AMBIVALENCE IN CONTEMPORARY SUNNI ISLAMISM – A CHALLENGE FOR WESTERN LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES?

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ambivalence of contemporary Sunni Islamism and its implications for Western liberal democracies. Its main objective is to clarify how Sunni Islamism operates as both a religious and political ideology—rooted in Islamic doctrine yet shaped by modern secular frameworks—thus challenging the conceptual boundaries of liberal democratic thought. The research addresses two central questions: *To what extent can Sunni Islamism be considered an authoritarian secular ideology rather than a purely religious movement? How does this dual identity influence its relationship with Western liberalism?* The originality of the paper lies in interpreting Islamism not as a religious deviation or reactionary force, but as a modern ideological project employing religious discourse for political mobilization and legitimacy.

Keywords: Islamism; Islam; Ideology; Secularism; Authoritarianism.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the concept of Islamism has become familiar in Western academia and Western political discourse. It is often linked with political upheavals and extremist violence using Islamic rhetoric. However, do we fully understand what this ambiguous concept refers to? Should it be seen as a unique aspect of Islam or as a secular ideology? Islamism is not simply an abstract representation of the Islamic faith or an exaggeration of Islam. While it originates from that context, it operates on a different level. This essay will analyse contemporary Sunni Islamism as a movement that, like any other social and political movement, has a specific doctrine. It draws inspiration from a secular ideology, using specific forms of political action to achieve its goals. However, there is a significant distinction: It is an ideology with religious principles that are put into immediate practice, meaning these principles are used as tools to analyse social and political conflicts, challenging the Western concepts of political liberty. Contemporary Sunni Islamism is a political ideology that formulates governance based on the Quran, seeking the establishment of an Islamic political entity. However, the extent of religion's influence on this political ideology is yet to be determined. This essay aims to illuminate these issues by providing a conceptual analysis of the various Western frameworks for contemporary Islamism, an ideology that presents religious precepts that seek to be transformed into immediate praxis, a challenge for Western liberal democracies.

This article aims to delve into the complex nature of contemporary Sunni Islamism in Western liberal democracies realm. It challenges common non-Muslim Western perceptions that often simplify it as a form of religious radicalism or extremism. Sunni Islamism is not just a result of religious fervour but is also a political ideology that combines religious principles with secular methods of social and political mobilization. Drawing on various theoretical frameworks, this study examines the intellectual roots and sociopolitical dynamics of Sunni Islamism, tracing its historical evolution from a reactionary force within the Muslim world to a global phenomenon that confronts modernity. Through a critical analysis of Western epistemological approaches to Islamism, the paper identifies two major interpretive frameworks: the modernist approach, which views contemporary Sunni Islamism

as a regressive reaction against Western influence and modernization, and the postmodernist approach, which frames it as a quest for cultural identity and autonomy in an increasingly globalized world. In addition, Social Movement Theory is applied to explore how contemporary Sunni Islamism functions as a political and social movement, mobilizing resources, framing narratives, and organizing strategies much like other secular ideological movements.

The main argument of the paper is that contemporary Sunni Islamism, while rooted in the Islamic tradition, goes beyond religious boundaries to function as an authoritarian secular ideology, distinct from traditional interpretations of Islam. Unlike classical religious movements, contemporary Sunni Islamism uses Islamic doctrine as a means to achieve political goals, particularly the establishment of an Islamic state governed by Sharia law. This conversion of religious principles into a structured political program represents a unique blend of religious and secular ideologies, which is the fundamental ambivalence at the heart of contemporary Islamism.

This article seeks to clarify the often-ambiguous relationship between Sunni Islamism and Islam. While Islamism heavily draws on Islamic doctrine, it cannot be reduced to a mere extension of religious practice. Instead, it represents a political ideology with a religious façade, using the Quran and the Sunnah as sources of legitimacy for its political ambitions. In this way, the study challenges simplistic categorizations of Islamism as either purely religious or purely political, offering instead a nuanced understanding of its dual identity.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, this research combines comparative conceptual analysis with interpretive-historical inquiry. It systematically examines Western theoretical frameworks—from modernist to postmodern and sociological perspectives—alongside primary Islamist writings by figures such as Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, and Abû'l-Alâ Al-Mawdûdî. The analysis proceeds through a multi-layered interpretive method: (1) a textual and hermeneutic reading of Islamist sources to uncover the ideological and theological logic underpinning political Islam; (2) a comparative theoretical evaluation

of Western academic interpretations of Islamism; and (3) a socio-historical contextualization of Islamism's evolution in relation to colonialism, modernization, and globalization. This methodological integration allows for a nuanced understanding of Islamism as both a doctrinally grounded and politically adaptive phenomenon, offering a novel contribution to the study of religiously inspired political ideologies and their tension with liberal-democratic thought.

