

# The Rise Of Muslim Fundamentalism

*A Volatile Mixture Of Religion And Politics Hostile To Modern Values*

By Daniel Pipes

**F**undamentalist Muslims have emerged in recent years as a major political force in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Although their activities sometimes do bring advantage to the United States (as in the Afghan civil war), these more often pose a danger to American interests.

It was fundamentalists who, for example, overthrew the pro-Western regime of the shah of Iran, attacked the Grand Mosque in Mecca, assassinated Sadat, and blew up the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut.

From Morocco to Indonesia, fundamentalist Muslims pursue a political program that derives from their understanding of the Islamic law, the Sharia. For them, the regulations contained in this divine code are the key to politics.

The Sharia is a massive body of regulations based on precepts found in the Koran and the other holy books of Islam. It covers both the most intimate aspects of life (such as personal hygiene and sexual relations) and the most public (such as taxation and warfare). The law of Islam has changed very little during the past thousand years; it represents the permanent goals incumbent on believers.

In the public sphere, however, the Sharia sets out goals so lofty Muslims have never been able fully to achieve them. The ban on warfare between fellow believers, for example has been repeatedly breached, while judicial procedures have almost never been followed and criminal punishments have not been applied.

In centuries past, pious Muslims coped with the problem of not attaining their religion's goals by lowering their sights. They postulated that full application of the law would occur only some day in the distant future. For the meantime, they agreed, it had to be adjusted to meet the needs of daily life; this they did by applying only those regulations that made practical sense. For example, by devising ways to ignore the prohibition on usury, they enabled pious Muslims legally to charge interest on loans. This pragmatic approach to religion, which predominated for hundreds of years, is known as traditionalist Islam.

Traditionalist Islam began to lose its hold in the late 18th century, as the success of the West began to cause a steep fall in the power and wealth of the Muslim world.

As Muslims increasingly experimented with Western-influenced interpretations of the sacred law, their efforts resulted in three new approaches to Islam: the secularist, reformist and fundamentalist.

Secularist Muslims believe that success in the modern world requires the discarding of anything that stands in the way of emulating the West; they therefore argue for the complete withdrawal of religion from the public sphere.

If secularists push away the Sharia entirely and embrace Western civilization, reformist Muslims incorporate parts of both. They interpret the Sharia in ways that facilitate the acceptance of whichever Western practices they wish to see adopted.

Fundamentalists, in contrast to both these groups and to traditionalist Muslims as well, believe that the law of Islam must be implemented in its every detail.

Although aiming to recreate what they think of as an ancient way of life, fundamentalists in fact espouse a radical program that has never been implemented. They claim their goal is to return to traditional ways but their program differs from the traditionalists' in many respects. Where traditionalist Islam is pragmatic, the fundamentalist version is doctrinaire. The former allows for human frailty, the latter demands perfection.

The appeal of fundamentalism grows most when Muslim societies intensely experience modernization. The first Muslims to encounter the modern West — government officials, military officers, aristocrats, merchants — tend

only, harmonious relations between Muslim governments, and ultimately a union of all Muslims living in peace under one ruler.

In sum, fundamentalists believe that Islamic law holds the answers to modern problems and that they alone are sincere about implementing the law. They disdain non-fundamentalist Muslims, are hostile toward non-Muslims, and act with the self-assuredness and determination that accompanies absolute certainty about knowing God's will. Accordingly, they feel justified in using any means to achieve power and often adopt extreme tactics.

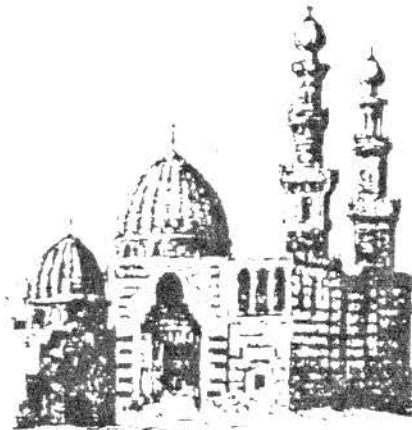
Most important for relations with the United States, fundamentalists have a deep and abiding hatred of Western civilization, which they see as the supreme obstacle to their goal of applying Islamic law.

From this point of view, the United States and the Soviet Union appear more alike than dissimilar. The two countries share much that fundamentalists reject. Americans and Russians are historically both Christian peoples whose culture derives from Western civilization. They share a scientific methodology, humanistic idealism and secularism. Political differences between the two countries appear relatively minor to fundamentalists.

