The Rise of Political Islam
Introduction

In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, Islamist movements have generally been portrayed in the Western media as replicas of, or even directly linked to, Usama bin-Ladin’s Al-Qaeda network, and as chiefly motivated by irrational hatred of “the West”. The USA’s “War on Terror” is seen by its supporters as a necessary reaction to this threat, but by its critics as creating the very terrorists it was meant to suppress. However, it is impossible to understand the recent rise of Political Islam without distinguishing between short-term factors related to US foreign policy and the historical dynamics behind the emergence of contemporary Islamist movements. This briefing focuses on the historical background, while the notes on page 16 provide extra detail on Islamist movements in Africa, Asia and the Middle East not covered in the main text.

What is “Political Islam”? For some Western analysts, the very idea is misleading: Islam is seen as an inherently political religion, which makes no distinction between religion and government, a view which echoes the perspective of Muslim scholars who emphasize that Islam is “din wa dawla” (religion and state). Others challenge these interpretations, pointing to the diverse forms of government and social relations in Muslim societies, arguing that “Islam” is not a monolith. In the account presented here, “Political Islam” is taken to mean political movements which assert that “Islam” is the solution to the problems of the modern world. Islamist movements do not simply offer personal salvation to believers, but promise social and political transformation.

Only a minority of these movements use violence to achieve their aims. They are deeply divided among themselves over fundamental questions such as whether to capture state power or gradually change society. They are also organisationally diverse — ranging from governing parties to charitable networks to underground military cells.

One factor behind the emergence of Political Islam has been the impact of Europe and North America on Muslim societies — ranging from direct military occupation to the social and cultural transformation brought about by industrialisation and urbanisation following Western models. Islamists have challenged colonial occupation and mobilised their supporters in a search for more culturally ‘authentic’ political models than those seen as having been imported from the West. They have also argued for a return to Islamic values to counteract the social tensions which accompany modernisation. So the principle of zakat (alms-giving) has often been mobilised to provide a safety net for the poor.

Another factor has been the changing role of the state. In medieval Muslim societies (as in medieval Christian European societies), religion regulated areas of people’s lives now supervised by the state, such as education, welfare, marriage and divorce, inheritance and childcare. The response of Islamist movements to this encroachment on the realm of religion has not, however, generally been to strengthen the role of traditional Islamic scholars. There are sharp tactical disagreements among Islamists about how to create a more Islamic society. In many cases, Islamists have set out to Islamise the state, demanding that governments use the Shari’a to generate modern legislation. Others have focussed on the Islamization of society, through pious example, good works and creation of social spaces in which personal behaviour is governed by “Islamic” rules (usually more strictly interpreted than in the rest of society).

Events in Iraq since 2003 demonstrate the interaction between long and short-term factors in the development of Islamist movements. The US government cited Saddam Hussein’s alleged links with Al-Qaeda as a reason for invading Iraq, although its critics argued that there was little evidence to support such claims. One outcome of the US invasion has been the creation of a political landscape dominated by Islamist movements. This is not merely the result of the opposition of some Sunni Islamists to the US invasion, but also reflects other factors such as the retreat of the state from welfare provision and the declining legitimacy of secular nationalist ideologies such as Ba’athism.

Although media reports tended to focus on the sensational exploits of Abu-Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, the leader of “Al-Qaeda in Iraq” killed by US forces in June 2006, the creation of an Islamist political consensus is likely to have greater effect on Iraqi society in the long run.

* see notes on page 16

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UGI Briefings

Editor Frank Preiss
Published by
Understanding Global Issues Ltd
Text and design copyright © 2007 Understanding Global Issues Ltd
ISSN 1355-2988

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cover picture: A pro-Islamic demonstration in Istanbul in December 2004. The poster reads: “Murderer Putin. Get out from Chechnya”. The Turkish government is keen to avoid such scenes, fearing that they may prejudice Turkey’s negotiations to join the European Union. Western leaders in their turn worry that if the negotiations fail Turkey may revert to a hardline Islamic stance. (AP Photo/Osman Orsal)
The Birth of Islam

According to Muslim tradition, Islam – ‘submission to God’s will’ – was revealed gradually to the Prophet Muhammad between the year 610 CE and his death.

Muhammad was a member of a merchant family in the Arabian city of Mecca. At first he doubted his religious calling, but his attacks on the traditional polytheism of Arabia, coupled with calls for greater social responsibility, earned him the enmity of Mecca’s leading families. However, he gained a small band of followers, including his first wife, Khadijah, and other members of his family. Harrassed and socially excluded, the small community migrated north to the city of Medina in 622 CE, the starting date for the Muslim calendar.

The community grew, and won a victory over a Meccan army at the Battle of Badr in 624. Despite a defeat the following year and a siege of Medina by the Meccans, Muhammad held the community together. By 630 the tide had turned and he returned to Mecca in triumph. By the time he died in 632, most of the Arabian peninsula had either embraced Islam or concluded alliances with the Muslims.

Muhammad’s death ended the period of direct revelation of God’s will to humanity. The community had lost a leader who had won thousands of converts to Islam, but Muhammad was also a state-builder and successful military commander. His death threatened to overturn the new political order in Arabia.

