

# Islamism and Totalitarianism: Similarities and Differences

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Muslim fundamentalism and Islamism are increasingly used as terms in the media and this article examines their meanings and genesis. It does so by looking at the teachings of its three primary ideologues, Hasan al-Banna, Abdul Al-Maududi and Sayid Qutb and comparing them to totalitarianism. It finds that there are substantial similarities, but also significant differences. The former involve the power of both Islamism and totalitarianism to mobilise the masses, ignoring class and religion, in order to combat exterior threat. In so doing, both replace the practice of religion with their own monopolistic ideology, relying on mass communication and suppression of dissent to construct a single party regime with the aim of conquering existing society which it believes has deviated from its ideal, creating a new man and reconstructing the state.

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Political turmoil and religious ferment within the Islamic world globally inevitably finds an echo in Muslim diasporas, particularly in Britain. Indeed it would be strange if it were not so. Although an increasing proportion of Britain's Muslim community are now second generation, their families' roots lie in their countries of origin and are continuously replenished by marriages, family reunification and visits to their original homelands, thereby creating a continuum with those countries. Moreover, many diaspora Muslim communities send for, or are supplied with, *immams* (prayer leaders) from the Indian sub-continent and the Middle East, sometimes for short stays, creating an additional bond. They are, therefore, intimately involved sociologically, politically and financially with the countries and problems within them, and between those countries and others.

A newly emerging world Muslim consciousness, propelled by such diverse factors as Saudi and Gulf state funding for mosque building programmes, and the rapid spread of information and communications technologies, assist in uniting and empowering the *ummah* (worldwide Muslim community). Issues of crucial importance to Muslims, *qua* Muslims, now span the national origins of the different communities. A list of current strategic-religious concerns would certainly include the ethnic cleansing of Muslims in

Bosnia, tensions between Pakistan and India, the consequences of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the Israel-Arab conflict, and religious tension, and resulting violence between Muslims and Christians in Africa and south-east Asia. The list is large and growing.

Tension brought about by conflict between tradition and modernism, both within and outside Muslim countries, generational conflict, and increasingly angry reactions to racism, are also now in the public domain and are subjects for debate and contention within Muslim society, and between that society and the majority society, particularly in the United Kingdom. The most potent catalyst of these crises though, is the disruptive impact of modernisation on deeply traditional societies, which anyway have been under strain. What sets the present crisis apart from others, however, is that it is affecting all Muslim countries and societies, is multi-faceted in that it touches all aspects of life, and that it follows successive failures to grapple these problems.

Threats of *jihad* (religious war) against the West, or statements supporting Islamist supremacy over other religions provide a picture of an Islam almost at war with itself, and in conflict with the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup> Expressed in harsh and uncompromising language these threats convey an impression that Islam is a monolithic triumphalist creed. Certainly the spread of Islam across Arabia, the repulsion of the Crusades and the occupation of southern Europe in the latter part of the first millennium were all achieved by force of arms, marking out Islam as an agent for violence, at least in Christian eyes. Calls for *jihad* and the recent revelations of a worldwide Islamist network dedicated not just to removing the US presence in the Middle East, but also to attacking the very symbols of Western economic and political supremacy in the West itself, suggest that Islam has declared a religious war. Osama bin Laden's networked mutual aid umbrella for Islamist terrorism is also called *The Front For Jihad Against The Crusaders and the Jews*, harking back to an earlier age when Islam fought religious wars against, or defended itself against, Christianity and Judaism. The impression, though, is an incomplete one, the historical perspective seen through Western eyes is a skewed one, and Islam is not the monolithic religion that some of its spokesmen would argue. However, it is fundamentalism and Islamism rather than Islam the religion which concerns us now.

Some commentators have suggested that those arguing for Islamism propose a form of totalitarian ideology. Two such comments

will suffice at this stage:

In such a (Islamist) state no-one can regard any field of his affairs as personal and private. Considered from this aspect the Islamic State bears a kind of resemblance to the Fascist and Communist states.<sup>2</sup>

For all the differences (between populism and nationalism) the analogy with Fascism is evident: just as 'national socialism' took over some of the ideas of its left-wing competitor and provided a rival, equally well organised and ideologically more successful force than the communist and socialist parties, so the Islamists have both challenged and appropriated the ideologies of the more traditional opposition parties. The ideological success of Islamist movements *vis-à-vis* the left has therefore involved a dual process of ideological and political displacement combined with appropriation of the latter's ideas and appeal.<sup>3</sup>

It is a brief comparison of the elements of Islamism and totalitarianism that I shall explore, noting the similarities and differences, and in so doing seek to place them in their historical context.

