Islamic movements are to an important degree rooted in worsening socio-economic conditions in individual countries." Martin Indyk, another former high-ranking U.S. diplomat, warns that those wishing to reduce the appeal of militant Islam must first solve the economic, social and political problems that constitute its breeding grounds.

Militant Islam reflects "the economic, political, and cultural disappointment" of Muslims, according to former German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel. Former Interior Minister Charles Pasqua of France finds that this phenomenon "has coincided with despair on the part of a large section of the masses, and young people in particular." Prime Minister Eddie Fenech of Malta draws an even closer tie: "Fundamentalism grows at the same pace as economic problems." Israel's Foreign Minister Shimon Peres flatly asserts that "fundamentalism's basis is poverty" and that it offers "a way of protesting against poverty, corruption, ignorance, and discrimination."

Armed with this theory of cause and effect, businessmen on occasion make investments with an eye to political amelioration. The Virgin Group's chairman, Richard Branson, declared as he opened a music store in Beirut: "The region will become stable if people invest in it, create jobs and rebuild the countries that need rebuilding, not ignore them."

### *Somewhere Near the Stratosphere*

**B**UT THE empirical record evinces little correlation between economics and militant Islam. Aggregate measures of wealth and eco-

conomic trends fall flat as predictors of where militant Islam will be strong and where not. On the level of individuals, too, conventional wisdom points to militant Islam attracting the poor, the alienated and the marginal—but research finds precisely the opposite to be true. To the extent that economic factors explain who becomes Islamist, they point to the fairly well off, not the poor.

Take Egypt as a test case. In a 1980 study, the Egyptian social scientist Saad Eddin Ibrahim interviewed Islamists in Egyptian jails and found 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 were “ideal or model young Egyptians.” In a subsequent study, he found that out of 34 members of the violent group *At-Takfir w'al-Hijra*, fully 21 had fathers in the civil service, nearly all of them middle-ranking. More recently, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service found that the leadership of the militant Islamic group Al-Jihad “is largely university educated with middle-class backgrounds.” These are not the children of poverty or despair.

Other researchers confirm these findings for Egypt. In a study on the country's economic troubles, Galal A. Amin, an economist at the American University in Cairo, concludes by noting “how rare it is to find examples of religious fanaticism among either the higher or the very lowest social strata of the Egyptian population.” When her assistant in Cairo turned Islamist, the American journalist Geraldine Brooks tells of her surprise: “I'd assumed that the turn to Islam was the desperate choice of poor people

searching for heavenly solace. But Sahar [the assistant] was neither desperate nor poor. She belonged somewhere near the stratosphere of Egypt's meticulously tiered society.” And note this account by the talented journalist Hamza Hendawi: In Egypt,

a new breed of preachers in business suits and with cellular phones are attracting increasing numbers of the rich and powerful away from Western lifestyles and into religious conservatism. The modern imams hold their seminars over banquets in some of Cairo's most luxurious homes and in Egypt's seaside resorts to appeal to the wealthy's sense of style and comfort.

What is true of Egypt holds equally true elsewhere: Like fascism and Marxism-Leninism in their heydays, militant Islam attracts highly competent, motivated and ambitious individuals. Far from being the laggards of society, they are its leaders. Brooks, a much-traveled journalist, found Islamists to be “the most gifted” of the youth she encountered. Those “hearing the Islamic call included the students with the most options, not just the desperate cases. . . . They were the elites of the next decade: the people who would shape their nations' future.”

Even Islamists who make the ultimate sacrifice and give up their lives fit this pattern of financial ease and advanced education. A disproportionate number of terrorists and suicide bombers have higher education, often in engineering and the sciences. This generalization applies equally to the Palestinian suicide bombers attacking Israel and the followers of Osama bin Laden who hijacked the four planes of September 11. In the first case, one researcher found by looking at their profiles that: “Economic circumstances did not seem to be a decisive factor. While none of the 16 subjects could be described as well-off, some were cer-

tainly struggling less than others.” In the second case, as the Princeton historian Sean Wilentz sardonically put it, the biographies of the September 11 killers would imply that the root cause of terrorism is “money, education and privilege.” More generally, Fathi ash-Shiqaqi, founding leader of the arch-murderous Islamic Jihad, once commented, “Some of the young people who have sacrificed themselves [in terrorist operations] came from well-off families and had successful university careers.” This makes sense, for suicide bombers who hurl themselves against foreign enemies offer their lives not to protest financial deprivation but to change the world.