One of the Prophet’s closest companions, Abu-Bakr, was chosen as caliph (khalifa in Arabic, meaning a deputy or successor). His office combined elements of the Prophet’s religious and political roles, as he was the community’s judge, spiritual guide and military leader. He was not, however, a prophet. Muslims believe that Muhammad was the ‘Seal of the Prophets’ ending a long line of messengers from God spanning thousands of years of human history.

Under Umar, the second caliph, the Muslim state expanded dramatically. By 644, when he died, Muslim armies had conquered the Levant and Egypt and, under the third caliph, Uthman, they added North Africa and Spain. Their northward advance was eventually halted in battle at Poitiers by Charles Martel in 732.

The strains of holding together this far-flung empire then began to show. Those who had played a central role in the conquests complained that Uthman gave precedence to family ties over the claims of piety or service to the state. Uthman was murdered by mutinying soldiers from Fustat in Egypt and was succeeded by Ali, the Prophet’s son-in-law. Ali’s authority was challenged by members of Uthman’s clan, the Umayyads, led by Mu’awiyah, who accused him of complicity in Uthman’s murder. The power struggle developed into open war, and Umayyad and Alid forces joined battle at Siffin, in Syria in 657. Mu’awiyah established a state based in Damascus, and after Ali’s murder in 661, successfully claimed authority over the whole Muslim empire. The political centre of the Muslim world shifted decisively away from the Arabian peninsula.

The murder of Ali brought to an end the era of the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs, who Sunni Muslims believe preserved a form of government instituted in the days of the Prophet. Some have also argued that the caliphate was subverted by those such as the Umayyads who wanted to transform it into mere kingship.

In 750 the Umayyads in turn were overthrown and Baghdad became the capital of the new Abbasid caliphate. The ulama, or body of Islamic scholars, now gradually became the focus of spiritual authority in Muslim societies. It was a time of great cultural richness, with innovations in music, literature, architecture, medicine and science. Europeans, too, benefited from this ‘Golden Age’; many works of Greek and Roman scholarship were translated into Arabic, and so preserved, at the behest of the Abbasid caliphs.

The Ka’ba at Mecca, the holiest shrine in Islam, was already a traditional focus of worship in the polytheistic period that Muhammad brought to an end.
Muslim Beliefs and Practices

All Muslims agree that the Qu’ran is the written form of the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad and contains their core beliefs.

The word Islam shares its root letters with the Arabic word for peace, ‘salam’. Muslims’ core beliefs are summed up in the declaration of faith (shahada): ‘There is no god but God and Muhammad is his messenger.’ This simple creed articulates the universalism of Islam - the idea that there is one message for the whole of humanity. It emphasizes the oneness of God, a doctrine known as tawhid. This idea is not only a condemnation of polytheism; it can also mean the rejection of any obsession - such as the pursuit of wealth and power - which takes the place of God in human minds.

In Islam men and women are responsible before God for their actions. Those who follow the ‘Straight Path’ revealed by God’s messenger are protected; those who stray will be punished in the after-life. Sinners can repent and redeem themselves through good works, which will count in their favour on the day of judgement.

The ‘five pillars of Islam’ are the public practices through which Muslims affirm their faith: the declaration of faith (shahada), prayer, alms-giving (zakat), fasting during the month of Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina (hajj).

The concept of Shari’a – literally ‘the way’ - is often misunderstood. Commonly translated as ‘Islamic law’ it has a much wider meaning for Muslims and can be used as a synonym for Islam. Shari’a encompasses worship and individual conduct as well as social practice and criminal and civil law.

For all Muslims the Qu’ran is the prime source of the Shari’a. It is the written form of the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad and contains their core beliefs, including the doctrine of God, the role of the prophets, relations with other religions, and regulations for the life of the community, such as rules for marriage and divorce, the ‘five pillars’, and punishments for theft and adultery.

For detailed rules for social life, most Muslims also draw on other sources, principally the sunna, a collection of traditions concerning the practice of the Prophet, his companions and other pious Muslims. Initially these traditions (ahadith singular: hadith) were preserved orally, but in the 9th century they were collected and written down by scholars. Al-Bukhari listed nearly 3,000 of the most reliable traditions, while his follower Muslim – Abul Husain Muslim bin al-Hajjaj al-Nisapuri – collected around 4,000. Scrutinising the ‘chain of transmission’, or list of people reporting them, was an important way of assessing the reliability of these memories.

The third basic source of the Shari’a is the consensus of the Muslim community (ijma’) in interpreting and applying the teaching of the Qu’ran and the sunna. Sunnis consider as binding practices that have been continuously accepted by the community since the days of the first four caliphs, but others can be overturned. The concept of ijma’ is an important mechanism for Muslims to respond to new problems.

Reasoning (ijtihad) is another source of the Shari’a. Drawing on the Qu’ran and the sunna, competent scholars may make legal judgements using their own reasoning. Sunni Muslims have traditionally considered that this process was only valid in the first centuries of Islam, arguing that the ‘gate of ijtihad’ closed in the 10th century. Shi’a Muslims give the ulama much more freedom to adapt the law to local circumstances.

Chinese Muslims from Xinjiang seeking visas for the Hajj pilgrimage, wait to break their fast sitting in front of the Saudi Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan. In October 2006 about six thousand Chinese pilgrims came here to get visas as Islamabad is closer to their home in China than Beijing. (AP Photo / B.K.Bangash)
greater opportunities to use reasoning, through the activities of specially qualified scholars known as mujtahids.