Of the two, however, the United States poses greater problems. The result is a slight but consistent bias among fundamentalists in favor of the Soviet Union and against the United States because American culture is the more threatening, its ideology the more alien, its power the more feared.

Soviet influence derives almost exclusively from its military prowess; its dreary state culture and moribund economy have virtually no impact on the Muslim world. It is the United States and Western Europe, rather, that influence Muslims everywhere. Their pop music, movies, video games, comics, textbooks, literature and art reach throughout the Muslim world. Their clothing, foods, household items and machines are found in towns and villages. Their universities, banks and oil companies beckon aspiring Muslims. Their sexual customs — contraception, abortion, dancing, dating, nightclubs, pornography, mixed social drinking, tight clothing, scant swimming suits, mixed bathing, beauty pageants, co-education and female employment — break down the divisions required by Islamic law.

This wide appeal of American and West European culture deeply disturbs fundamentalists. They condemn Western culture as aesthetically loathsome and morally decadent; they spread conspiracy theories to inspire



to experiment with secularism and reformism. But as the masses get caught up in modernizing, they try hard to preserve accustomed ways. Fundamentalism attracts them precisely because it promises to fend off Western influences and practices.

Fundamentalist organizations grow in strength as Muslim masses seek solutions to modern dilemmas. Their goals are: a penal code based on the Koran, taxation according to Islamic levies, second-class citizenship for non-Muslims, warfare against non-Muslims

fears in Muslims of American motives; and they warn of disasters befalling those who abandon the Sharia.

Fundamentalists also strongly discourage instruction of European languages and attendance at American schools.

A dilemma confronts the United States whenever friendly governments face major fundamentalist opposition. The U.S. is tempted to assist them but the more aid they accept, the more vulnerable they are to fundamentalist accusations of selling out to Washington. Often referred to as the "kiss of death," the problem of contamination by association is especially delicate in the Muslim world (where it plagues the Soviet Union no less than the U.S.).

What then should be U.S. policy for dealing with the fundamentalist Muslim threat in the Middle East and elsewhere?

First, in the case of Muslim governments friendly to the United States, such as Morocco, Egypt, the Sudan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan

- ▶ No help for the fundamentalists in the opposition. U.S. contact with them helps, of course, to understand their views and monitor their influence, but no assistance should be provided to them.

- ▶ Dissuasion of Muslim governments pre-empting fundamentalists. Bringing them into the government or applying their program inevitably leads to repression, instability and anti-American policies.

- ▶ Reduction of public U.S. links to Muslim governments, especially in countries where powerful fundamentalist movements exist. Discreet cooperation, not visible ties, are to be built.

In the case of Soviet-backed Muslim governments, including Libya, Syria and Afghanistan, U.S. policy should be to:

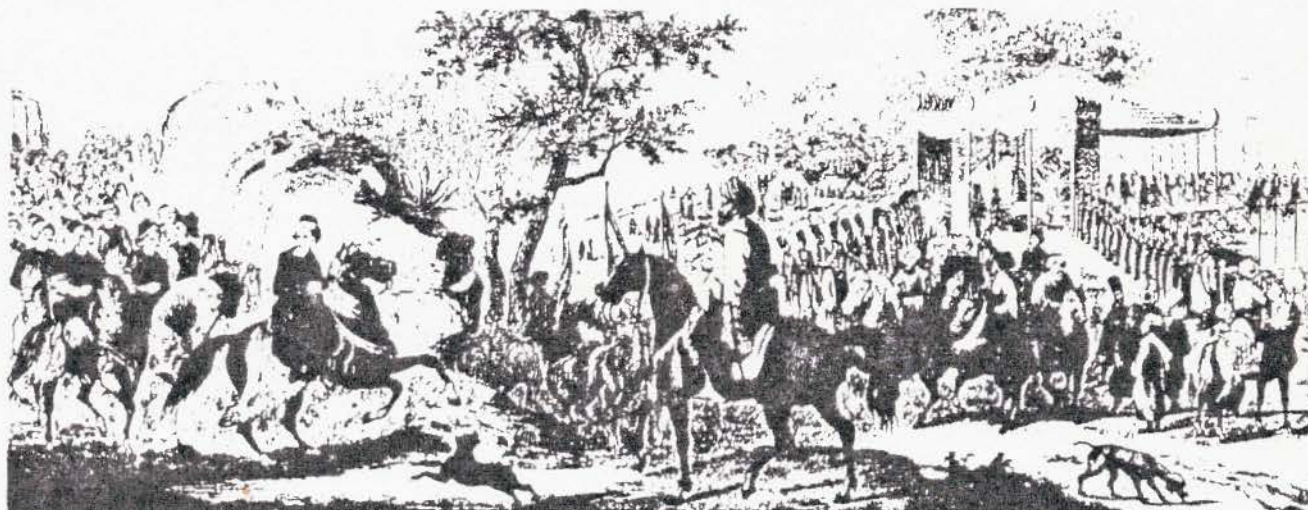
- ▶ Assist fundamentalist groups only with great caution and as a last resort.

