

# MERIA

## Why Radical Muslims Aren't Taking Over Governments\*

By Emmanuel Sivan

*Twenty-odd years after its rise to prominence, radical Islam (or Islamism) is at bay. Its mixed record includes survival in the teeth of state repression, some impact on political decisionmaking, socio-cultural hegemony, but a general failure in the attempt to take power. This predicament of radical movements holds true particularly in the Arab-speaking world those ancient countries where Islam has been ensconced for nearly fourteen centuries. Why has radical Islam reached this impasse?*

### **SOCIO-CULTURAL SUCCESS, POLITICAL FAILURE**

Radical Islam has made tremendous inroads into the hearts and minds of Arabic-speaking Muslims. In the socio-cultural realm, militant Islamic discourse maintains a hegemony in the public debate among Arabs, replacing Pan-Arabism and Marxism. Islamism has a profound impact on gender roles, fertility, consumption habits, as well as on the marginalization of local Christians and the censorship of movies, plays and books. Hyper-rigorous religious practice has spread, leading to a growing social pressure towards conformity, the best example of which is the donning of the veil by women. Voluntary Islamic organizations proliferate; the popularity of Islamist media (notably audio- and videotapes) grows;(1) and religious activism resurges as the major avenue for venting both protest and the craving for change. The cultural success of radical Islam resides, above all, in the strength of voluntary Islamic associations.

Although the movement has always known a high turnover rate due to attrition or legal and administrative pressures, a large pool of new recruits, mostly young urban males in their teens, seems always to be

available. As a result, the number of voluntary Islamic associations, far from declining, is on the rise; their activity, despite legal and bureaucratic harassment and some scandals (such as the bankruptcy of "Islamic" banks in Egypt), remains as strong as ever.

These associations remain the backbone of radical Islam. They carry out the work of da'wa, spreading the word and establishing a counter-society to propagate the movement's ideas, create support networks for members, and show that Islamic values can be fully implemented in the contemporary world. The continued vigor of the Islamic associations is a consequence, above all, of the budgetary woes of most Middle Eastern countries following the decline in oil prices after 1985, a decline that had implications not just for oil exporters but also for the poor countries, as Arab foreign aid dried up and employment for expatriate "guest workers" dwindled. For some states, these woes were further exacerbated by the demise of the Soviet Union and resultant loss of assured East European markets.

The revenue crisis helped the Islamists in two ways. First, regimes responded to this problem by breaking the

unwritten covenant agreed to with their subjects in the 1950s and 1960s in which the subjects relinquished their claims to basic human and civil rights in return for the state undertaking to provide them with education and health care, employment, and subsidies for such necessities as staples, cooking gas, and transportation. The poorest and the young suffered these retrenchments the hardest.

The "retreating state" of the 1990s thus creates disgruntled citizens by the legion: university graduates no longer assured of a government job; workers barely able to eke out a living, let alone save for a dowry and establish a family; or masses of recent rural migrants who lack such basics as shelter. All these groups provide a pool of possible recruits for Islamic associations.

Second, at a higher socio-economic level, Islamic associations have sprung up among professionals (doctors, lawyers, journalists) whose growing wealth and sophistication enable them to act independently. They first try to shape decisionmaking within their respective professions, then reach out and take positions on public affairs in general. Islamism also has had political impact, though indirect. It limits regimes' room of maneuver; for example, any plan to slash subsidies must take into account the menace of Islamic- instigated mass demonstrations, for mass public demonstrations protesting austerity measures have often occurred.<sup>(2)</sup> Family planning policies falter or advance in a haphazard manner due to the vituperations of Friday sermons in "free" (meaning non-governmental) mosques. National security and regional power are often handicapped by the need to allocate resources to counter-terrorism and the maintenance of public order. Da'wa associations, always known for their idealism and probity, are now more than ever in demand.

Eventually, the support networks thus created could serve as a base for an

eventual rise to political power. But they have not. Only in Sudan did the radicals, in alliance with the army, manage to wrest power and hold it. Otherwise, radical Islamic movements in Arab countries have shown a persistent inability to become the major political player. In Algeria especially, a violent insurgency has led to many deaths but not to a takeover of the government, and the same holds to a lesser extent in Egypt, and Tunisia. In Yemen and Jordan, they had a share in government as junior partners for brief periods, but exerted barely any influence on public policy. In all, the radicals have tried three avenues of approach to power-- violence, da'wa and parliament--with various degrees of failure.