The right to issue legal judgements is bound up with the question of authority within the Muslim community. Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the early Muslims settled on a system which saw spiritual and temporal authority combined in the leadership of the caliph. Over time spiritual authority came to rest with the ulama. Among Sunni Muslims the ulama is not organised in a formal ‘church’. There is no process of ‘ordination’. Religious scholars traditionally gained a wide audience through teaching and publishing, and attachment to an important place of worship, such as the Al-Azhar mosque-university in Egypt.

Shi’a Muslims have a clearer clerical hierarchy. After a long period of study under a senior scholar, students may qualify as mujtahids. Lay believers must follow the guidance of a mujtahid, whose judgements are binding on them, unless overturned by the decision of a more senior mujtahid. The Shi’a ulama also have the right to collect a special tax, known as the khums. Thus the most senior Shi’a scholars, known as Ayatollahs, are the heads of powerful religious institutions providing religious education and welfare to thousands of beneficiaries.

It is commonly thought that Islam does not distinguish between government and religion, but historically most Muslim societies have shown a balance between the spiritual authority of the ulama and the temporal authority of secular government. And the ulama have rarely sanctioned rebellion, preferring bad government to none. “Even if somebody from among unjust kings becomes ruler, this would be better than there being none”, wrote Ibn Taymiyya, the 14th century Sunni jurist. The same can be seen in Shi’a Islam; throughout most of their history Shi’a Muslims have lived under the rule of non-Shi’as.

In pre-modern Muslim societies – as in Europe – the state played a limited role in everyday life. Government had little role in enforcing standards of personal and collective behaviour, regulating personal relationships through marriage and divorce or providing education. These areas of Muslims’ lives were governed by the Shari’a, usually as interpreted by the ulama. It was the encroachment of the modern nation state on the sphere of personal relations which provided the impetus behind many twentieth-century Islamist movements. However, it was often not the traditional ulama who were behind these mobilisations, but activists trained in the secular education system.

The question of authority is at the root of the difference between Sunni and Shi’a Islam. Sunni Muslims, who are the majority, look to the sunna, or practice, of the Prophet and his closest companions for guidance in addition to the Qu’ran. Shi’a Muslims follow the sunna of the Prophet, but they also look to the Prophet’s direct descendants through his daughter, Fatima, for religious and political leadership. The name, Shi’a, comes from the Arabic phrase shi’at Ali, or ‘partisans of Ali’. The first Shi’a Muslims were supporters of Ali, the fourth caliph, and the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. They believed that the Prophet designated Ali as his successor, but that his will was thwarted with the election of Abu-Bakr, the first caliph.

According to Shi’a tradition, Ali was the first of the Imams, infallible leaders of the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet. The majority of Shi’a Muslims believe that there were twelve Imams, although some traditions recognise only seven, or even five. After Ali’s murder in 661, his sons were unable to take on the role as political power passed into the hands of the Umayyad dynasty. Ali’s youngest son, Hussein, led a doomed rebellion against the tyrannical Umayyad ruler, Yazid in 680 CE. After answering the call of the citizens of Kufa to lead them, Hussein and a small band of followers were massacred by Yazid’s troops in the Iraqi desert. The town of Kerbala, with its shrine at Hussein’s tomb, marks the spot where the battle took place. The narrative of Hussein’s revolt and his subsequent martyrdom has been invoked in numerous contemporary political struggles, from the Iranian revolution to the mobilisation of the Lebanese Shi’a community by Hezbollah against Israel.

Most Shi’a Muslims believe that the line of infallible Imams ended with the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi who disappeared in 874 CE. He is considered to be in ‘occultation’, in other words present but invisible to human beings, until his expected return, which will usher in a reign of justice.

**Women in Islam**

Islam is often seen in the West as oppressive to women, symbolised by Muslims’ adoption of the hijab, or veil. Critics point to aspects of Islamic law and practice where women are not equal to men, e.g., inheritance laws, marriage and divorce, and legal testimony. Muslims reply that women’s position was considerably improved by the coming of Islam into the patriarchal society of Arabia; Muslim women enjoyed rights unavailable to their sisters in Europe until the 19th century, e.g., the right to inherit, hold and manage property in their own name.

Both men and women are addressed directly in the Qu’ran, and are equally responsible before God for their deeds. In family life their ideal roles are seen as complementary, rather than equal, with the husband as provider and the wife as homemaker and educator of the children.

Nevertheless, historical role models for Muslim women’s participation in public life are not hard to find. Aisha, the youngest wife of the Prophet, played an important political role in the early Muslim community. She led a rebellion against Ali, the fourth caliph, and was present at the Battle of the Camel where her supporters were defeated.
The Colonial Encounter

The conflicts and mistrust that scar the Middle East today have their origins in the rapid growth of the European nation states and their imperial ambitions.

The sack of Baghdad in 1258 by the Mongols brought about the end of the Abbasid Empire. When a new Muslim power arose to take its place, it was led by Turks, rather than Arabs. In the fifteenth century the remnants of the Byzantine Empire fell to the Ottomans. Within a generation the Ottoman empire had expanded to include Syria and Egypt and swiftly brought large areas of the Middle East and North Africa under its rule. In 1517 the ruler of Mecca accepted Ottoman overlordship, making the Sultans protectors of the Islamic holy places.