BACKGROUND

Contemporary Sunni Islamism is an eclectic movement that, like contemporary Shiite Islamism (whose maximum representation reflects the current Iranian constitutional theocracy), actively aims not only to affirm and promote the faith but also the creation of Islamic-inspired governing formulas. It is a historically determined and dated movement (20th and 21st centuries), framed within a reactive and disruptive phenomenon within the Muslim world (Roy, 1995). Between the 18th and 19th centuries, the three great Islamic empires (Ottoman, Indian and Persian) declined due to demographic problems, economic crises, and pressure from European colonising powers (Dale, 2010; Lewis, 2003; Quataert, 2005). As a reaction, in the first period, throughout the Muslim world, an Islamic "awakening" was sought – from Saudi Arabia (with Abd al-Wahhab, 1703-1792) to Nigeria (with 'Uhman Da Fodio, 1754- 1817) and in the middle of the 19th century, another reactive period emerged, the "Islamic reformism" (*al-Islah*), which lasted until around the Second World War. Some currents stand out at this stage, such as Salafism or the *tanzimat* movement, which aimed at a political reform of the State (Lauziere, 2015; Shaw & Shaw, 1977). Finally, still within this reactive line, there is contemporary Islamism and its various forms, whose echo dates to the 1920s. The driving force was the exclusion of Islam in the founding of new post-Ottoman Empire nation-states, as well as the spread of modern Western ideologies (nationalism and socialism) in the Muslim world. The intellectual solidification and true reification of contemporary Islamism will only occur after the 1960s. It is easy to identify three distinct

forms of Islamism. One is more political; another is characterised as having a more missionary and less secular attitude; and a third has armed violence as its source. This article focuses on the first.

TWO NON—MUSLIM WESTERN EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO ISLAMISM

In Western academia, two significant lines of thought seek to justify the advent of Sunni Islamism: one that could be defined as "modern" and the other as "post-modern". In the first line, the tendency is to justify Islamism as a reactive and regressive movement, carried out by intellectuals and less favoured urban social classes, against the westernisation of Muslim societies. It starts from the idea of a crisis that arises from a deep feeling of humiliation in the face of the failure of the once-great Islamic civilisation. The answer translates into a return to the origins and an abrupt and brutal refusal of everything with a Western character. Some authors, such as Bernard Lewis (2002, 2003) or Samuel Huntington (1996), emphasise the shock and confrontation between the pre-Enlightenment Muslim world and Western modernity. Roughly speaking, both associated this rise with historical and structural factors. To this end, they considered several historical facts: the fall of the imperial power of the Caliphate – a symbol of unity among Muslims; the effects of Soviet occupations; the legacy of the Crusades; or the massive presence of Western culture in Islamic countries.

These episodes are also intertwined with frustration and humiliation over the perceived impossibility of 'modernisation'. According to these authors, the clash between the discovery of a certain Western way of life and radical interpretations of Islam led to the quest for new political 'prescriptions'. In the same vein, Olivier Roy (1995, 2004) and John Gray (2003, 2008) view the phenomenon as a regressive modern utopia with a more secular than religious character. It becomes latent the very Western idea of individual and pessimistic revolt as a by-product of the conflicts accompanying globalisation. These authors see Islamism as a political-religious hybrid that fuses ideas of apocalyptic myth with utopian hope.

On the other hand, the second interpretative line of Western academia presents Islamism as a reactive manifestation of postmodernity. Here, Islam is perceived as a response to a loss of identity, cultural autonomy, and political or moral alternative. It is a quest for difference in the universalised world of Western values. In other words, postmodernity created a relativistic vacuum that fostered scepticism and irrationalism in the pursuit of certainty. Broadly, according to the 'post-modern' reading, it is in this condition that the basis of some contemporary religious radicalism lies. In the same interpretative line, some view the Islamic reactive phenomenon of the 20th century as a kind of third phase of the anti-colonial struggle (Burgat & Dowell, 1993). There was the political and economic. This is the identitarian and cultural (Castells, 2004; Esposito, 1984, 2003; Gellner, 1981, 1992; Kepel, 1992, 2000 and 2005). Essentially, the construction of contemporary Islamic identity is a reaction against unattainable modernisation, whether capitalist or socialist, the adverse effects of globalisation, and the collapse and post-colonial nationalist projects.

SUNNI ISLAMISM AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

These two approaches to Islam, the "modern" and the "post-modern", can also be added as another, more sociological, which applies concepts developed within the Social Movements Theory. Sociologists such as Quintan Wiktorowicz (2004a, 2004b and 2005), Asef Bayat (2005), Roel Meijer (2009) and Thomas Olesen (2009) do not approach Islamism as a monolithic system. However, they also do not read it as a specificity of the Islamic world in reaction. Making comparative readings with the mechanics of other social movements, they focus on Islamism's support instruments and social dynamics. In other words, attention is paid, for example, to the way disputes and rivalries are organised, how ideas are framed and propagated, and how hatred and feelings of injustice are collectivised. There is also a focus on the tactics and strategies adopted in the face of exogenous changes, which, according to the Social Movements Theory, are seen as creating opportunities or limitations.

Therefore, when analysing contemporary Islamism, three processes common to other social movements can be emphasised in this line: resource

mobilisation, the decision-making process, and the ideological framework. Here, neither cultural shock nor deprivation or frustration explains adherence to Islamism. Furthermore, Islam itself is not a determining factor. Above all, the aim is to avoid the stereotype and type of "essentialisation" of the two previous lines of approach. However, this escape often falls into a kind of "socialisation" of the entire process, limiting the analysis.