## **VIOLENCE**

Many radical movements have taken recourse to violence. Hoping to follow the Iranian, Sudanese, and Afghan examples, they sought to seize power from above and thus control the major instruments "heretical modernity" (meaning the state). But, after two decades of mostly failed efforts, fewer and fewer radicals believe they can take power by force. The main obstacle has proven to be the stiff and increasingly effective resistance of existing governments.

Counter-terrorist operations have been devised with ingenuity and daring, relying on "sting" operations, intelligence, and changes in legislation (which permit preventive arrest, search without warrant, transfer of suspects to the jurisdiction of military courts). Security services in many Middle East countries cooperate with their counterparts in other Muslim countries (including Turkey and Pakistan) as well as in the West. Several dictatorial regimes physically wiped out the movement: Saddam Husayn of Iraq liquidated cadres in 1980 and quelled the March 1991 revolt; Hafiz al-Asad of Syria did so in the 1982 Hama massacre; Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi of

Libya did so everywhere except in Wadi al-Anjil.

Authoritarian regimes rarely go to these extremes (with the exception of Algeria), but have shown themselves capable of defending their resource base: oil and gas (in the Persian Gulf, Libya, Algeria), the Suez Canal in Egypt, and even the vulnerable tourism industry in many countries. Nor do the regimes neglect the battle for hearts and minds. To deprive Islamist violence of its legitimacy, they use the resources of the Islamic establishment (notably its audiotaped spokesmen) as well as the entertainment industry (the Egyptian one has produced such successful movies as "The Terrorist" and "Terror and Meatballs," as well as the television mini-series "Layla and the Dervishes").

The achievements of these counter-terrorist efforts vary. In Tunisia, the iron-fisted President Zayn al-'Abidin 'Ali has managed to stem the tide of terrorism in just a few years following his takeover from Habib Bourghiba in November 1987. In the Algerian civil war, the scales have been tipped against an Islamic victory. Both the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) and the Islamic Salvation Group (GIA) have suffered heavy losses and are shunned by the bulk of the population. No more can their members believe that "power is within the range of our Kalashnikovs." Protest, revenge, extortion are the all-pervasive goals of the violence which still goes on.

The Egyptian security services, in a sustained effort galvanized by the assassination attempt on Husni Mubarak in June 1995, have lowered the yearly level of violence to some 190 killed in 1996, compared to 1,100 in 1993, 700 in 1994 and 480 in 1995. While this deadly harvest is still greater than what Egypt experienced in the early years of the Mubarak presidency (30 killed per year), the improvement is evident. Further, the violence has been largely contained in Upper Egypt

(particularly the Malawi region) far away from the loci of power and the large population centers.

Endemic violence, of the Shiite variety, can still be detected on a smaller scale in Bahrain, and on a sporadic scale in Morocco and Yemen. Perhaps as a result of the widespread anti-terrorist activities, radical Islamic movements have experienced discord and disarray. It has reached the point that imprisoned leaders of the Jihad and Jama'a Islamiya organizations in Egypt have called for an end to all acts of terror, despite the opposition of many leaders who are in hiding or abroad. A similar call was launched by most leaders of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and its military arm, the AIS, only to be rejected out of hand by the band of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which continues to massacre women and children in the countryside south of Algiers.

Discord is not a novelty in the history of radical Islam, which has known various splits and internecine wars, but its extent today is greater than anything the radical Islamic movement has known over the last quarter century.

## CULTURAL INFILTRATION

If violence "re-Islamization from above"--is on the decline, how about "re-Islamization from below," the long-term infiltration into society's every nook and cranny as a way to gain eventual political control? This is, on the face of it, the Muslim Brethren strategy in Egypt and elsewhere. They engage in grassroots vigilantism to ban alcohol, pornography, and television satellite dishes, and to impose Islamic law, dress codes, and stricter regulation of tourists.

In Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Kuwait, fundamentalists conduct court fights and press campaigns against "permissive" writers and artists. They

mobilize popular protests against relations with Israel (a prominent topic in Jordan), launch strikes against the high cost of living (in Lebanon and Morocco), or demonstrate in favor of the constitution (in Bahrain).

Two key factors support this strategy. First, the Islamist message that the failure of the supposedly all-providing state is due to its moral dissoluteness and secularism is simple, effective, and it appeals to a deeply ingrained cultural tradition connecting private anxieties to public woes.