Ottoman culture was a fusion of Turkish, Arabic and Persian influences and Islam played an important role in knitting together this diverse society. Christians and Jews, as 'people of the book', were given protected status. They were exempt from military service and were governed by their own religious laws but were required to pay an extra poll-tax, known as the jiziya.

In the 19th century this sprawling empire, with its linguistic diversity and its semi-autonomous religious communities, contrasted starkly with the nation states that were emerging in Europe. European manufactures flooded the Middle East, and the European powers took military action to keep Ottoman markets open. Using their advantage in weapons technology, they expanded aggressively, making it almost impossible for the Ottoman rulers to keep pace. By the late 19th century the Ottoman government was bankrupt and it eventually collapsed after World War I.

European states also used the issue of religion to intervene in Ottoman society. They recruited members of religious minorities such Christians and Jews to act as consular officials and commercial representatives. At times of sectarian conflict - often exacerbated by the economic distress caused by European goods swamping local markets - the Europeans powers sent troops to protect local minorities and their own citizens.

This was the backdrop for the lives of two key thinkers, whose championing of Islam as the framework for a response to the encroachment of European power inspired many later Islamist movements. Jamal-al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh also challenged the authority of the traditional ulama, prefiguring the rise of 20th century Islamic political activism, which has often drawn its cadres from graduates of the secular education system.

Wahhabism, the movement led by Muhammad Ibn Abd-al-Wahhab in late 18th century Arabia, had a different origin to the intellectual debates of Afghani and Abduh, but through its alliance with the House of Sa’ud, it has had a profound effect on the development of Political Islam. Alliance between Ibn Abd-al-Wahhab and Ibn Sa’ud, ruler of the Nejd area of Arabia, was cemented by the marriage of Ibn Abd-al-Wahhab’s daughter to one of Ibn Sa’ud’s sons. Sa’udi-Wahhabi forces sacked the Iraqi city of Kerbala in 1801 and took control of Mecca in 1803 and Medina in 1804. In 1810 they plundered Medina, destroying relics at the Prophet’s tomb. This act of iconoclasm provoked a response from the Ottoman Sultan, who sent the governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, to recapture the holy cities.

In the 20th century the partnership between Wahhabism and the Sa’udi family was to have a far greater impact on the Muslim world. The Ottoman Empire, which had expelled the Wahhabis from Mecca and Medina in the early 19th century, collapsed, leaving local leaders vying for control of the Arabian peninsula. The British, who had encouraged an Arab revolt

Sultan Abdül Hamid II (ruled 1876-1909)
His predecessors had introduced administrative reforms (the Tanzimat), and had even experimented with constitutional government, but as the Ottoman empire continued to fracture Abdül Hamid re-imposed harsh autocratic rule. In particular his treatment of the recalcitrant (Christian) Greek and Armenian populations aroused worldwide condemnation.
against the Ottomans, supported the ruler of Mecca, Sharif Hussein, but later backed the ruler of Nejd, Ibn Sa’ud, who defeated Sharif Hussein and united Arabia under his leadership.

The discovery of vast quantities of oil in what was now called Saudi Arabia turned Ibn Saud from the penniless ruler of an obscure desert kingdom into a powerful force in world affairs. The Wahhabi movement, still allied to the Saudi royal family, gained access to virtually unlimited funding to spread its puritan vision of Islam around the globe. Saudi rulers relied on the Wahhabi movement to enforce some cohesion on a society undergoing rapid economic and social change. Ironically, in a country renowned for the extravagance of its ruling class, Wahhabism, which preached the austerity and simplicity of the early Muslim community became the official creed.

By the 1990s, however, cracks were beginning to show in Saudi society. The decision of the royal family to invite the US to set up permanent bases on Saudi soil in the wake of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait was a source of great bitterness. Rising unemployment and a growing gap between rich and poor also encouraged criticism of the elite. Opponents of the royal family turned the Saudi rulers’ Wahhabi rhetoric against them, accusing them of hypocrisy and betraying Islam. The home-grown Islamic opposition included a radical wing, which bombed US bases, including an attack on Khobar near Dhahran in 1996. The renewed Palestinian uprising, or intifada, after 2000 and the second US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 further emboldened the radicals, who kidnapped and beheaded a US engineer based in Saudi Arabia in 2004.

Two Modern Thinkers

Jamal-al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) travelled widely and lived in Afghanistan, India, France, Egypt, Turkey and Iran. After his lectures on Islamic philosophy scandalised traditionalist scholars in Istanbul he moved to Egypt, where he taught at Al-Azhar university in Cairo. There he attracted a wide following including Muhammad Abduh, then a student at the university. With his followers Afghani debated modernist and reformist ideas, expounding his belief that Islam was compatible with reason and freedom of thought. His association with early nationalist activists and opponents of European imperialism brought him to the attention of the authorities and he was forced to leave Egypt in 1879. In 1884 he published a newspaper in Paris in collaboration with Abduh. After a brief period in England he travelled to Iran, at first advising the Shah, and later organising a nationalist campaign against him in protest at plans to award a tobacco concession to a foreign company. He ended his life in the Ottoman court, in Albert Hourani’s words “a virtual prisoner of the sultan although treated with honour”.