Those who back militant Islamic organizations also tend to be well off. They come more often from the richer city than the poorer countryside, a fact that, as Khalid M. Amayreh, a Palestinian journalist, points out, “refutes the widely-held assumption that Islamist popularity thrives on economic misery.” And they come not just from the cities but from the upper ranks. At times, an astonishing one-quarter of the membership in Turkey’s leading militant Islamic organization, now called the Saadet Party, have been engineers. Indeed, the typical cadre in a militant Islamic party is an engineer in his forties born in a city to parents who had moved from the countryside. Amayreh finds that in the Jordanian parliamentary elections of 1994, the Muslim Brethren did as well in middle-class districts as in poor ones. He generalizes from this that “a substantial majority of Islamists and their supporters come from the middle and upper socio-economic strata.”

Martin Kramer, editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*, goes further and sees militant Islam as

the vehicle of counter-elites, people who, by virtue of education and/or income, are potential members of the elite, but who for some

reason or another get excluded. Their education may lack some crucial prestige-conferring element; the sources of their wealth may be a bit tainted. Or they may just come from the wrong background. So while they are educated and wealthy, they have a grievance: their ambition is blocked, they cannot translate their socio-economic assets into political clout. Islamism is particularly useful to these people, in part because by its careful manipulation, it is possible to recruit a following among the poor, who make valuable foot-soldiers.

Kramer cites the so-called Anatolian Tigers, businessmen who have had a critical role in backing Turkey’s militant Islamic party, as an example of this counter-elite in its purest form.

### *Not a Product of Poverty*

THE SAME pattern that holds for individual Islamists exists on the level of societies, as well. That social pattern can be expressed by four propositions.

First, wealth does not inoculate against militant Islam. Kuwaitis enjoy a Western-style income (and owe their state’s very existence to the West) but Islamists generally win the largest bloc of seats in parliament (at present, twenty out of fifty). The West Bank is more prosperous than Gaza, yet militant Islamic groups usually enjoy more popularity in the former than the latter. Militant Islam flourishes in the member states of the European Union and in North America, where Muslims as a group enjoy a standard of living *higher* than the national averages. And of those Muslims, as Khalid Durán points out, Islamists have the generally higher incomes: “In the United States, the difference between Islamists and common Muslims is largely one between haves and have-nots. Muslims have the numbers; Islamists have the dollars.”

Second, a flourishing economy does not inoculate against radical Islam. Today's militant Islamic movements took off in the 1970s, precisely as oil-exporting states enjoyed extraordinary growth rates. Muammar Qaddafi developed his eccentric version of proto-militant Islam then; fanatical groups in Saudi Arabia violently seized the Great Mosque of Mecca; and Ayatollah Khomeini took power in Iran (though, admittedly, growth had slacked off several years before he overthrew the Shah). In the 1980s, several countries that excelled economically experienced a militant Islamic boom. Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco all did well economically in the 1990s—as did their militant Islamic movements. Turks under Turgut Özal enjoyed nearly a decade of particularly impressive economic growth even as they joined militant Islamic parties in ever larger numbers.

Third, poverty does not generate militant Islam. There are many very poor Muslim states but few of them have become centers of militant Islam—not Bangladesh, not Yemen, and not Niger. As an American specialist rightly notes, “economic despair, the oft-cited source of political Islam's power, is familiar to the Middle East”; if militant Islam is connected to poverty, why was it not a stronger force in years and centuries past, when the region was poorer than it is today?

Fourth, a declining economy does not generate militant Islam. The 1997 crash in Indonesia and Malaysia did not spur a large turn toward militant Islam. Iranian incomes have gone down by half or more since the Islamic Republic came to power in 1979; yet, far from increasing support for the regime's militant Islamic ideology, impoverishment has caused a massive alienation from Islam. Iraqis have experienced an even more precipitous drop in living standards: Abbas Alnasrawi estimates that per capita income has plummeted by nearly 90 percent since 1980,

returning it to where it was in the 1940s. While the country has witnessed an increase in personal piety, militant Islam has not surged, nor is it the leading expression of anti-regime sentiments.