Second, the intricate yet elastic organizational structure of radical Islam is supple and decentralized with a minimalistic hierarchy. This sort of "enclave"<sup>(3)</sup> (as anthropologists call it) ensures equality of status among members without hampering decision-making; it does so by promoting charismatic local figures. In this way, it hampers repression and endows the members with a sense of empowerment and group solidarity.

The radicals are resourceful in finding new locales in which to operate: Afghanistan served as a recruiting ground for militants to gain experience, contacts, and skills, then return to their home countries; Bosnia served this same function until the Dayton agreement of 1995. The North African movements, persecuted at home, transferred much of their activity (including propaganda, support networks for terrorism and even some terror operations) to migrant communities in Western Europe. Hamas expanded financing and support ventures in both Europe and North America. The Egyptian Jihad organization moved some of its operations to Ethiopia (where it tried to assassinate President Mubarak) and Pakistan (where it blew up the Egyptian embassy).

Militants living in Europe have achieved something else: improved coordination between the Islamist movements of various countries. Migrant

workers recruited for the cause frequently shuttle across the Mediterranean and along with family gifts, used cars, and electrical equipment, they carry propaganda material produced in the West as well as funds. This supple network fulfills radical Islam's claim to be an international movement that encompasses the whole umma (population of Muslims).

Thus do religious luminaries from one country sometimes act as the higher legal and moral authority in another country: Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi of Egypt's Muslim Brethren lives in Qatar and serves as the supreme mufti for the Palestinian Hamas. Sheikh Ibn Qatada, a Palestinian-Jordanian living in London, is mufti for elements of the Algerian GIA. An Egyptian and former Afghan volunteer, Sheikh Abu Hamza, is one of the GIA's chief propagandists abroad.

The cause of radical Islam is advanced when regimes, realizing that the old nationalist and statist ideologies have lost their appeal, try to steal some of the radicals' thunder by relying on religious legitimacy. They infuse the school system with heavy doses of Islamic contents so that many children thus educated are later amenable to accept the radicals' world view, transmitted in what is for them a familiar discourse. Because schooling is predicated upon learning by rote (talqin), the young are conditioned to accept a dogmatic message with no sense of critical inquiry, just the mindset in which radicalism thrives.

All this helps explain the socio-cultural and organizational survival of radical Islam, which is in itself quite a feat, but why have these factors not brought about an increase in political power?

The Islamist movement aims to stop, before it is too late, the seemingly ineluctable and rapid slippage of the Middle East towards apostasy, modernity and secularism. By nature a long-term effort, this campaign can hardly enthuse a membership

made up in their crushing majority of people aged fifteen to twenty-five. Underlying the Muslim Brethren's message is that, thanks to the ongoing crisis of the state and their own resourcefulness, they ultimately will infiltrate the elites and create a popular base to exert pressure upon these secularized elites to change. At the end of the road, they would bring to power new Islamized elites (for example, judges who would interpret cases in the light of Islamic law, the Shari'a).

Experience has shown, however, that powerful, countervailing cultural forces operate: the audio-visual media emit hedonistic messages which undermine the notion "Islam is the solution." The consumer culture's attraction, the lure of "Made in USA" sneakers and movies, bewitches many amongst the shabab (youth) upon whom the elderly leaders had pinned their hopes. More dismaying yet, are the local knockoffs, such as the North African hybrid of Arabic and rock music, dubbed Rai. Increasingly, Islamist voices can be heard asking, "Perhaps all we can wage is a rearguard battle. Isn't it likely that our present achievements are doomed to death by attrition?"

## I. PARLIAMENT

The dead-end of violence and da'wa leads Islamists often to give higher consideration than before to the parliamentary option. The proponents of parliamentarism point to its many virtues. It permits them to introduce legal reforms, shapes policy making, allocates resources to causes close to the radicals' hearts (i.e. Islamic education). Opponents of parliamentarism retort with several arguments.

First, they are ideologically against it. For them, democracy is a value only for the despised "Westoxicated" elites. It cannot stop society's decline into infidelity, let alone reverse the curve. A system predicated

on the sovereignty of man, it runs counter to Islam's attachment to the sovereignty of God. It can be accepted at best as an instrument, and as that it dismally fails.

Second, in countries where "parties of a religious character" are illegal, such as Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt, the radicals are barred from running at all or are allowed to do so only under a subterfuge as independent candidates or in a joint list with another party. They are subject to constant harassment of da'wa activities through control of voluntary associations, professional organizations, unofficial mosques and preachers. Their activists do not enjoy freedom of expression and travel, may be subject to arbitrary search and detention, or may lose their government jobs.