For Afghani the key to the revival of Muslim political power and Muslim societies lay not in copying Europe, but in the Islamic tradition itself. Muslims’ powerlessness before European imperialism was not due to the backwardness of Islam, but was the product of internal problems. If Muslims could overcome their divisions and forge a new community of faith, a revived Islamic umma, they would find the resources to resist European domination. In Islamic Solidarity, Afghani argued: “The believers in Islam are preoccupied neither with their ethnic origins nor with the people of which they are a part because they are loyal to their faith; they have given up a narrow bond in favour of a universal bond: the bond of faith”.

Rejection of European domination did not entail a refusal to engage with European ideas, however. Afghani believed that European science was compatible with Islam and was a necessary ingredient for the revitalisation of Muslim society. Afghani’s ideas brought him into conflict not only with the European powers, but also with local rulers and the traditional ulama. His stress on global Islamic solidarity led him to champion the role of the Ottoman caliphs, although most fell far short of his ideal of a just ruler. The son of an Egyptian farmer, Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) received a traditional religious education at Al-Azhar university in Cairo, which he entered in 1866. He worked closely with Afghani between 1872 and 1879, when he was dismissed from his teaching post in the wake of Afghani’s expulsion from Egypt. Summoned by the Egyptian ruler, Khedive Tawfiq, he returned to Cairo to edit the Official Gazette, but his support for the nationalist revolt led by army officer Ahmad Urabi in 1882 led to another period of exile. After a brief collaboration with Afghani in Paris, Abduh moved to Beirut. On his return to Egypt in 1889 he became a judge, and then Mufti of Egypt in 1899. He worked closely with the British authorities, and came into conflict with the ulama because of his call for the reform of traditional Islamic doctrine.

Muhammad Abduh broke with his teacher to advocate a gradualist nationalism. Abandoning Afghani’s pan-Islamic ideas, he was prepared to work with the colonial authorities in order to bring about reforms and strengthen the modern nation state. In his last years he championed educational reform in Egypt. His philosophical approach to the Islamic tradition was highly influenced by rationalism. He argued that traditional interpretations of Islam which contradicted the moral order of the first Muslims should be ignored. His vision of Islam was one of symbiosis between rationalism and respect for tradition, guided by the purity of belief of the first Muslims.
Modern Sunni Activism

Islamists have frequently oscillated between attempting to reform society and the revolutionary overthrow of the non-Islamic state.

The Muslim Brotherhood was one of the most important models of Islamist organisation in the 20th century. Founded in 1928 by a schoolteacher, Hassan al-Banna, in the Egyptian city of Isma‘iliyya, it quickly spread to neighbouring countries and became influential in Syria, Palestine and Jordan. Also in Egypt, Sayyid Qutb (see box) developed a radical critique of the Brotherhood’s political methods, arguing for the revolutionary overthrow of the non-Islamic order whereas Al-Banna’s stressed the gradual ‘Islamisation’ of society. Qutb was executed in 1966, but his ideas inspired underground Islamist groups in Egypt, including Islamic Jihad.

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Sayyid Qutb

Sayyid Qutb, like al-Banna, was a school teacher by profession, although it was in his parallel career as a writer and literary critic that he was chiefly known during the 1940s. He joined the Brotherhood in 1951, after a visit to the USA which had a profound effect on his life. He was appalled by the materialism of US society and shocked to hear Americans praising the assassination of Al-Banna. His employers in the Ministry of Public Instruction had hoped that his trip would provide them with a useful spokesman for Western-style reforms of the education system. Instead Qutb denounced the USA, arguing Egypt needed a culturally authentic value system, not one imported from the West.

While in prison Qutb formulated a radical critique of contemporary society, rejecting what he saw as the shallow materialism of both western modernity and Arab nationalism. In *Signposts*, published shortly after his release from prison in 1964, he outlined three key concepts. Firstly he argued that all contemporary societies had reverted to a state of pre-Islamic barbarism (the *jahiliyya*, or Age of Ignorance). He identified various faces of jahiliyya, ranging from atheistic Communism to political systems which formally recognised God’s existence but adopted man-made laws in place of Islamic law.

Secondly, Qutb rejected “human rulership in all its shapes and forms”, arguing that political leaders who sought to exercise sovereignty were in effect usurping divine power. Thirdly, he called for the creation of a new Muslim society made up of people “whose entire lives – in their intellectual, social and political aspects – are based on Islamic ethics”. This could not be achieved simply by the gradual and patient recruitment of individuals, but had to be set in motion by the actions of a Muslim vanguard.

The novelty in Qutb’s approach lay in his characterisation of all contemporary Muslim societies as barbaric, and his designation of their leaders as non-Muslims. The idea that Muslims should pronounce other Muslims to be unbelievers (‘*takfir*’) is not accepted by the majority of Islamic scholars. The conclusions Qutb drew were equally radical: the vanguard should act to remove the non-Islamic order and only afterwards worry about the detailed laws and systems of the new society.

*Signposts* quickly reached a wide audience, despite being banned shortly after publication. The following year Qutb was rearrested and charged with treason, and was executed in 1966. The brutal response of the state to Qutb’s ideas made him a hero and a martyr to many within the Muslim Brotherhood. The organisation’s leadership, however, were critical of Qutb’s approach. They did not attack him by name, criticising instead the Pakistani scholar Abul-Ala Mawdudi on whose work Qutb drew in writing *Signposts*.