Noting these patterns, at least a few observers have drawn the correct conclusion. The outspoken Algerian secularist, Saïd Sadi, flatly rejects the thesis that poverty spurs militant Islam: “I do not adhere to this view that it is widespread unemployment and poverty which produce terrorism.” Likewise, Amayreh finds that militant Islam “is not a product or by-product of poverty.”

### *Providing a Decent Living*

IF POVERTY causes militant Islam, broad-based economic growth is the solution. And indeed, in countries as varied as Egypt and Germany, officials argue for a focus on building prosperity and fostering job formation to combat militant Islam. At the height of the crisis in Algeria during the mid-1990s, when the government pled for Western economic aid, it implicitly threatened that without this aid, the Islamists would prevail. This interpretation has practical results: for example, the government in Tunisia has taken some steps toward a free market but has not privatized for fear that the swollen ranks of the unemployed would provide fodder for militant Islamic groups. The same goes for Iran, where Europe and Japan mold policies premised on the notion that their economic ties to the Islamic Republic tame it and discourage military adventurism.

This emphasis on jobs and wealth creation also transformed efforts to end the Arab-Israeli conflict during the Oslo era. Prior to 1993, Israelis had insisted that a resolution would require Arabs to recognize that the Jewish state is a permanent fact of life. Achieving that was

thought to lie in winning acceptance of the Jewish state and finding mutually acceptable borders. Then, post-1993, came a major shift: increasing Arab prosperity became the goal, hoping that this would diminish the appeal of militant Islam and other radical ideologies. A jump start for the economy was expected to give Palestinians a stake in the peace process, thereby reducing the appeal of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In this context, Serge Schmemmann of the *New York Times* wrote (without providing evidence) that Arafat “knows that eradicating militancy will ultimately depend more on providing a decent living than on using force.”

The Israeli analyst Meron Benvenisti agreed: Islam’s “militant character derived from its being an expression of the deep frustration of the underprivileged. . . . Hamas’s rise was directly linked to the worsening economic situation and to the accumulated frustration and degradation of the ongoing occupation.” Shimon Peres weighed in as well: “Islamic terror cannot be fought militarily but by eradicating the hunger which spawns it.” Guided by this theory, the Western states and Israel contributed billions of dollars to the Palestinian Authority. Even more remarkably, the Israeli government fought against efforts by pro-Israel activists in the United States to make U.S. aid to the PLO contingent on Arafat’s fulfilling his formal written promises to Israel.

At this late date, one hardly needs to point out the falsehood of Oslo’s assumptions. Wealth does not resolve hatreds; a prosperous enemy may simply be one more capable of making war. Westerners and Israelis assumed that Palestinians would make broad economic growth their priority, whereas this has been a minor concern. What has counted instead are questions of identity and power, but so strong is the belief in the

militant Islam-from-poverty thesis that Oslo’s failure has not managed to discredit the faith in the political benefits of prosperity. Thus, in August 2001, a senior Israeli officer endorsed the building of a power station in northern Gaza on the grounds that it would supply jobs, “and every [Palestinian] working is one less pair of hands for Hamas.”

### *A Different Argument*

**I**F POVERTY is not the driving force behind militant Islam, several policy implications follow. First, prosperity cannot be looked to as the solution to militant Islam and foreign aid cannot serve as the outside world’s main tool to combat it. Second, Westernization also does not provide a solution. To the contrary, many outstanding militant Islamic leaders are not just familiar with Western ways but are expert in them. In particular, a disproportionate number of them have advanced degrees in technology and the sciences. It sometimes seems that Westernization is a route to hating the West. Third, economic growth does not inevitably lead to improved relations with Muslim states. In some cases (for example, Algeria), it might help; in others (Saudi Arabia), it might hurt.

Could it be, quite contrarily, that militant Islam results from wealth rather than poverty? It is possible. There is, after all, the universal phenomenon that people become more engaged ideologically and active politically only when they have reached a fairly high standard of living. Revolutions take place, it has often been noted, only when a substantial middle class exists. Birthe Hansen, an associate professor at the University of Copenhagen, hints at this when she writes that “the spread of free market capitalism and liberal democracy . . . is probably an important factor behind the rise of political Islam.”