### Islam and Islamism

As a faith Islam is universalist, crossing national boundaries, encompassing all races and classes. Its adherents claim it to be the fastest growing religion. It is also the newest of the three monotheistic religions, and much of its early relationship with Christianity and Judaism has been an abrasive one. Unlike the others Islam constitutes an all-encompassing life system that includes religion (*din*), state (*dawlah*) and law (*shariah*).

However, Islam is neither timeless nor seamless: its political and cultural practices have been numerous and complex, and Muslim societies have been sociologically diverse. Islam does not separate faith and state, the secular and the sacred; it sees the two as inseparable. It has no formal leadership and all believers have the right to speak for Islam, provided they are learned and their learning is publicly recognised. Of course pronouncements on religious matters by, for example, *al Azhar* University in Cairo (the oldest in the Muslim world), carry more weight than those by other religious

leaders or institutions, but there is no global authoritative institution issuing religious edicts. A consequence of this is that doctrinal deviation is usually interpreted as coming from within the tradition rather than being a challenge to it, unless it runs counter to the very core values and beliefs.

Fundamentalism and revivalism within Islam are not new phenomena. They have always existed in Muslim communities as a part of a cyclical pattern of decline and resurgence, each phase of decline triggering a revivalist response. They rather represent the culmination of accumulated teaching and tradition going back to the time of the Prophet. According to the Islamists Islam is more than a religion, however all-embracing, it is a political ideology and one which its initial protagonists sought to define in keeping with the emerging ideologies of the twentieth century. But they brought a religious legitimacy to their vision by returning to the original texts and the inspirations of the first community of believers.

A clear distinction might also be made between fundamentalists and Islamists. The former, the traditionalists, still live according to the norms and strict rules which have held sway throughout the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world for fourteen hundred years. They are marked by an adherence to, or return to, strict interpretation of the *shariah*. 'It is a tendency that is forever setting the reformer, the censor, and the tribunal against the corruption of the times and of sovereigns, against foreign influences, political opportunism, moral laxity and the forgetting of sacred texts.'<sup>4</sup> The latter, the Islamists, tend to be the often educated but displaced, lower and middle-class victims of urbanisation. Their influences are anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism and anti-Westernism fused in symbiotic fashion with Western leftist ideologies and grafted onto a radicalised and politicised religious world outlook. Unlike the former they are not rejecting the ideas and symbols of modernity, they are adapting and using them.

Two religious leaders stand out in this historical process by which fundamentalists and Islamists came to challenge the religious and political orthodoxy of their times, identifying the contemporary political issues and offering solutions which underlie modern day Islamist ideology and practice. Ibn Taymiyyah (died 1328 CE) is the most prominent precursor of present day (*Sunni*) revivalism. The embodiment of the militant theoretician and activist defender of the faith, he violently opposed heretical beliefs and practices, including

innovation, preached *jihad* against unbelievers and placed restrictions on non-believers. He assumed a self-appointed role as legal interpreter (*mutjahid fil madhrah*) of the *Sunnah* (sayings of the Prophet codified as law), thereby freeing himself from adopting the juridical opinions of his predecessors. His overriding concern was the building of a moral society on the basis of a reinvigorated Islamic ideology and its strict implementation in society. As a consequence of the contemporary threat from the Tatars' invasion of Asia Minor, fighting the *jihad* against the enemies of his community assumed a higher obligation than prayer, pilgrimage or fasting. Ibn Taymiyyah's resolute fundamentalism has left an indelible mark upon later generations of fundamentalists.

His direct spiritual descendent was Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahab, whose strict doctrinal teachings during the last century were based upon his interpretation of Ibn Taymiyyah, and his direct spiritual predecessor Ibn Hanbal (died 855 CE). He rejected all subsequent theological interpretation, accepting only the *Koran* and the *Sunnah*. He repudiated the legitimacy of the Ottomans, preaching strict adherence only to the teachings of the Prophet. His doctrinal influence paid a substantial part in enabling the House of Saud to conquer the Arabian peninsula in the second and third decade of the twentieth century, and continues to this day in the puritanical version of Islam practised there, and in contemporary Afghanistan where it has been adopted by the Taliban. *Wahabism* is now the primary religious imperative within the national and transnational Islamic terrorist groups, whose members volunteered for the *jihad* in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union.