Qutb’s ideas provided the intellectual seedbed for the next wave of the Egyptian Islamist movement in the late 1970s. Following the death of Gamal Abd-al-Nasser in 1970, his successor Anwar Sadat turned away from the ‘Arab Socialism’ of the 1960s in favour of economic liberalisation and rapprochement with the West. He attempted to give an Islamic gloss to his policies, styling himself ‘the Believer President’ and allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to begin publishing again. Other, more radical groups also emerged. The Society of Muslims, also known as Al-Takfir wa-l-Hijrah, believed in complete withdrawal from contemporary society and labelled all those outside its own ranks as unbelievers. The group was crushed after it kidnapped and then killed the Minister of Islamic Endowments, Muhammad al-Dhahabi, in 1977.

The Gama’at Islamiyya, or Islamic Societies, recruited thousands of university students. By the late 1970s they controlled many student unions, marginalising leftist and Nasserist groups. They called for a restoration of the Islamic caliphate, abolished after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Initially they were tolerated by the government, but their opposition to Sadat’s negotiations with Israel led to confrontations with the authorities.

In October 1981 Sadat was killed by members of another small Islamist group, Islamic Jihad. Although the assassination caused consternation among Western governments, little changed in Egypt. The new president, Hosni Mubarak continued Sadat’s policies of economic liberalisation and peace with Israel. He executed the leaders of Islamic Jihad and imprisoned many other activists.

The Brotherhood survived, continuing to attract large numbers of Egyptians to its vision of an Islamic society. Although officially banned, it gained representation in parliament by putting up candidates for a legal political party. Government cuts in health and education provision and the gradual decay of the Nasserist welfare state increased the importance and popularity of the Brotherhood’s charitable work.

Repression did not initially destroy the radical groups either, which continued to operate as terrorist cells targeting foreign tourists and government officials. A military offensive by the state in the 1990s eventually crushed the armed Islamist movement, although Egyptian activists continued to play a prominent role in radical Islamist groups abroad such as Al-Qaeda.
Local armed Islamist opposition groups active (or claimed to be active) since 2001

Muslim attitudes to living in Britain
From a survey by GfK NOP/Social Research

Who represents you politically?

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<th>Representation</th>
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<td>MP</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mosque</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Council of Britain</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Councillor</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade Union</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significant differences
- One in three Muslims aged 18–24 (28%) mention their Mosque, compared to 15% of 25–44 year olds and 10% of those aged 45+
- Second generation Muslims are more likely to mention their Mosque than First generation Muslims (21% vs 15%)
- Muslims who prefer British law see a traditional democratic representative as more important than their counterparts who prefer Shari'a law (23% mention their MPs vs 11%)

Which party would you vote for?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lab Dem</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refused</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the full survey visit www.gfknop.co.uk/content/news/news/Channel4_MuslimsBritain_toplinefindings.pdf
Local armed Islamist opposition groups active (or claimed to be active) since 2001

For the full survey visit www.gfknop.co.uk/content/news/news/Channel4_MuslimsBritain_toplinefindings.pdf

Sources: Britannica Yearbook, CIA World Factbook, OIC, etc.
Revolution in Iran

The overthrow of the Shah in 1979, and the creation of an Islamic Republic under Ruhollah Khomeini, demonstrated the wide appeal of Political Islam.

To its supporters, the Iranian revolution showed that political change did not have to fit a European mould. For critics, the rise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (see opposite) was proof of the ‘reactionary’ and ‘medieval’ nature of Political Islam.

Under the Shah Iran had already experienced rapid economic and social change. Key reforms included the redistribution of land from large landowners to the farmers and profit-sharing in industry. Education was removed from the control of clergy while laws on personal status were reformed to bring them closer to a western-style secular system. In foreign relations the Shah developed close relations with the USA. Incomes rose dramatically, but so did inflation and a growing gap between rich and poor. The autocratic government stifled all criticism.

US criticism of Iran’s human rights record led to relaxed government controls and a flowering of middle-class opposition. Demonstrations widened in 1978 after an attack on Khomeini, then in exile in Iraq, in the government press. Sixty people were killed by the police, triggering a cycle of protest as commemorative gatherings became huge demonstrations against the government. As it grew the social composition of the movement changed, drawing in the urban working class and religious students. The clergy, rather than middle-class liberals, began to play a leading role.

Khomeini was expelled from Iraq. Moving to Paris he made direct contact with opposition groups inside Iran for the first time. In November 1978 he met the leaders of the opposition National Front and agreed to the removal of the Shah and the establishment of a ‘democratic and Islamic’ government. Demonstrations and strikes continued, and the Shah left the country on January 16 1979. Government was left in the hands of a Regent and the Supreme Army Council, but these bodies were unable to function. Khomeini returned in triumph on 1 February 1979.

Khomeini named Mehdi Barzagan prime minister in a provisional government. The last prime minister appointed by the Shah, Shahpur Bakhtiar, fled the country as the army began to declare support for the revolution. A national referendum resulted in an overwhelming majority in favour of abolishing the monarchy and establishing an Islamic Republic.

The declaration of the Islamic Republic of Iran and adoption of a new constitution was followed by a struggle for power in which Khomeini and his supporters were one pole of attraction within a broader movement.

