Islamic Fundamentalism Since 1945

Beverley Milton-Edwards
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For first-time students of the increasingly well-researched field of Islamic fundamentalism, or for those with a general interest keen to hone their understanding, Beverly Milton-Edwards' fourth book, *Islamic Fundamentalism Since 1945*, is a good place to start. This compact book, running a mere 139 pages of text, has a rather grand ambition: to describe the defining periods in the growth of this phenomenon and introduce the main players as well as the key debates. To a large degree, this ambition is successfully met.

Milton-Edwards uses an historical linear approach, and so we begin, in chapter 1, with "a diverse tradition from past to present" that takes us quickly from the events following the Prophet's death in 632 to the Muslim Brotherhood's emergence in Egypt in 1928. The author regards its founding father, Hassan al-Banna (1906-49), in "many respects as the founding father of Islamic fundamentalism." The subsequent chapters examine "The Advance of Secularism"; "Identity and Revivalism"; "Islam Armed"; and "Going Global: Fundamentalism and Terror." With the penultimate chapter, "Ground Zero and Islamic Fundamentalism," we are brought to the present.

The year 1945, the end of the Second World War, marks the first dismemberment of the imperialist model and the emergence of new nation

states. In Europe, as the horrors of Stalinism and Nazism were beginning to be more clearly understood, there was a growing disenchantment with strong nationalist ideologies. As the West, then, began to question the idea of the nation state, the newly independent states – which often did not have a cohesive sense of identity prior to colonialism, since its people had often existed within tribal, ethnic, or linguistic groupings – began to formulate what the ideas of nation and nationhood meant.

In numerous majority-Muslim countries, the political leaders who took the reins of power from the retreating colonial rulers were strong nationalists; they were also often secularists. As Ernest Gellner notes in *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 58), "there are two outstanding models of modernisation by Muslim states – against religion and with it." The second formulation, which Milton-Edwards calls *revivalism* and links directly to the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism, was fed by such thinkers as Pakistan's Abu-l A`la Mawdudi (1903-79) and Egypt's al-Banna. By the 1970s, she argues, revivalism had become a palpable force within Muslim states.

One of the early defining moments in the clash of these secular and religious ideologies was the period of 1978-79, when Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini ousted the Shah as well as the opposition Leftists, and inaugurated a revolutionary Islamic state – the first time that a revolution in the modern period had as its basis both a religious ideology and also, importantly, a non-progressive (and therefore retrogressive) construct of time. The Iranian revolution raised important questions about Islam and modernity; the contention between "religious" and "temporal" spheres (envisaged in radically differently ways in Christianity and Islam), and the appeal to tradition and to rationality as a means of judgment. Milton-Edwards argues that in the early years of Khomeini's rule, analysts predicted that Teheran "administers a network akin to an Islamist Comintern." She then adds that "as events unfolded throughout the 1980s the spectre of the global fundamentalist Comintern proved unfounded" (p. 80).

Reference to Islam and Islamic symbolism, however, became more prevalent across Muslim countries – both by those who opposed the state and by those who ran it. Some political leaders flirted with an Islamic ideology (e.g., Sadat in Egypt) and some appeared to be personally and politically committed to its governing principles (e.g., Zia ul-Haq in Pakistan). She speaks of how Saudi oil money funded *madrassas* (religious schools) in Thailand, Afghanistan, and Pakistan; how Iran financially and logistically supported radical groups outside of Iran; and how CIA money

pumped to Pakistan's intelligence service (the ISI) encouraged Bin Laden and the Taliban, all of which, in turn, fed the growth of Islamic fundamentalism. As examples of the growing tide of Islamic fundamentalism, she cites events in, among other countries, Sudan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia.

She argues that Islamic fundamentalism declared a war on both "democracy" and "Disney," although it did not reject the modernity project wholesale, a testimony of which is both the weapons of artillery as well as the weapons used to disseminate its ideas. Milton-Edwards argues that the new breed of fundamentalist leaders were not "dedicated to forging transnational links" (p. 72) and then goes on to examine how, in our own time, Islamic fundamentalism has taken on – or rather has come to be perceived to have taken on – a global, transnational shape.

Islamic Fundamentalism Since 1945 provides an incisive overview of the events and the leaders who gave birth to what we now refer to as "Islamic fundamentalism." Throughout her book, the author attempts to present a balanced picture of this phenomenon and repeatedly points out that if Islamic fundamentalism is a threat to the West, it is also a threat to the "house of Islam." In such a broad-sweeping narrative as this, however, there is a danger that particularities will be lost. In *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), Fred Halliday makes an important argument against a unitary reference to *Islam*, by which he means the sociopolitical system and not the theology. A similar argument could be applied to the concept of *Islamic fundamentalism*, which is neither a cohesive universal philosophy nor has emerged or indeed developed equally in different regions of the world. Although Milton-Edwards is clearly aware of the dangers of a universalist reading of events, as seen when she says that "the manifestation of Islamic fundamentalism took different forms in different states" (p. 80), Islamic fundamentalism often appears as a monolithic phenomenon in her text: "Throughout the 1970s the revivalism project was apparent across the Muslim world. This had a significant impact on the political arena as well" (p. 67).

Islamic Fundamentalism Since 1945 is undoubtedly a useful entry point into the study of Islamic fundamentalism. The narrative is both cogent and easy to follow. In that latter point, however, is also what I consider to be its greatest weakness. There appears to be a too-ready acceptance of the "dominant discourse" and too little attention to speculative ideas. For instance, to such questions as whether political Islam is antimodern, or, as Gellner argues, is one of the "great traditions" that is ulti-

mately modernizable, "not as an innovation or concession to outsiders, but rather, as the continuation and completion of an old dialogue within Islam between the orthodox centre and the deviant error" (p. 5); why the ideas of such modern progressive Islamic thinkers as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-97) and Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) gave way to the ideas of the revivalists; if the ground won by the Islamic fundamentalists at the public level has to do with their ideology's appeal or the civic services they often provide (e.g., free health centres and schools/*madrassas*); and whether there is a growing religious sensibility that seeks an Islam of the "middle way," both in Muslim states and in western countries where Muslims are a minority, and if this will ultimately be the force that pushes back Islamic fundamentalism.

Anita Mir
Independent Writer and Researcher
London, United Kingdom