In this respect, the distinction between Egypt and Jordan or between Tunisia and Morocco is simply one of degree. Many Islamists argue that Arab regimes offer at best a sort of democracia pactada of the type practiced in some Latin American countries during the transition period from military rule. These are democracies of what sociologists call "partial inclusion," built on shared rules of political competition including the right to vote and an electoral law designed to minimize the influence of extremist parties and favor more traditional-rural sectors (through a two-chamber system, for instance, as in Morocco and Jordan). These are top-down affairs whose creation presupposes the opposition's willingness to content itself indefinitely with second-tier cabinet portfolios.

Some religious organizations would be included in the system as is the Algerian Muslim Brethren, led by Sheikh Nahnah, now running in the 1997 elections under the banner of the Social Movement for Peace. Others such as the Algerian FIS, would not be permitted to run, though its members

would one day perhaps be allowed to participate as individuals.

Third, skeptics note that no Arab opposition party has ever won power or even won a plurality through the ballot; electoral returns are, in fact, tampered with almost everywhere. And, in the one instance in which a party came closest to doing so, the first round of the June 1991 elections in Algeria when FIS won a plurality, the results were annulled by the military.

Fourth, they say that Islamists have precious little to show for playing the parliamentary game and conclude that participation in government is an error. Their impact on legislation and policy is paltry. Sadat had promised enactment of *taqin al-Shari'a* (vetting existing laws for conformity with Islamic jurisprudence) but the Muslim Brethren of Egypt never succeeded even in pushing it through parliamentary committees. In Jordan, the large faction of the Islamic Action Front (a.k.a. Muslim Brethren) could neither block the signing of the "sacrilegious" peace treaty with Israel nor development of close ties with the Jewish state. The same holds true of *Jama'a Islamiya* (Sunni) and the Hizbullah (Shi'i) deputies in Lebanon and their counterparts in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Morocco. In Yemen, the *Tajammu al-Islah* party is still smarting from the debacle of the May 1997 elections and its subsequent ousting from the government.

Moreover, when an Islamic party does cross the apparently critical threshold and join the government, it has to make do with minor ministries where its efforts are quite often hampered. As a result, the party in question is discredited with its own electorate either as a sell-out or as ineffectual, and loses votes in the elections following its oustings from government; this happened in Jordan in 1993 and in Yemen in 1997. Further supporting the skeptical view, last but not least, is the Turkish case, where the radical Necmettin Erbakan was actually

permitted to become prime minister but was stymied in every initiative he took and forced out of power within a year of coming to power.

Parliamentary initiatives create much discord. Within Tunisia's *Nahda* movement, a minority led by founder Rashid al-Ghannushi (now in exile in Great Britain), demanded a change in the movement's platform and its embrace of democracy; rebuffed, he set up a rival organization, the Tunisian Islamic Front (FIT). Young Muslim Brethren activists in Egypt are endeavoring to establish a new party (named *Wasat*, the median way), that endorses the parliamentary option despite the opposition of the Muslim Brethren leadership. Sheikh 'Imad al-Faluji, a founder of the Palestinian Hamas, established the dissident Islamic Salvation Party that competed in the 1996 elections, and he then joined Arafat's administration.

Yet in countries where this very option has long been pursued, it is now a controversial issue. In Jordan the Muslim Brethren decided by a majority vote in the leadership, and under pressure from mid- and low-level militants, to boycott the November 1997 elections. The predicament for fundamentalist Islam is not solely of the regimes' making. Even those liberal circles in the Arab ruling elites favoring a transition to democracy must take into account the antidemocratic nature of radical Islam, which being the most important opposition force in society, might be the beneficiary of such a transition, leading to an Iranian- (or Sudanese-) style regime. This scenario, feared by the modern middle class, recalls the situation in Latin America in the 1980s, when Marxist-Leninist parties were the ones likely to benefit from the replacement of military rule by democracy. Whether to accept *democracia pactada* Arab-style is not only the major question exercising the radicals, but also a major concern for many in Arab ruling elites.

## BEYOND APOLOGETICS

Some independent-minded thinkers within the radical orbit have recently set this predicament in relief. Perhaps Munir Shafiq, a Christian convert to Islam from northern Jordan living in Lebanon, has done so with the greatest insight. Long active in the Palestinian movement Fatah, Shafiq later abjured nationalism and Marxism, converted to Islam, and became a widely read radical Islamist thinker. If radical Islam wishes to allay the fears it generates and join the political process, he writes, it must undergo a transformation, not a face lift. It must wholeheartedly and as a matter of principle accept pluralism and toleration (in the modern sense, first elaborated by Spinoza). In this he includes the notion of alternation of power as well as basic human and civil rights for people of all hues and convictions. Shafiq calls for a rigorously honest rethinking of ideology and practice; mere window-dressing, like the recourse to apologetic arguments, will not do, he warns.