The observance of Islamism is due to a rational choice process with a logically well-defined strategy, where costs and risks are weighed. In other words, the adherence to the Islamist movement is not the result of a blind and irrational choice typical of a fanatical religious cult. It is an option for a purely strategic logic motivated by a narrative dimension that reveals the underlying ideology. However, and this is a characteristic feature, this rationale belonging to the collective presupposes the existence of a narrative and metapolitical rhetoric that unifies and catalyses different pretensions and feelings. It should be noted that what defines a movement (cohesion and combination of ideas and actions) depends mainly on leadership and ideology (Tilly, 1978). The ideological framework, perceived via the discursive element, is a variable to consider in understanding the movement. The discourse is built around two pillars: aversion to Western modernity (which includes aspects as broad as democracy, nation-state, or capitalism) and a return to the political function of religion.

However, it is essential to remember that Islamism is not an extension of Islam, in this perspective. Although it lives and comes from an Islamic context, it is a social movement with metapolitical rhetoric and a secular and subversive nature. It is a movement of rupture because it desires change and the annihilation of the opponent. It aims to change the status quo due to an incompatibility with the current situation's values and legal, social, and political order. The main objective is the establishment of an Islamic State (*dawla Islamiyya*).

AN INCONGRUENT DEFINITION OF SUNNI ISLAMISM
Until the Iranian revolution of 1979, the term Islamism was virtually absent from the Western academic or political lexicon or the media. It was with the

emergence of figures like Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989) in Iran, a defender of political Islam and a constitutional theocracy, that the world was introduced to new forms of political manifestation drawing on Islam. This necessitated the conceptualisation of these manifestations. From the Western perspective, it was a new 'Islam' that was assumed, distinct from the Islam known until then. (Kepel, 2000 and 2005)

The terminology Islamism is still an ambiguous conceptual creation of Western academia to encompass notions of manifestations as varied as "Islamic fundamentalism", "Islamic revivalism", "political Islam", or "Islamic activism". These notions help characterise the movement only as a whole but are far from synonymous with Islamism.

For Muslims, the concept of Islamism or Islamists is not common. This term, translated as *Islamiyyûn* (masculine plural), does not exist in the Quran. Theorists of classical Sunni Islam (from the four most prominent theological schools – Hanafi, Malaki, Shafi and Hanbali), followers of Koranic terminology, do not use this term. Even reformers such as Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92), founder of Wahhabism, al-Afghani (1838-97) or Rashid Rida (1865-1935) never used the term (Mozzafari, 2007). Neither the writings of Hassan al-Banna (1906-48), founder of the "Muslim Brotherhood", nor those of Al-Mawdûdî or Sayyid Qutb refer to Islamism (Esposito, 1983; Mawdûdî, n.d.; Moussalli, 1994; Qutb, 2001 and 2009). Not even the Shiite leader Khomeini (1902-89) himself used the term. The Sudanese Hasan al-Turabi (1932-2016) stood out, who, like Western theorists, considered "Islamists" (*Islamiyyûn*) to be Muslim politicians for whom Islam is a solution, whether as a religion and government or as a constitution and law (Mozaffari, 2007; Turabi, 2003).

It's not sufficient to confine Islamism within the realms of fundamentalism or revivalism. There is an essentialist nature of a return to Sacred Text and an imposition of religious precepts, seemingly distorted. However, this notion extends beyond the religious component. There is a political nature, but it is deeply rooted in the religious dimension and doctrine, making the definition of Islamism as political Islam seem redundant or incomplete. It's important to note that, in the practice of Islam, there is no Western Westphalian separation between religion and politics. Secularisation is not

a reality in this religion (Gellner, 1994). The concept of 'political Islam' is a North American coinage, popularised in the 1980s due to the prominent role that Shiite religious leaders and scholars (*ulama*) began to play at the government level (International Crisis Group, 2005).

In fact, for most Muslims, Islam is a matter of the public sphere, as doctrine beyond faith is also normative. The doctrine, inseparable from the law (*Shariah*), postulates and transmits legal prescriptions and moral impositions to the Muslim community (*Ummah*). For Ernst Gellner, Islam is a "project of a social order (...) This means that there is a set of rules, eternal, divinely ordained, and independent of the will of men, which defines an appropriate ordering of society" (1981: 1). It is an orthopraxy – of a religious Islam (*din*), regulating way of life (*dunya*) and intervening as a State (*dawla*). In this way, religious leaders always assume the role of theologians and jurists. The executive power is subordinate to the legislative power (divine law), and these leaders end up playing the role of guardians of moral and political integrity (Gellner, 1994). In Islam, there are no canons, only divine law per se and addressed to the *Ummah*. In this sense, it seems pleonastic to speak of "political Islam". Furthermore, this expression presupposes the existence of an apolitical Islam, which would have existed before 1979. It is a fallacious argument.

Islamism seeks, unapologetically, to shape all spheres of collective life. Moreover, what happens is the binding acceptance of a divine law (*Shariah*), immutable, which does not tolerate others of human origin. The Quran and Sunnah are the basis of this law. The difference is that Islamists see Islam not as a mere religion or just a religious doctrine but as a political ideology that can change different spheres of society. Islamist leaders use terms that are very un-Islamic (and very Westernised), such as civil society, ideology, State, or sovereignty (Roy, 2004).