The ending of the colonial era, the subsequent development of independence movements and growth of nationalism, socialism and Communism within the European colonies in the Middle East and India was paralleled by the development of a religio-political awakening. It was in Egypt that a specifically Muslim political consciousness began first with the formation of the *Ikhwan al Muslimun* (Muslim Brothers) by Hassan al-Banna in Ismailiyah in 1929. According to Hrair Dekmejian: 'The Society of Muslim Brothers more than any other organisation, has been the ideological and institutional epicentre of fundamentalism in the Arab sphere and the Islamic world.'<sup>25</sup> Despite the Brotherhood's Egyptian origins its spiritual and political influence has been evident in all Arab countries and throughout the Muslim world. During the inter-war years Egypt

was a 'battleground' for competing anti-colonialist, nationalist and religious forces, all of which had failed to free Egypt from British imperial rule according to al-Banna. The development of Egyptian nationalism under the European-appointed Khedive ran alongside the growth of a new Islamic reformism (*Salafiyyah*), while at the same time the dissolution in 1924 of the hereditary Caliphate based in Constantinople left a spiritual and political vacuum throughout the former Ottoman empire. Coeval with al-Banna was Abdul Ala Maududi, the founder of the *Jamaat al Islami* (Islamic Society) in that part of India which became Pakistan after Partition in 1947. Both he and al-Banna endeavoured to define the Muslim religion primarily as a political system along the lines of other major ideologies of their time. In claiming a legitimacy for their views, they both sought to explain them in terms of a 'return' to the early communities of believers. For both of them modernity had failed to deliver, and they sought a restoration of religious authority.

The leadership of the Brotherhood passed in the 1950s to Sayid Qutb. Both he and Maududi, whom he had met in Cairo in 1951, raged against what they characterised as *jahilya* (barbarity), which Qutb used to describe individualism and dissolution, and which led to moral and social decline. He believed that the Islamic world would become increasingly subject to this as Western influences grew. He foresaw Westernisation and the growth of multinationals with alien economic concepts of interest and insurance and foreign tourism, and the need to cater for foreign tourists' desires, as polluting the Islamic world. Qutb further believed that a modern lifestyle devoted to individualism and hedonism diluted family life and devotion to religious duty. Moreover, foreign investment in the Muslim world had not led to any improvement in the socio-economic situation of the masses, and the gulf between rich and poor was increasing, not narrowing. Both Maududi and Qutb were against nationalism, which they saw as a European invention imported into the Middle East and south-east Asia. As such it was bound to ally itself with that other European invention, secularism, all the more so as European nationalism was essentially secularist, bred in a culture where religion and state were different entities.

On democracy, Qutb wrote in *Signposts on the Road* (1964) that in order to throw off the yoke of *jahilya*, society must undergo a radical change beginning with its very moral foundations where numerous 'man-made idols from agnosticism to capitalism hold

sway'.<sup>6</sup> An all-out offensive, a *jihad*, must be waged against modernity so that a moral rearmament could take place. He was not against science or technology, only that their benefits should be used with care for the common good. Therefore, before Islam finally lost its grip it had to take the offensive. He was, however, against any concept of secular leadership and railed against the leadership then in place in the early 1960s, particularly the pan-Arabism of Nasser's Egypt. His agitation against anything other than simple ritual, overlaid by religious experience, brought him into collision with the religious authorities and the government, and led to his imprisonment and eventual execution. He, therefore, serves as a model for revivalists, for Islamists, and has been dubbed 'the spiritual father of the Islamic revolution'.

Despite the global aspirations of their ideologues, Islamists have no centre; there is no overall pan-Islamic radical leadership. Within each country different groups have their own way, decentralisation being further enhanced by persecution and repression, which led to the breakup into relatively small groups. Some radical leaders have raised the banner of the resurrection of the Caliphate spanning all lands where Muslims live, but they see it as a distant ideal. The same is true now. The only group to campaign currently for its resurrection and renewal, the *Hizb ut Tabrir* (Islamic Liberation Party), was founded in 1953 by Sheikh Taqi Uddine al-Nabahani, an Islamic court judge in East Jerusalem, following his disagreement with the Muslim Brotherhood. It is rightly regarded as so extreme that other Islamists doubt its sincerity or even any basic understanding of the very religion it professes to defend.<sup>7</sup>

Decentralisation has often led to sectarian squabbles within the radicals' ranks, sometimes going to extremes, but certain broad denominators stand up. The radicals proceed from a gloomy diagnosis of the malady of Islam, hence the sense of urgency. If urgency does not necessarily lead to violence, and increasingly it did in the 1990s, it does lead to a divorce from, and almost to some sort of revolt against, present Muslim society and polity. Both attitudes are intermeshed: both are predicated upon the Maududi theory that as Islam has reverted to a state of *jahilya*, true Muslims find themselves in a state of war against the apostates, and that *jihad* is but a defensive response to the 'war of annihilation' the apostates conduct against Islam.