Moreover, there is a specifically Islamic phenomenon of the faith having been associated with worldly success. Through history, from the Prophet Muhammad's time to the Ottoman Empire a millennium later, Muslims usually had more wealth and more power than other peoples, and were more literate and healthy. With time, Islamic faith came to be associated with worldly well-being—a kind of Muslim Calvinism, in effect. This connection appears still to hold. For example, as noted in the formulation known as Issawi's law ("Where there are Muslims, there is oil; the converse is not true"), the 1970s oil boom mainly benefited Muslims; it is probably no coincidence that the current wave of militant Islam began then. Seeing themselves as "pioneers of a movement that is an alternative to Western civilization", Islamists need a strong economic base. As Galal Amin writes, "There may be a strong relationship between the growth of incomes that have the nature of economic rent and the growth of religious fanaticism."

Conversely, poor Muslims have tended to be more impressed by alternative affiliations. Over the centuries, for example, apostasy from the religion has mostly occurred when things have gone badly. That was the case when Tatars fell under Russian rule or when Sunni Lebanese lost power to the Maronites. It was also the case in 1995 in Iraqi Kurdistan, a region under double embargo and suffering from civil war:

Trying to live their lives in the midst of fire and gunpowder, Kurdish villagers have reached the point where they are prepared to give up anything to save themselves from hunger and death. From their perspective, changing their religion to get a visa to the West is becoming an increasingly more important option.

There are, in short, ample reasons for thinking that militant Islam results more from success than from failure.

### *The Elevator to Power*

THAT BEING the likely case, it is probably more fruitful to look less to economics and more to other factors when seeking the sources of militant Islam. While material reasons deeply appeal to Western sensibilities, they offer little guidance in this case. In general, Westerners attribute too many of the Arab world's problems, observes David Wurmser of the American Enterprise Institute, "to specific material issues" such as land and wealth. This usually means a tendency "to belittle belief and strict adherence to principle as genuine and dismiss it as a cynical exploitation of the masses by politicians. As such, Western observers see material issues and leaders, not the spiritual state of the Arab world, as the heart of the problem." Or, in Osama bin Laden's ugly formulation, "Because America worships money, it believes that [other] people think that way too."

Indeed, if one turns away from the commentators on militant Islam and instead listens to the Islamists themselves, it quickly becomes apparent that they rarely talk about prosperity. As Ayatollah Khomeini memorably put it, "We did not create a revolution to lower the price of melon." If anything, they look at the consumer societies of the West with distaste. Wajdi Ghunayim, an Egyptian Islamist, sees it as "the reign of *décolleté* and *moda* [fashion]" whose common denominator is an appeal to the bestial instincts of human nature. Economic assets for Islamists represent not the good life but added strength to do battle against the West. Money serves to train cadres and buy weapons, not to buy a bigger house or a late-model car. Wealth is a means, not an end.



Means toward what? Toward power. Islamists care less about material strength than about where they stand in the world. They talk incessantly of this. 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 Islamist, declares that the slogan "God is Great" will reverberate "until Islam spreads throughout

the world." Abdessalam Yassine, a Moroccan Islamist, asserts "We demand power"—and the man standing in his way, the late King Hassan, concluded that for Islamists, Islam is "the elevator to take power." He was right. By reducing the economic dimension to its proper proportions, and appreciating the religious, cultural and political dimensions, we may actually begin to understand what causes militant Islam. □

*It's the Clash, Not the Cash*

It is quite astonishing how little we have understood, or empathised with, the huge crisis that has faced that vast and populous section of the world stretching from the Mahgreb through the Middle East and Central Asia into South and South-East Asia and beyond to the Philippines: overpopulated, underdeveloped, being dragged headlong by the West into the post-modern age before they have come to terms with modernity. This is not a problem of poverty as against wealth, and I am afraid that it is symptomatic of our Western materialism to suppose that it is. It is the far more profound and intractable confrontation between a theistic, land-based and traditional culture, in places little different from the Europe of the Middle Ages, and the secular material values of the Enlightenment.

—Sir Michael Howard,  
speech to the Royal United Services Institute,  
October 30, 2001