Arguments maintaining that Islam equals democracy in that it holds to the principle of shura (consultation to elect a caliph) do not suffice. For one thing, apologetics are historically inaccurate: the shura was rarely implemented even in the Golden Age, and even then it encompassed notables only. For another, verbal juggling of this sort would never convince hard-bitten rulers, their ever-suspicious security services, or the liberal middle class not after the experiences of Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan, not after the long drawn-out confrontation with the violent brand of Muslim radicalism.

What is required, say Shafiq and his followers, is a serious effort of *ijtihad* (legal reinterpretation) to infuse the shura notion with modern pluralistic values. Furthermore, such values should then be injected into radical Islam's own internal mode of

governance, which is at present autocratic, if not worse. It's a tall order. Some rethinking along these lines has been sketched out, but more remains to be done, as Shafiq would be the first to acknowledge.(4)

Moreover, voices like Shafiq's are, for the moment, solitary. Most radical groups who choose the parliamentary option are content to mouth the clichés about "shura equals democracy." (5) They dodge issues such as the status of religious minorities or whether freedom of expression encompasses agnostics, atheists, or holders of iconoclastic ("heretical") Muslim doctrines. They have come up with no constitutional-political guarantees to ensure alternation.

No wonder that all this is not enough to convince regimes or liberal public opinion, whose deep distrust of Islamists harks back to the days of Muslim Brethren violence in the 1950s. That Hasan al-Turabi, the most prolific writer on shura in the 1980s, has become a blood-stained leader of the present Sudanese regime, certainly does not add to the credibility of the allegedly pro-democratic spokesmen in Islamist ranks.

When the exiled Tunisian leader Rashid al-Ghannushi announced a few years ago his conversion to democracy, then split the Nahda (Renaissance) movement he had founded over this issue, his past involvement in violence against the Neo-Destour Party was still a fresh memory. Doubts about his sincerity came not just from the autocratic Tunisian president and his henchmen but also from the Tunisian League of Human Rights, a bold opposition force. The Egyptian government denied a legal permit to the Wasat Party (the matter is still under appeal) and liberal opinion split over whether to believe the party's declared commitment to democracy.

Poor as the Arabic-speaking radicals' prospects for seizing power may be, it would be wrong to view them as doomed to

political failure. Even in their present anti-democratic mindset, their top-down options may get a new lease on life due to changes in the economic and political environment. Power could yet be within their reach, through bullets or ballots, resulting from a military defeat, a succession crisis of the regime, or a drastic worsening of the economic situation.

## NOTES

1. Emmanuel Sivan, "Eavesdropping on Radical Islam," *Middle East Quarterly*, March 1995, pp. 13-24.
2. In Algeria (1988); Egypt (1977, 1981, 1984, 1987); Jordan (1989, 1996); Kuwait (1989, 1990); Morocco (1984, 1988, 1996); South Yemen (1986, 1990); Sudan (1984, 1985, 1988).
3. Emmanuel Sivan, "The Enclave Culture," M.E. Marty and R.S. Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalism Comprehended* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 11-63.
4. Munir Shafiq, *Al-Nizam ad-Duwali al-Jadid wa-Khiyar al-Muwajaha* (Beirut: Dar al-Nashir, 1994); idem., *Hawla Nazariyyat al-Taghyir*, (Beirut: Dar al-Nashir, 1995). See also, *Majmu'at min al-'Ulama'* [a pseudonym, possibly sheikhs Jamal Hammami and Jamil Salim], *Al-Islam wa'l-Musharaka fi'l-Hukm* (Nablus, n.p. 1996).
5. Rashid Ghannushi, *Al-Hurriyat al-'Amma fi'l-Islam*, (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiya, 1993); 'Ali Benhajj (Algerian), *Risala ila Wazir al-Ittisal*, (n.p.: 1995), pp. 53-58; Abu-l'Ala' Madi (founder of the Egyptian al-Wasat party) interview, *Al-Hayat* Dec. 25, 1996; Mohammad al-'Awwa (Egyptian Muslim Brethren), "Al-Ta'addudiya min Manzur Islami," *Minbar al-Hiwar* (Winter 1991), pp. 129 ff.

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