Many Islamist organisations do not practice violent *jihad*, but all seek to impose an authoritarian and puritan system on their society.

*Dawah* (the propagation of the faith) is also a basic feature of Islam. As a universalist creed Islam has sought to spread its message throughout the world, and the obligation is both an individual and collective one. Proselytism occupies a special place in the Islamist world outlook, as a consequence of al-Banna's teachings. Members of the Brotherhood took oaths of allegiance to carry out *dawah*, together with one of silence. Under al-Banna the Brotherhood staged mass rallies to reinforce members' commitment. Today it is carried out with ever growing zeal, but more discreetly, and sometimes in secrecy as a consequence of state repression.

For the radicals three distinct options have emerged: *Hijra* (migration) or retreat into small groups to lead a more spiritually pure life, often separating themselves physically from the rest of society; reform and the promotion of education to others in the hope that they will prepare them for victory; and violence. Faced with such alternatives Qutb, on his release from prison in Egypt in 1964, moved away from the existing Brotherhood programme of long-term education and infiltration toward the latter choice and sanctioned military training in preparation for terrorism, although he continued to stress the long-term overall benefit of education. However there were, and still are, countervailing forces against terrorism and military revolt, not least of which is the memory of the Islamic world tearing itself apart in the seventh century, leading to its subsequent cultural and political demise.

For Dekmejian, the preachings of the main exponents of Islamist thought reflect striking similarities, despite the centuries which divide them, including: commitment to the *ummah*; advocacy of militancy and *jihad* in defence of Islam; combination of fundamentalist ideology with political and social activism in their personal lives; readiness to challenge religious and political authority and willingness to sacrifice for the sake of Islam.<sup>8</sup>

For him the ebb and flow of Islamic fundamentalism throughout history reveals an ongoing dialectic between Islam and its social, economic, and political environment. Thus the contemporary Islamic setting, like its historical antecedents, is conditioned by the operation of multifaceted dialectical relationships, which may become exacerbated in times of crisis. Dekmejian identifies eleven such relationships: Secularism vs. Islamism; Islamic Modernism vs. Islamic Conservatism; Establishment Islam vs. Fundamentalist Islam; Ruling Élites vs. Islamist Militants; Economic Élites vs Islamic Radicals;



Ethnic Nationalism vs. Islamic Unity; Sufism vs. Islamism; Traditional Islam vs. Fundamentalist Islam; Religious Revivalism vs. Political Islamism; Gradualist Islam vs. Revolutionary Islam; *Dar al-Islam* (the territorial domain of Islam) vs. *Dar al-Harb* (the rest of the world beyond Islam).<sup>9</sup> The interplay of these dialectical relationships in the Islamic world has progressively generated a crisis of major proportions.

Of interest to our analysis are the protracted conflicts which pit the ruling religious élites and the high-ranking clerics, who are usually appointed by government, against the leader-ideologues of the fundamentalist groups representing populist and revivalist Islam. These conflicts suggest that the Muslim world is in a state of constant tension, not only with others, but within itself and indeed this has been the Islamists' aim. They suggest that this 'war' be seen as part of a global struggle between Islam and its adherents and a long line of opponents.

In conducting their campaigns Islamist leaderships have targeted particular categories within society who are more sensitive to societal problems by virtue of their own socio-economic position, and age. They include those in political conflict with the society in which they live, the nativist-traditional elements, the newly urbanised classes, the dispossessed and the youth.

### Governance of the Islamist State

Maududi retained some residual modernism in his attempts to defend democracy and Islam as a democratic force. He advocated the *shura* (consultation) process, which exists between government and governed in Saudi Arabia and some Gulf states. In contrast however, Qutb argued for a dictatorship that would grant political liberties to the virtuous alone. He saw democracy as a bankrupt form of government and argued against its importation into the Middle East.

This crisis in governance led Islamist thinkers to ponder the relationship between the state and the government. Banna and Maududi had emerged at a time of growing nationalist mobilisation against foreign domination, so inevitably their views reflected nationalist ideology, but also contained a reaction to it.