Triumph of the clerics

The Iranian revolution, with its massive street protests and workers’ strikes, had much in common with 20th century European revolutions. But the faction which emerged victorious to head the new state was led not by nationalists or socialists, but by turbaned clerics.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah

The Lebanese Shi’a movement Hezbollah is the product of two major influences. Firstly the political mobilisation of the country’s Shi’a community, which was historically marginalised under the sectarian division of power. Since the 1940s, the presidency has been reserved for Maronite Christians while Sunni Muslims have held the prime minister’s office. Secondly, the movement was inspired directly by the Iranian Revolution and follows Khomeini’s doctrine of wilayat al-faqih.

In 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon in an attempt to crush the Palestinian Liberation (PLO) Organisation which was headquartered in the city. The Israeli invasion triggered a split in the Shi’a militia Amal, and a new group emerged, eventually adopting the name Hezbollah – ‘Party of God’. As the civil war drew to a close in the late 1980s, Hezbollah began to play an ever more prominent role in the resistance to the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon. Israeli forces had maintained control of large areas of the South since 1982, relying on a pro-Israeli militia, the South Lebanon Army (SLA) after 1985.

The SLA’s brutality was symbolised by Khiyam prison camp, where hundreds of suspected resistance supporters were tortured. Throughout the 1990s Hezbollah organised military operations against the SLA and the Israelis, bringing together Lebanese fighters from different political and religious backgrounds. In May 2000, Israeli troops finally withdrew from South Lebanon, and the SLA collapsed.

Hezbollah’s role in liberating South Lebanon won the party wide support. Hezbollah supporters won seats in the Lebanese parliament, while the party maintained good relationships with Syria and Iran. In July 2006 Hezbollah announced that it had captured two Israeli soldiers in a bid to exchange them for Lebanese prisoners in Israel, thus triggering a new Israeli invasion of South Lebanon.
ranging from the communist Tudeh Party and the guerrilla Mojahedin-e Khalq on the left to middle-class liberals campaigning for a western-style democracy. By the end of 1979, however, Khomeini and his supporters were gaining the upper hand. Students backing Khomeini seized control of the US embassy in Tehran and took staff hostage. Organised in the Islamic Republican Party, Khomeini’s supporters dominated the parliament and key sections of the state. Over the next two years most of Khomeini’s high-profile critics, ranging from senior clerics such as Ayatollah Shariatmadari to the first president of the Republic, Abolhasan Bani-Sadr were manoeuvred out of power.

The ‘two souls’ of the Iranian revolution

Ruhollah Khomeini was born in Khumayn, and received a traditional religious education. He abandoned the established view of the Islamic jurist (faqih) as an advisor to the monarchy, arguing that kingship was incompatible with Islam. He evolved the theory of the ‘guardianship of the jurist’ (wilayat al-faqih) which shaped the Islamic republic after the revolution. He argued that in the absence of the last of the Shi’a Imams, the Mahdi, political leadership should be exercised by the ulama in general and the leading faqih in particular. This was a radical departure from the classic Sh’ia doctrine, which placed a senior cleric as head of the community of believers, but with the state headed by a different ruler.

Despite their religious framework, Khomeini’s arguments were attractive to many Iranians because they were articulated in a language borrowed from nationalism and the Left. He spoke of the ‘two souls’ of the Iranian revolution. He argued that in the absence of the last of the Shi’a Imams, the Mahdi, political leadership should be exercised by the ulama in general and the leading faqih in particular. This was a radical departure from the classic Sh’ia doctrine, which placed a senior cleric as head of the community of believers, but with the state headed by a different ruler.

Ali Shariati was born in 1933 in a village in northern Khorasan. His mother was from a land-owning family. His father was a well-known local Islamic teacher and thinker renowned for introducing modern critical thinkers to his students. He had also formed the short-lived ‘Movement of God-worshipping Socialists’, of which Ali was a member.

In 1956 Shariati travelled to Paris, arriving at a moment when the struggle against European colonialism was reaching a new peak. He studied philology at the Sorbonne, but also became involved in radical anti-imperialist and student politics. He translated works by Che Guevara, Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon and Louis Massignon. He also developed an interest in sociology, western Orientalism and radical Catholicism.

Nine years later Shariati returned to Iran, and was immediately jailed for eight months for anti-government activities abroad. He then secured a post at the College of Literature in Mashad. It was his lectures at the Husseinieh Irshad, a modern Islamic centre in northern Tehran between 1969 and 1972 which first attracted a wide audience. The lectures circulated on tape and were only later published under the title Islamoology. Young people began forming Shariati study groups. The authorities were concerned by their growing radicalisation. Shariati was imprisoned and the Husseinieh Irshad was closed down, on the grounds that it was encouraging the growth of the Mujahedin-e Khalq, a left-wing guerrilla movement which had launched an armed struggle against the Shah. In 1977 Shariati managed to leave Iran, but died shortly afterwards. Many in the Iranian opposition believe he was murdered by Iranian agents.