"Islamic activism" may be an excellent approximation of Islamism. In effect, the movement seeks to include all lines of action that can influence a society – from political to cultural. However, "activism" refers to an extraordinary action that seeks social change, which does not cease to be so when it implies regularity. When change is achieved, or action for change is instituted, the idea of activism no longer makes sense. Islam is then a kind

of active religiosity, as opposed to a "passive" religiosity, which takes on a politicised form.

THREE SUNNI FOUNDING FATHERS

The echoes of contemporary Islamism were felt especially in the 1920s with Hassan al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al Muslimun*) in Egypt. However, it was from the 1950s and 1960s onwards, with the theories and writings of the Pakistani Abû'l-Alâ Al-Mawdûdî (1903-1979) and the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), that the ideology underlying the movement gained body and strength. Through them, we can understand the secular matrix of contemporary Islamism.

Al-Banna found in the application of Sharia the solution to the problems that afflicted colonial Egypt, which was increasingly distant from Islamic religiosity. The Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the vanguard of a movement that had a political purpose as its goal (Lia, 1998). For them, Allah was the objective; the Prophet was their leader, the Quran was their constitution, *jihad* was their path and martyrdom was their hope (Hussain, 2010). Al-Banna wanted to re-Islamize Egypt.

For this to happen, adopting the Islamic trinity (*din, dunya* and *dawla)* in practice would be necessary. This "extreme orthopraxy" then appears as an ideological system that merges and subsumes State, culture and religion. It constitutes a "progressive" challenge against the modernization of Islam that was taking place at the time and which, according to them, tended to Westernize trustworthy Muslim precepts. Based on an archetypal reading of the Prophet's life, Hassan al-Banna recreates a method of transforming power. In the Sunnah, besides being the basis of jurisprudence for the Sharia*,* one can find a model for transforming power and fighting against the non-Islamic world. The founder of the Ikhwan divided the Prophet's mission into three distinct phases: an introductory phase, a preparatory phase and an execution phase.

In the first phase, concepts and ideas are disseminated among the population through prayers, writings, civic action and other practical methods. In the next phase, the most reliable cadres are identified to carry out

and sustain the struggle to conquer power. It is the time for solidifying and identifying the relationships between hierarchies and the time for political and military doctrine and discipline. During this phase, only those who demonstrate absolute loyalty and the ability to carry out the assigned tasks are admitted to membership in the movement. Finally, the execution phase involves combat and efforts to achieve objectives – here, commitment and obedience to the chain of command become essential. With al-Banna, therefore, there is an instrumentality of political violence that seeks legitimacy in Islamic precepts. In his thinking, the rupture of a conjunctural order is latent in a pure dialectical process between destruction and preservation. Thus, starting in Egypt, this organization established strategic relationships with mosques, civic associations, and community organizations to influence potential activists with revolutionary ideas (Hussain, 2010).

Qutb, a member of the *Ikhwan*, advocates in his works a return to the religious sources of Islam to legitimize, based on a living hermeneutic reading, political action. In his work *Zilal al Qur'an*, or "In the Shadow of the Qur'an", a commentary on the sacred Qur'an, Qutb translates the inerrancy of the sacred text into modern analytical tools applied to social organization – ranging from politics, through economics and ending with faith (Qutb, 2009). He demonstrates Islam as a universal system. In this way, he demands a contextual reinterpretation of man in his time (without altering the imaginary principles), making it applicable in contemporary Islam (Qutb, 2001).

It revolves around four basic concepts – *jahiliyya* (age of ignorance), the idea of *hakimmiyya* (absolute sovereignty of God), *tali'a* (need to create an advance guard) and *jihad* (fighting in the way of God – a subject we will look at in detail later). For Qutb, the Muslim world has been regressing, finding itself in the same state of religious ignorance as Mecca – *jahiliyya* – when the Prophet began his pilgrimage. For the Egyptian, this situation is due to the growing influence of other values in Islam, namely Western values. The concept of *jahiliyya,* a term that appears in the Quran associated with the Prophet's period in Medina (after the *hijra*), is full of political, intellectual and moral connotations. It is a Qur'anic concept that is used as an antithetical

formula to the idea of sovereignty. According to Qutb, sovereignty, if based on Islamic precepts, is the highest form of governmental and legal authority.

In other words, submission to sovereignty is here identified as being Islam itself. Sovereignty comes only from Allah (*hakimmiyya*), who exercises it through the Sharia. Naturally, whoever, in the exercise of power, does not govern in accordance with God's Law, acts against Him and against the community of believers, the *Ummah*. This type of ruler thus exercises power based on a form of idolatry, thus justifying and legitimizing his overthrow. Revolt against a power that is considered impious becomes legitimate. For Qutb, sovereignty and authority come solely and exclusively from God (*hakimmiyya*), by Whom men govern. He advocated a revolution that, like Marxist-Leninist revolutions, depended on a vanguard (*tali'a*) capable of fighting for the construction of an Islamic State.

It is a revolutionary vanguard whose militants should be the purest believers (Back, 2001). Their mission, through popular support or clandestine infiltration into the state apparatus, would be to show the path that the community of believers should follow, to lead them to abandon *jahiliyyah* (Qutb, 2001). For Qutb, the role of the vanguard group is crucial: in addition to acting as an interlocutor in the ongoing process, its militants are men of arms and men of prayer, that is, fighters and interpreters of the Quran and the Sunnah.