- ▶ Refuse assistance that establishes fundamentalist groups as the major alternate opposition to the Soviet allies.

- ▶ Help non-fundamentalist Muslim opposition groups organize against Soviet-backed regimes.

As for neutralist governments, Iran especially, try to convince them that the U.S. poses less of a threat than the U.S.S.R.

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## Islamic Movements Around The World

**F**undamentalists have established major political movements in many countries during the past 15 years. Examples include, from west to east:

**Senegal**, where several fundamentalist organizations have shaken up the sedate compromises made by Senegalese Muslim leaders.

**Morocco**, where since the mid-1970s the government of King Hassan II has faced increasing opposition from fundamentalist groups calling for complete application of Islamic law. Hassan's two-pronged policy has been to co-opt the fundamentalists by adding an Islamic tone to this government and to isolate them by cracking down on fundamentalist organizations.

**Algeria** was turned into a secular society through the long French occupation (1830-1962), but since 1973 fundamentalist groups have demanded application of Islamic law.

**Tunisia's** Islamic Movement, established in June 1981, gave fundamentalists a unified voice after a decade of increasing presence in Tunisian political life.

**Egypt**: The Muslim Brethren — the leading fundamentalist movement of the 20th century — was founded in 1928 and played a key political role before being outlawed in the 1950s. The Brethren became more moderate in recent years, leaving violent action to such groups as New Jihad, the group that assassinated Anwar Sadat.

**Sudan**: Fundamentalist groups have mounted strong challenges to the central government for many years. These culminated in an attack on the capital city in March 1970, which was put down by the air force at a cost of some 10,000 lives. President Gaafar Nimeiri imposed Islamic law in September 1983 and subsequently made it the primary principle of legislation.

**Syria**: The main opposition to the secularist regime of Hafez Assad has, since 1976, come from the Muslim Brethren. The government revealed its concern by its draconian anti-fundamentalist measures: The worst of these was the destruction of large parts of the city of Hama in February 1982, leading to the deaths of some 20,000 Syrian citizens.

**Saudi Arabia**: The Saudi government espouses fundamentalist principles, but since the 1920s has moved away from applying them. A growing discrepancy between rhetoric and actions creates tensions with the fundamentalists. This triggered the takeover of the Grand Mosque of Mecca by fundamentalists in November 1979.

**Turkey**: Until Ataturk's death in 1938, Turkey was the only Muslim country consistently to apply secularist principles in public life. Since then, however, secularism has been eroding.

**Iran** experienced secularist policies during the rule of the two Pahlavi shahs, 1925-1979. These were dramatically reversed when Ayatollah Khomeini took

power in February 1979. His regime has endeavored to apply the Islamic law in its entirety. Iran is today the country watched around the world by those wishing to see if the fundamentalist experiment can work.

**Afghanistan**: The imposition of Marxist rule in April 1978 sparked widespread revolt against the central government. Of the six most important groups fighting in the resistance, four are led by fundamentalists.

**Pakistan**: The secularist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto lost power in a 1977 coup to the fundamentalist Gen Zia-ul-Haq, who has declared an ambitious program of Islamization.

**Bangladesh**: Politics here went through a secularist period after independence in 1971, but since 1975 have taken on a fundamentalist cast.

**Malaysia**: Fundamentalist organizations put pressure on the government to increase its fundamentalist orientation. In the process, they threaten to upset the delicate balance that exists between the Muslim Malays and the non-Muslim Chinese and Indians.

**Indonesia**: Fundamentalists, repeatedly frustrated by their poor showing in national elections, have resorted to non-democratic means — demonstrations, provincial rebellions, terror — to get their way and put their program into effect.

— Daniel Pipes