Islamist thinkers saw foreign domination of their countries as a symptom of Muslim weakness, and its elimination as a key to Muslim power. Such domination could be attacked directly by *jihad* against

foreigners or indirectly by promoting an Islamic awakening. Whatever their strategies they all worked to redress the gross imbalance of power between Islam and the West. They also sought to replace weak rulers and states with strong rulers and states: 'Preoccupied with the defence of Islam and the acquisition of power, they preferred the strong rule of a just and virtuous Muslim.'<sup>10</sup> The Brotherhood demanded, and still demands, the abolition of party politics and indeed of political parties in Egypt, and the creation of one single Islamic party. This despite its participation in politics and representation in both the Jordanian and Egyptian parliaments. There might be elections within the party to determine the most suitable leader, but no more. Al-Banna was impressed by Stalin's Soviet Union, and regarded the Communist Party as a model for a successful one-party system.

Maududi argued that authority belongs to God and God alone, and that all authority is exercised on his behalf. Non-Muslims have no share in this state, and women have no place in politics. Although he rejected individual dictatorship he nevertheless advocated a form of one (Islamic) party rule. He retained some residual modernism in his attempts to defend democracy in Islam as a democratic force, as evidenced by *shura*.

However, 'Maududi was certain about what the Islamic state was not, it was the very antithesis of a secular Western democracy'.<sup>11</sup> Qutb also argued, in accordance with tradition, that legitimate power comes from God alone, and it is therefore the role of the leader only to interpret God's word. For him and Maududi *democracy*, which signifies the sovereignty of the people, and which legitimises rule by people of people, goes against God's word, as revealed through the Prophet. In Islam people do not cover themselves with laws they make their own, as in the democratic tradition. Rather, people are governed by a regime and a body of law imposed by God, which they can neither change nor modify. The concept of majority rule, therefore, does not sit well with an Islamic system of government because Islam would not agree that the majority is sovereign.

In synthesising both Maududi and Banna's views, Qutb went on to ponder how the Islamic state could be realised. In doing so he concluded that it could only be by violent revolution. Such a revolution would only be successful if it were prepared by a long campaign of persuasion of the masses. He believed that the

revolutionary vanguard had to organise itself, retreat from impious society to live a pure life in preparation for overturning the political order.

Qutb came from a traditional and deeply puritanical background. Having lived in the US during the 1950s and having been appalled by what he saw as a moral laxness, on the one hand, and the growth of multinational, particularly US, corporations, on the other, he railed against what he saw. 'Those who have usurped the power of God on earth and made his worshippers their slaves will not be dispossessed by dint of word alone.'<sup>12</sup> He thus transformed what had been a tendency towards violence into an explicit logic of revolution.

Banna, Maududi and Qutb defined the *Sunni* path to Islamism. The minority *Shiite* schism has also had its exponents of fundamentalism. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Persian Sayyid Jamal al-Din al Afghani worked to transform Islam into a lever against Western imperialism. According to Kramer:

In many respects, Afghani was the prototype of the modern fundamentalist. He had been deeply influenced by Western rationalism and the ideological mode of Western thought. Afghani welded a traditional religious hostility toward unbelievers to a modern critique of Western imperialism and an appeal for the unity of Islam, and while he inveighed against the West, he urged the adoption of those Western sciences and institutions that might strengthen Islam ... Afghani was tempted by power, and believed that 'power is never manifested and concrete unless it weakens and subjugates others'. Quoting this and other evidence, one Arab critic has argued that there is a striking correspondence between Afghani's thought and European fascism.<sup>13</sup>

The Iranian contemporary of Banna was Navvab Safavi, whose *Fidaiyun* (Devotees of Islam) emerged at a time of growing nationalist mobilisation against foreign economic and political domination and were responsible for assassinating leading secularists. They never grew into a mass movement and disbanded after the 1956 execution of Safavi. His direct successor was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who though not an ideologue in the sense that Banna, Maududi and Qutb were, nevertheless successfully oversaw the creation of an Islamic state ruled only by those most learned in Islamic law. 'Since Islamic government is a government of law,

knowledge of the law is necessary for the ruler, as has been laid down in tradition ... The ruler must surpass all others in knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

Although Khomeini's doctrines constituted a religious rationale for the overthrow of existing Muslim states, since none could claim to have religiously knowledgeable rulers, his legitimisation of rule by Islamic jurists proved unacceptable since in most Muslim states the jurists usually serve the state. His de-legitimisation of the rule of hereditary monarchies or the military, the system of governance in most contemporary Muslim countries, attracted widespread support among fundamentalists, whether *Shiite* or *Sunni*.