The legal rigidity imposed by scholarly clerics should be overcome by an open and dynamic legal-religious hermeneutics, as if it were a kind of Islamic law in motion (*fiqh haraqi*) (Roy, 1995). This should be based on the interpretation of the militants of the vanguard group who would apply it according to the context and social reality. The revolutionary action of the avant-garde would then create a new normativity and a "theology" applied to the earthly world, with the Medina model as an archetypal example.

Neither al-Banna nor Qutb rules out the use of violence to achieve their objectives. The use of this violence is seen by both as a kind of *ultima ratio*. And this is where the main difference lies between Islamists and jihadists, for whom violence is *prima* and not *ultima ratio*. But, above all, Qutb calls for the fight against internal enemies. That is, he calls for the fight against

the secular governments of Muslim countries, which are accused of acting in accordance with values that are contrary to the Islamic faith. Therefore, they are considered impious, since they limit God's sovereignty over men. They do not govern according to the *hakimmiyya* precept, and therefore they are tyrants, and therefore there is legitimacy for their overthrow.

Qutb, like al-Banna, considered Mohammed a timeless symbol of seizing power—a historical precedent that could revolutionize the Islamic world if resurrected. However, unlike al-Banna, Qutb categorized the process into two stages (Qutb, 2001 and 2009; Habeck, 2006). The initial stage involved the Prophet's thirteen years in Mecca, during which he peacefully attempted to convert non-believers. Qutb viewed this period as a time of spreading the faith. He emphasized the importance of avoiding violence, focusing instead on uniting and educating believers, preparing them for subsequent phases. Following his time in Mecca, the Prophet journeyed to Medina in what is known as the *hijra*. Qutb interpreted this migration as an effort to establish a new community based on Islamic principles.

The next phase refers to Mohammed's stay in Medina. This is when the first Islamic State was established, although it was still in its early stages. During this time, the Prophet led an armed offensive against the non-believers, and the Battle of Badr in 624 was a significant event for all Muslims, as it marked the point where a small group of Muslims defeated the powerful Quraysh tribe. Essentially, the small community of believers, known as the "vanguard", triumphed over the *jahiliyyah*. This battle was the first between Muslims and non-Muslims. Following this victory, the Muslim community grew, and Mohammed returned triumphantly to Mecca, making the city the center of the newly formed Islamic State. Additionally, in less than two centuries, the Islamic world extended from the Indian subcontinent to the Iberian Peninsula.

Qutb argued that the Muslim world had become "decadent." He believed that to revive the glory of the past and overcome modern *jahiliyyah*, certain stages needed to be recreated. This revival should start with the appeal (*dawah*) to authentic Islam. Then, a group of true believers would likely form a group (*jamaat*) or party (*hizb*) to seize power and govern according

to divine precepts. Like Prophet Muhammad's followers, this group should migrate, isolate themselves from the surrounding *jahiliyyah,* and establish the beginnings of an Islamic state (*dawla islamiyya*). Islamic law would then be applied to the public and private lives of its citizens. This concept envisions the initiation of a new Medina and eventually a return to Mecca. It is probable that the creation of this "Medina" would be accompanied by further conflicts and an increase in the number of believers joining the movement. Many Islamist groups have adopted Qutb's method and interpretation of the Prophet's life as a means of gaining power. The notion that true Islam is scarce and needs to be reinstated has influenced numerous Islamic ideologists. From this perspective, the world is viewed as being in a situation similar to that of Mecca during the time of Prophet Muhammad, necessitating the use of *dawah* to generate opposition. The process of appealing and uniting as a group (*jamaat* or *Hizb*) to seize power is a defining feature of Islamists groups.

Mawdûdî believed that the decline of Muslim power in South Asia and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire were mostly caused by French and British colonialism. Mawdûdî, who was a journalist and educated in the Deobandi school, advocated for a revolutionary form of Islam, a concept that later gained widespread appeal.

Mawdûdî, like al-Bana and later Qutb, firmly believed that Muslim society needed to be rid of all Western influence, shaping his entire ideology. During the rise of post-World War I nationalism and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, he rejected any Islamic claims to create a State based on the Western model, proposing instead the increasing Islamization of societies through a State that would exercise all its sovereignty in the name of the Prophet. By legitimizing power in God, Mawdûdî aimed to fully restore the religious dimension in human society, which had been relegated to the individual sphere under the influence of Western society. This "reestablishment" would easily take place once the link between the lordly dominion of God (*al-rububiyya*) and the servitude of man to God (*al-ubudiyya*) was restored (Meddeb, 2005). Similarly, Qutb, with the idea of *hakimmiyya*, emphasized that sovereignty came from Allah and did not emerge from the people, conventions, contracts, or a hegemonic group. Thus, he considered all

other forms of political governance as illegitimate and under his influence, the Islamic religion tended to become further politicized (Kepel, 2002).

In 1937, Mawdûdî became involved in politics. In 1941, he founded the *Jama'at i Islami* party, which remains active in Pakistan and is considered the vanguard of the Islamic revolutionary movement he promoted. This movement, influenced by the Leninist model, aimed to establish a contemporary Islamic State by following the example of the first Muslims who separated themselves from the impious people of Mecca during the *hijra* .

Kepel suggests that Mawdûdî was the first in the 20th century to theorize a strategic political action based on the original rupture that founded Islam (2002). This approach was influenced by the political actions seen in the Western world during the 1930s. Despite Mawdûdî 's arrests, the *Jama'at i Islami* maintained its legal status and operated within the Pakistani political structure, but it was unable to gain a significant position through democratic means. The party's political program attracted mainly a specific lower middle class that had recently become literate, like the situation in Egypt.

His legacy is characterized by the politicization of the founding rupture of Islam and the urgent need for an Islamic State to counter the influence of the Western world. This ideological framework has been critiqued for encouraging its followers to spread death and destruction worldwide (Meddeb, 2005).

The "youth bulge" that many Muslim-majority societies experienced during the twentieth century played a significant role in the consolidation of Islamism by generating both social pressures and political opportunities for Islamist movements. Rapid population growth produced a large cohort of young people who faced limited economic prospects, urban unemployment, and political marginalization, creating fertile ground for ideological mobilization (Roy, 1994, 1995, 2004). In the absence of effective state structures and amid disillusionment with secular nationalist regimes, Islamist movements offered these youths a sense of purpose, belonging, and moral clarity. They provided social services, education, and networks of solidarity that secular institutions often failed to deliver, thereby channeling generational frustration into a framework of religious activism and political resistance.

Consequently, the youth bulge not only expanded Islamism's social base but also infused it with a dynamism and militancy that reshaped the movement's ideological and organizational trajectory across the Muslim world (Fuller, 2003; LaGraffe, 2012; Roy, 1994).

RELIGIOUS PRECEPTS OF A SECULAR AUTHORITARIAN IDEOLOGY?

In this article ideology and religion are not seen as opposites. They are analysed separately to avoid confusion with political or secular religions. Throughout the text, ideology is presented as the foundation of political pragmatism. The term "secular" is used to show the absence of religion in this ideological framework. This helps illustrate the autonomy of Islamism from Islam.

Authoritarian ideological systems are compelling bases for mobilisation and legitimation[1]. They trace the path of a community and guide socio-political behaviour in favour of this path (Cassinelli, 1960; Gentille, 2013). In this sense, for western academia, Islamism can also be seen as an authoritarian ideology, as it presents itself according to a total life formula, where socio-political and economic actions are well marked (Tibi, 2008). As highlighted earlier, there is a matrix that shapes all spheres of society in favour of a cause. However, idiosyncratically, moving away from secular aridity will take the principles and foundations of the Islamic religion, transforming them into ideological precepts used in political rhetoric.

In short, Islamism still meets all the requirements of a secular ideology, but it tends to sacralise its doctrinal essence, which comes from Islam discursively. Therefore, legitimacy tends to be stronger and more mobilising, as it is the drink of ideological and religious dimensions. This perspective

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[1] Authoritarian ideological systems, tend to appear as virtuous and messianic – a formula that is applicable and determining to all areas of society. Its praxis, or its exercise of formal power, is based, most of the time, on ideological dogmatism (normally in the form of messianism), on the identification of the dominant party with the collective, on the "invasion" of the State by agents of that political power and organized terror in the service of this dogmatism (Zippelius, 2010).

will also be reflected in leadership: it follows Allah and the dictates of His Prophet Mohammed.

Furthermore, although there is a projection of socio-political organisation into the future, Islamism is a regressive and revivalist ideology, facing a mythical past in which Islam was taken in its purest and most pious form (*salaf*). In an almost archetypal way, it parallels the first moments of Islam and the life of the Prophet. According to the Quran and Sunnah, Mohammed goes from Mecca to Medina (hegira – *hijra*), creating the first Muslim community in the latter. The model conceived in Medina by Mohammed and followed by the first four caliphs (*khulafa al-râshidun*) allowed the apartment of the *jahiliyya*.[2] It is the formula adopted by Islamist ideology. Sayyid Qutb is one of the great theorists of Islam who explored this formula (Qutb, 2001).

It is based on an ethical bond that unites people in the same society, the *Ummah*. Moreover, being a religious movement, the ideology underpinning it is based on the idea of a peculiar political community (albeit virtual), as it results from a pact superior to the contingent and precarious relationships of the everyday life of the *polis*. It means that religion has a function of social and political integration, becoming the central pillar guiding the actions of individuals in all fields of society (Pace & Stefani, 2000).

Naturally, faced with the pluralism and fragmentation that characterise contemporary Western societies, Islamism, unrealistically, seeks to conceive a unity in the action of individuals that aims at sociocultural transformation. As it was already said, it is a collective movement, with a religious rhetoric that conveys a modern utopia that immediately allows political mobilisation, emerging as a source for the non-legitimisation of the current sociopolitical order. Note that this source can also justify the transformation of this status quo through violent means.

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[2] *Jahiliyya* means "age of ignorance", a spiritual condition in which the pre-Islamic "barbaric" culture lived. This term is used by Islamist theorists, who have rethought it to describe, and later condemn, all non-Islamic values.

It takes advantage of the primacy of Islamic religious law (*Shariah*) over positive law to realise this utopia. Furthermore, it assumes the truth of faith as a guide for human action without mediation. In effect, this same truth gains political form, thus becoming a State ideology. Consequently, all instruments of political power become forms of imposition of this totalising ideology full of religious symbols.