### Totalitarianism

Totalitarianism aims at the corporate state, one where the state controls the economy and directs enterprise, and high culture, involving the galvanisation of the masses with the aim of creating a new level of statehood through the creation of a new man. To do so certain elements have to be harnessed: there must be a continuous mobilisation; there must be social control mechanisms (in order to achieve mobilisation); political and social opposition must be eliminated; politics itself must be the object of a sacralisation process to replace the belief in God with the worship of the new state.

Reaction to rapid and forced industrialisation, the cataclysmic events that followed and which shattered the world at the beginning of the twentieth century, led to the development of totalitarian ideology. The failed ambitions of imperialistic and monarchical regimes to fulfill their strategic aims, the inability of their successor regimes to engage with, and harness, the new political and economic realities, to stabilise their new world and to involve their populations in democratically elected governments, created a vacuum which allowed totalitarianism to develop, and, for a comparatively short time, to flourish. In achieving its hold it also created new realities, new systems of governance in which each succeeding form of repressive government contained some, though not necessarily all, the elements of what we now describe as totalitarianism.

Totalitarianism developed entirely new political institutions to meet newly emerging situations, and in this process destroyed the legal and political traditions hitherto in place. No matter what the specifically national traditions were, or the particular religious or philosophical source of their ideology, totalitarian government

always transformed classes into masses, supplanting political party-based systems not by petty dictatorships, but by the mobilisation of a mass movement.

As a concept, totalitarianism originated in the 1920s. In January 1925 Mussolini referred to it, noting that a leader of his people, through the force of his own perception and strength of mind, was capable of bringing about a social and political transformation. In this he sought to mobilise the masses not just a class for what he perceived to be the public good.<sup>15</sup>

The degree to which the inter-war totalitarian states achieved the ideal of the corporate state varies. The Soviet command model presents the strictest example, whereas Spain and Portugal retained a high degree of economic freedom. During the Second World War Vichy leaders genuinely wanted to overcome traditional divisions between employer and employee. They appointed technocrats to oversee state planning needs and to co-ordinate private and public demands, but like Spain and Portugal its systems are best described as 'more a form of authoritarian populism'.<sup>16</sup>

The economies of all of them were of course dislocated by the war effort, or the preparation for it, during substantial periods of their existence. The fact is that with the exception of the Soviet and later the Chinese models, the economies of Italy and Germany in the years leading up to 1939 were allowed to function more or less rationally, and in this respect the corporate state never properly existed.

Again with the exception of the Communist models (both the Soviet Union and China) this was achieved not by the outright abolition of existing institutions, but by the creation of duplicate offices within the administrative machines. These parallel institutions were grafted on to the existing ones, which often had historical and practical origins having been tried and tested over years. Of course the duplication was wasteful of resources, and so, instead of being the streamlined efficient modern corporate state, the totalitarian regimes in fact were inefficient in their use of economic and human resources.

This aspect of parallel institutions is also found in contemporary fundamentalist and Islamist regimes, where the religious authorities monitor the effort and responsibilities of states' institutions and the populace, and intercede where they believe religion or moral precepts are in danger of being compromised. Such a system leads inexorably to an ever-swelling bureaucracy in which more and more people are dependent on the patronage of the state, the party or the religious establishment.

The organisation of the totalitarian state via the mobilisation of the masses depended on the use of élites. Hence the formation of front organisations, for teachers, scientists, technicians and others vital to the running of the state. Behind all of these, however, stood the secret police, charged with ensuring that the masses, and the states' organs did not deviate from the laid-down line. The religious police play the same role in those Muslim states which adhere to fundamentalism or Islamism.

The only rule of which everybody in a totalitarian state may be sure is that the more visible government agencies are, the less power they carry, and the less is known of the existence of an institution, the more powerful it will ultimately turn out to be. According to this rule, the Soviets, recognised by a written constitution as the highest authority of the state, have less power than the Bolshevik party; the Bolshevik party, which recruits its members openly and is recognised as the ruling class, has less power than the secret police. Real power begins where secrecy begins.<sup>17</sup>

Advancement through a totalitarian system was not founded on meritocracy, or democratic election; it depended on the whim of the leadership. However, leadership succession in the Islamist world is clearer than in the totalitarian one. In the former, none of the dictators saw to their succession effectively and of course Hitler and Mussolini fell through defeat in war, although both made belated attempts to nominate successors. In general the system built around and underneath them was based on the premise that no-one should ever be powerful enough to challenge the leader while he was still alive. Totalitarian leaders in the post-war years were generally more successful in ensuring their succession though their periods of rule, and those of their pre-war predecessors were generally marked by purges to ensure that any prospective challenge was neutralised. In the Islamist system, the religious leadership is charged with electing one from among them who is considered to be best fitted for the role. And in Iran, for example, this process went reasonably smoothly, as was seen with the succession to Khomeini.

A common feature of totalitarian states was the extensive use of social control mechanisms. Nationally directed organisations, overlapping with formal educational institutions, and backed by extensive use of propaganda, were designed to harness the nation's

youth and to ensure that they did not succumb to decadence and worked towards the national good. The mass rallies of Red Square, Rome and Nuremburg reinforce the feeling of membership in an exclusive world, and in the early stages these were replicated by Islamist groups, but repression and persecution by the state in the end put a stop to them.

Totalitarianism, like Islamism, has the sole answer to society's ills, and the prescription for the way forward. No debate was tolerated, and opposition was ruthlessly crushed, although there were, of course, significant differences in the way opposition was dealt with in Italy and Germany, or in China.

The totalitarian regimes' need for continual mobilisation around a declared theme – although Salazar's Portugal might properly be excluded from this analysis – has been described by Hannah Arendt as follows: 'the perpetual-motion mania of totalitarian movements which can remain in power only so long as they keep moving and set everything around them in motion'.<sup>18</sup>

Although early Fascism and Nazism were marked by strong opposition to the Church, both sought, ultimately, to enlist its support in order to influence the masses better. In their relation to the state itself, however, they differed widely. In Spain and Portugal the Church-backed regimes saw in the *Falange* and *Estado Novo* continued support for its own supremacy. Mussolini's Fascism tended to worship the state, while Nazism often elevated the party above the state. In practice of course, this meant that there were often parallel state and party organisations, which developed into competing empires.

Ideology is the application of scientific, and supposedly rational, thought to a belief system, and purports to explain the historical process, the past, the present and the future. In this respect totalitarianism shares another bond with Islamism which deals not with belief in God, but, rather, sets out an explanation for why the state is as it is, and a system of behaviour.

By conferring on the party or nation a sacred status, totalitarianism elevated an earthly entity, thereby replacing religion. Man still needs a religious belief system despite modernity, and in seeking to promote itself above all else the totalitarian system sought to replace religion with a new belief system.

The power to recruit and command the loyalty of the masses was the totalitarian regimes' most conspicuous feature. They demanded

the total unrestricted, unconditional and unalterable loyalty of the individual. According to Arendt, such loyalty can only come from the politically isolated man who has lost the capacity to act with others in the political realm, thereby making his subjugation by the totalitarian state possible. Such a man has nowhere else to go. He is completely isolated; an 'atomised' human being without other ties, and consequently his validation of his place in the world comes only from his membership of the movement, or the party.<sup>19</sup>

On his loyalty to the party or the state Arendt writes that:

Total loyalty is possible only when fidelity is emptied of all concrete content, from which changes of mind might naturally arise. The totalitarian movements, each in its own way, have done their utmost to get rid of the party programmes which specify concrete content and which they inherited from earlier, non-totalitarian stages of development. No matter how radical they might have been phrased, every definite political goal which does not simply ascent or circumscribe the claim to world rule, every political programme which deals with issues more specific than 'ideological questions of importance for centuries' is an obstruction to totalitarianism.<sup>20</sup>

Emilio Gentile, who spanned the pre- and post-war eras portrayed totalitarianism somewhat differently. For him a crucial fault of liberalism and capitalism was the way both divided people socially, and created a political class which had little contact with the masses. He therefore predicated a social system which would bring people together and close the gap between leaders and the masses which the capitalist system had created.

The term 'totalitarianism' can be taken as meaning: *an experiment in political domination* undertaken by a *revolutionary movement*, with an *integralist conception* of politics, that aspires towards a *monopoly of power* and that, after having secured power, whether by legal or illegal means, destroys or transforms the previous regime and constructs a *single party regime*, with the chief objective of *conquering society*. That is, it seeks the subordination, integration and homogenisation of the governed on the basis of the *integral politicisation of existence*, whether collective or individual, interpreted according to the categories, the myths and the



values of a *palingetic ideology*, institutionalised in the form of a *political religion*, that aims to shape the individual and the masses through an *anthropological revolution* in order to regenerate the human being and create the *new man*, who is dedicated in body and soul to the realisation of the revolutionary and imperialistic policies of the totalitarian party. The ultimate goal is to create a *new civilisation* along expansionist lines beyond the Nation-State.<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusions

Islamism and totalitarianism are both the politics of despair, and in this respect they have something in common. Both target and appeal to the dispossessed who, having nothing else, seek a system which provides an identity and authenticity. The revolutionary and all-embracing ideology which replaces, at least temporarily, the traditional religion with a political system, which itself becomes a religion, provides a way out both at an individual and group level.