Islamism, therefore, remains a revolutionary ideology like other modern Western totalitarian political formulas, but with the characteristic of being a hybrid that merges a myth of ideological utopian hope with a narrative with religious undertones. In this case, it is a political formula that calls into question the legitimacy of the modern Western State.

Nevertheless, more than the characterisation of an identity forged in a particular political and religious praxis, Islam is also marked by an absolute cultural and ideological otherness about the West. In this sense, it opposes not only secular nationalism, in force in some Muslim-majority countries since the second half of the last century, but also more traditional conceptions of Islam that consider social militancy and politics to be a minor factor.

IDEOLOGICAL PRAXIS

The implementation phase of the Islamist ideological project aims to seize political power. This strategy is based on two religious precepts – the response to the Islamic call and obligations (*dawah*) and, subsequently, the creation of a group (*jamaat*) or party (*hizb*) that must emerge as the vanguard of the movement.

Islamists have as their base premise the absolute indivisibility of the Islamic trinity. Their main objective is to apply this premise on a global (or local) scale. For them, the world is divided between *dar al-Islam* (Islamic territory, where Islamic jurisprudence is applied) and *dar al-harb* (literally means the *abode of war* but refers to non-Islamic territory). In the call for membership (*dawah*), it is implicit that the entire Islamic community has the task of expanding *dar al-Islam* throughout the world so that everyone can share in a socially and politically just order.

According to contemporary Islamism, the socio-political universe where Islamic jurisprudence is not applied, in addition to not being on the right path, tends to act repressively. The driving force behind this type of rhetoric is two political facts. Firstly, territories historically considered Islamic occupied by non-Muslims (such as Saudi Arabia – sacred territory –Chechnya, Kashmir, or Palestine). Secondly, countries with a Muslim majority and secular governments are repressive towards manifestations of Islam (as is the case of almost all that were or are political heirs of Nasserism, such as Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, or Yemen).

Recognizing that the influence of Islam on politics has waned, Islamists look to an ideal past as a reference point. Their aim is to correct the world that they perceive as being on the wrong path and prevent the repression of Muslim brothers. To achieve this, they seek to restore the Caliphate – the first step towards the Islamization and correction of the world. This necessitates shaping society to make it receptive to this transformation (Qutb, 2001).

The grand objective of Islamism is the result of a precise and unilateral hermeneutical line that seeks to refound society. This mission, when faced with opposition from the status quo, seeks to subvert power to establish a state model based on the ideal model in the Koran and Islamic traditions. The unilateralism of this mission is evident in the fact that Islam invests, above all, in the political sphere. Contrary to what may seem apparent, Islamism must adhere to the guidelines of Islamic legal tradition. It views tradition as the necessary framework for believers to strictly follow their faith and implement divine law on earth. In politics, the path and instrument that govern the inclusion/exclusion of the State are deeply rooted in "sacredness" and are intended to be ethically established. Therefore, Islam, while striving for an ideal past, is an ideology of a progressive nature, more secular than religious.

Despite the apparent ideological uniformity, there is a differentiation in terms of the adherents' convictions and not just the degree of militancy. This is evident in how they diagnose the problems of the Muslim world, interpret Islamic law, and act in various societal fields. The question of the legitimacy of their actions is also an important differentiating element.

Although Islamism often defines itself in opposition to secular political models, it has shown the capacity to adopt some virtues of secular States, particularly in supporting the fragile and vulnerable. Rooted in Islamic principles of charity (*zakat*) and social justice, many Islamist movements have filled welfare gaps left by weak or fragmented state institutions, providing education, healthcare, and aid to marginalized groups (Brooke, 2015; Wickham, 2013; Wiktorowicz, 2002). Yet this welfare orientation remains primarily faith-based rather than universalist, reflecting religious duty more than secular notions of equal citizenship. Consequently, while Islamism may mirror certain social functions of secular governance, it does so within a moral and theological framework that can reinforce rather than overcome social fragmentation.

In summary, the doctrinal body and ideological systematization are standard. The strategic application of the precepts is the only difference, and this depends primarily on contextual pressure. Different diagnoses lead to a variety of prescriptions. This categorization is far from fixed, as the differentiation of manifestations of Islamic activism is a recent and ongoing process. It's important to note that this essay refers only to a form of Islamism that seeks to gain political power through the dynamics of the political game, rather than through religious proselytism or armed action. Therefore, it is a political manifestation of Islam, and organization around party structures is a characteristic. It also includes movements relatively engaged in the democratic process and accepting the principle of the nation-state. They seek reform rather than just revolution.

Examples of this activism are some politicised Islamist movements such as the current *Ikhwan* and various branches (Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Algeria, or Europe) (Al Anani, 2016; Lia, 1998; Obaid, 2017; Rubin, 2010; Wickham, 2015), the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* party in Turkey (Yesilada, 2023; Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018), the *Milli Görüs* of the Turkish diaspora (Rosenberg, 2024), the *Parti de la Justice et le Développement* in Morocco (Monteanu et al, 2023), or the *Ennahda* movement in Tunisia (Cimini, 2021; Grewal, 2020; Yildirim, 2017).

Unlike more religious forms of activism, this contemporary Islamism became politicized and adopted modern Western organizational models and

political parties to seize state power and influence government structures. This led to a permeability of structures in response to the political context, resulting in the adoption of Westphalian principles that separate the political and religious spheres. Additionally, the movement embraced the nation-state principle over the supranational concept of the *Ummah* and shifted from revolutionary strategies to seeking the establishment of an Islamic state through constitutional reforms, while recognizing the constitution as a legal framework (International Crisis Group, 2005).