The Muslim's religious duty to propagate the faith and to establish a world order (*al nizam al-islami*), has been adopted by the Islamist for whom the duties of *dawah* and *jihad* transcend all other obligations. Exporting the totalitarian ideologies of the 1930s, too, became an imperative whether through the front organisations established by the International, or the various friendship societies with Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. Although primarily focused on national and internal issues both totalitarianism and Islamism initially also offered world solutions, the former because Islam is universalist and the latter because the ideologies were expansionist for politico-economic reasons.

The decline of political élites and institutions in both cases created crises in the very legitimacy of those institutions. In the Muslim world, the leadership often lacked the requisite initial capital on which to build and progress. Both, therefore, harked back to a glorious past, whether it had a racial or a national basis. For Islamists it has reached back to its early days of the community of believers who accompanied and succeeded the Prophet, or more recently to the Middle Ages when Islam conquered the Middle East and southern Europe and provided the basis for much scientific and cultural progress. For the Nazis it was a racial ideal with its roots in

mythology, and with the Fascists it was imperial Rome. Other totalitarian systems found other heroic or scientific ideals on which to base their new legitimacy.

The age of totalitarianism in Europe has now ended. It has certainly been seen as the product of the twentieth century alone, and of the consequences of the drastic changes which came upon Europe in the wake of the Enlightenment, the rapidity of industrialisation and the imperialistic ambitions of states. Islamism, however, has a long way to go, given the continuation of the crisis within the Muslim world, and its relationship to the West and modernism. Experienced observers are agreed that political Islam itself has generally failed to achieve its objective of transforming society, and of substantially altering the power relationships with the West (Roy, Esposito, Hekmejian). Even where it has taken power it has had to compromise after time and accommodate criticisms and change. The recent so-called, liberal's challenge to Ayatollah Khomeini and the religious establishment in Iran, and the stripping of Hassan al Turabi's power in Sudan, are only among the two most prominent and recent.

## NOTES

1. *Jihad* (holy struggle) has two aspects: the mystical act of sacrifice as an act of devotion; the struggle for an Islamic state. It is not counted among the Five Pillars of the faith (profession of faith, prayers, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage) but to Islamists it now constitutes an additional sixth pillar. For them *jihad* almost invariably means armed struggle against the impious, the heretic or the declared enemy. *Jihad* need not operate within a territorialised state; it applies throughout the *ummah*.
2. Martin Kramer, 'Fundamentalist Islam at Large: The Drive for Power', *Middle East Quarterly* 3/2 (June 1996), p.5.
3. Fred Halliday, 'The Politics of Islamic Fundamentalism – Iran, Tunisia and the Challenge to the Secular State', in Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (eds.), *Islam, Globalisation and Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.74.
4. Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994), p.4.
5. R. Hrair Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution – Fundamentalism in the Arab World*, 2nd edn. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p.73.
6. Sayid Qutb, *Ma'alim fil-Tariq* (Beirut: 1968), quoted in Emanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam – Theology and Modern Politics* (New York: Yale University Press, 1967), p.25.
7. For criticism of Hizb ut Tahrir see, for example, articles by Azzam S. Tamimi, 'Hizb ut Tahrir, Reflections on its Origins and Ideas', 1988, at [www.msanews.mynet.net/Scholars/Tamim/tahrir.html](http://www.msanews.mynet.net/Scholars/Tamim/tahrir.html), and M. Amir Ali, 'American Elections and Hizb At Tahrir', 2000, at [www.msanews@lists.acs.ohio-state.edu](mailto:www.msanews@lists.acs.ohio-state.edu). Tamimi has had a long association with Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Brotherhood, and Ali writes as an Islamist critic.
8. Dekmejian (note 5).
9. *Ibid.* p.19.
10. Kramer (note 2), p.4.

11. Quoted by Charles J. Adams, 'Mawdudi and the Islamic State', in John L. Esposito (ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp.119-21.
12. Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p.55.
13. Kramer (note 2), p.2.
14. *Ibid.* p.6.
15. Roger Eatwell, *Fascism - A History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1995), p.57.
16. *Ibid.* p.169.
17. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), p.308.
18. *Ibid.* p.306.
19. *Ibid.* p.323.
20. *Ibid.* p.324.
21. Emilio Gentile, 'The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections on the Question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism', trans. Robert Mallett, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 1/1 (2000), pp.18-55.