The most significant shift among the Islamists who have embraced political expression is their acceptance of the current status quo, despite their ongoing struggle against it. This shift marks a notable departure from the most radical and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. In their speeches, they have set aside the revolutionary utopia of an Islamic State to emphasize other struggles, such as the pursuit of justice (*al-adala*), freedom (*al-hurri-yya*), and the fight against state corruption. Their success is partly due to tying the desire for greater social and political justice to their propaganda, which is justified by the growing repression and corruption of the secular governments in the countries where they operate. They emphasize that these principles will be effective through the legal practice of the Islamic law, which is a central point of their political propaganda.

There are two important factors that show an evolution in this propaganda. First, it is recognized that all Muslims should live according to modern times instead of trying to recreate the Islamic State of Medina. This requires more intellectual effort and contemporary interpretation (*ijtihad*). This shows the intellectual rigor behind the development of political Islam. Second, it is important to acknowledge the role of community bodies (such as parliaments or assemblies) in the legislative process (International Crisis Group, 2005).

In the context of political Islam, there is a shift from the belief that only God should have sovereignty (known as *hakimiyya* in Qutb's conception) to the concept of people's sovereignty. However, despite the seemingly moderate nature of political Islamism, some groups do not support democratic processes in their political activities. Additionally, there are groups that, even though

they claim to be non-violent, still advocate for armed action. For example, *Jama'at I Islami* in Pakistan (Abbott, 1957; Shah et al., 2021) and the coup plotters of *al-Jabhah al-Islamiyah al-Qawmiyah*, led by Hassan al-Turabi in Sudan (Hassan & Buaben, 2015; Miller, 1994), do not fully embrace democratic principles. On the other hand, groups like *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Hanif, 2012; Wali, 2017) and the now-defunct *al-Muhajiroun* (Weeks, 2020) do not explicitly advocate violence but can create an atmosphere of fear and distrust that may lead to armed actions fueled by the belief that Muslims are under attack.

CONCLUSIONS

While there is a semantic and conceptual relationship between doctrine and ideology, it's important to understand that they aren't interchangeable. Doctrine is an adaptable interpretation of specific ideas that are logically structured. It refers to a group's established set of beliefs, often formalized. It's a product of rational elaboration, which may come before the formation of a political identity (Crick, 1987). It encompasses philosophical orientations on a meta-level and envisions an ideal future society based on a complete ethical rejection of the current society applicable to the world (Cassinelli, 1960). This is the case with Islamic doctrine, the practice of Islam.

On the other hand, ideology is the dynamic social force that corresponds to such doctrine, emerging from a complex system of cause and effect. It's the doctrine in motion, albeit with distinct characteristics. This is evident in the case of contemporary Islamism, which is rooted in a comprehensive interpretation of Islamic doctrine. Its primary objective is establishing an Islamic State, locally or globally. Therefore, it's distinct from Islam as a religion. However, it draws from its founding doctrine, incorporating many symbols and concepts that form the movement's discursive and unifying language.

Contemporary Islamism, from a Western theoretical perspective, is not simply an expression of faith or an extension of Islam. It is rooted in its cultural context but also seeks to challenge and reshape the Islamic and cultural traditions of the regions it influences. Like other social and political

movements, it is driven by a specific doctrine that is applied ideologically, supported by specific forms of action. However, a crucial difference lies in its ideology, which incorporates religious principles intended to be immediately implemented. In other words, these principles are interpreted as tools for analyzing social and political conflicts, justifying power struggles. Significant figures such as Al-Banna, Al-Mawdûdî, and Qutb exemplify this idea. Islamism is a revolutionary ideology that aims to seize power, using specific forms of action to achieve its goals. Nevertheless, it is not drastically different from other modern secular Western authoritarian political formulas. It can be seen as a hybrid that combines a myth of utopian ideological hope with a regressive narrative of religious connotation. In essence, these principles are interpreted as instruments for analyzing political and social conflicts, justifying power struggles.

The narrative of Islamism, despite its religious rhetoric and strong utopian and millenarian character, is fundamentally secular. It is not merely a by-product or exception of Islamic religiosity, as actions in the name of Islam are not solely an expression of religious radicalization. They are driven by concrete political objectives, with a rhetorical justification supported by factual situations. These situations include the presence of Western forces in Muslim territory or the tyranny of predominantly Islamic secular rulers, as well as the inevitable process of acculturation to Western values and ways of life due to increasing globalization. The content analysis of the documentation reflecting this ideological dimension reveals a profoundly political and elegant simplicity. In essence, Islamist ideology, with populist touches, lacks complex theological argumentation to easily reach the masses. It focuses on triggering an accession process that depends not only on factual sociopolitical conditions, but also on a pragmatic-ideological dimension. The religious precept is an adaptive interpretation of a specific idea of Islam, tailored to situational application. It serves as a heuristic device that prompts activists to weigh the costs and benefits of their actions and behaviours. For every risk, there is perceived spiritual return and an advancement in the society. From this dual perspective, actions in the name of this ideology can be seen as not just rational, but strategically so.

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