Shariati linked Marxist ideas such as ‘class struggle’ and ‘imperialism’ to figures in the Shi’a tradition, such as Imam Ali and Imam Hussein. He argued that Abu Zarr Gharibi, a companion of the Prophet who was critical of the early caliphs, was the “first God-worshipping socialist”. On women’s role in society, he argued that the Qur’an’s message had to be understood afresh by each generation as society changed. While polygamy was acceptable and logical at the time of the Prophet, because it offered protection and material support for the vulnerable, in a modern society it was wrong and degrading to women. Yet he was also strongly critical of what he saw as the immorality and materialism of the West. Women in Europe might have attained liberation from restrictive customs, but they were also imprisoned by consumerism, leading lonely, shallow lives.

Shariati criticised ‘western civilisation’, but also adopted ideas from western thinkers, particularly Marx. Like many Third World intellectuals of his time, he mobilised ideas from ‘the West’ against western domination, looking for inspiration to the traditions of his own society.

Khomeini and Shariati’s ideas represent something of a paradox. Both are considered central to the Iranian revolution, and both use the vocabulary of Shi’a Islam to articulate a project of radical political change. They differ however, on who should be the agent of that change. Khomeini wanted to strengthen, and reinvent the role of the clergy. Shariati, by contrast, saw the clergy as part of the problem of the old regime. In many ways, Khomeini and Shariati could be seen as two souls of the Iranian revolution – although both opposed the Shah, one sought an extension of clerical power, the other liberation from it.
From Afghanistan to Al-Qa‘idar

The events of 9/11 focused the attention of the world on the radical Islamist network known as Al-Qa‘idar, (‘the base’) and its leader, Usamah Bin-Ladin.

Al-Qa‘idar had its roots in the resistance to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s, which brought the group’s future leaders together, and provided the initial training ground for Al-Qa‘idar’s cadres.

The communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan seized power in a coup in 1978, but immediately faced a rebellion from Islamist groups opposed to its policies of secularisation, land reform and re-education. The following year, the USSR intervened to impose a new leadership on the PDP and thousands of Soviet troops entered Afghanistan to support the Moscow-backed government.

The invasion only strengthened the rebellion. The USSR’s enemies began channelling arms to the Islamist guerrillas, or mujahidin. Inside Afghanistan the presence of Soviet troops increased the appeal of the mujahidin who now appeared as the USSR’s enemies. Their coalition fragmented, leading to the outbreak of civil war.

The withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 led to the eventual collapse of the pro-Moscow government and in 1992 the mujahidin took control of the capital, Kabul. It was soon clear that the different guerrilla organisations had little in common beyond their hatred of the USSR. Their coalition fragmented, leading to the breakout of civil war.

Meanwhile, the Arab volunteers’ alliance with the Saudi and US governments had been shattered by the US-led attack on Iraq in the wake of Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Despite their loathing for the secular Ba’ath Party dictatorship in Iraq, the ‘Arab Afghans’ were alarmed by the Saudi government’s decision to invite US troops into Saudi Arabia. They believed that the presence of US forces in the kingdom defiled the holy shrines of Mecca and Medina and was an insult to Muslims everywhere. For Bin-Ladin, by this act, the Saudi royal family had forfeited any claim to protect Islam, whether in Saudi Arabia itself, or in the wider world. He criticised the Saudi rulers, branding them renegades from Islam.

In 1992 Bin-Ladin left Saudi Arabia for Sudan. His Saudi nationality was revoked in 1994, leaving him stateless. By 1996 he had returned to Afghanistan, first to Jalalabad, and then to Kandahar, where he was sheltered by the Taliban movement. This was also the year that Bin-Ladin announced his first call for jihad against the USA and its allies. Alongside him as he made his appeal was Ayman al-Zawahiri, an activist in the Egyptian Islamic Jihad group. Al-Zawahiri, often described as ‘Number Two’ to Bin-Ladin, brought his networks of Egyptian activists, with their experience of a long military struggle against the Egyptian government, into the new organisation, by now called ‘Al-Qa‘idar’.

The ‘Arab Afghans’ also turned against the pro-Western governments of their home countries. In Algeria, after the army overthrew the 1991 elections which would have brought the Islamic Salvation Front to power, ‘Arab Afghans’ helped create the Armed Islamic Group which conducted a bloody war against government forces, at the cost of 100,000 lives. In Jordan, Afghan veterans threatened the government. Rifaat, an Islamist militant trained in Afghanistan, told reporters in May 1993: “If Jordan signs a peace treaty with Israel we will put the kingdom to fire and sword.”
The Israeli-Palestinian peace process spurred further radicalisation of the Arab Afghans. At first the peace deals between the PLO and Israel were greeted with relief by most Palestinians. But as the 1990s drew to a close it became clear that the peace process had stalled. Negotiators failed to agree on the fundamental ‘final status’ issues, such as Jerusalem – claimed by both Israelis and Palestinians as their capital – and the fate of millions of Palestinian refugees. Israel continued to build settlements in the Occupied Territories and frequently blockaded Gaza and the West Bank. While the secular Palestinian nationalists, such as Yasser Arafat’s Fatah movement, remained committed to a negotiated peace, the focus of resistance to Israel shifted to Islamist groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Meanwhile UN sanctions on Iraq, and the mounting humanitarian crisis in the country gave Al-Qa’idah a further cause. With the US acting as both Israel’s major backer and leading the attack on Iraq, Bin-Ladin’s message had a resonance far beyond the tiny numbers who actually joined Al-Qa’idah or adopted his tactics. This in a sense, was Al-Qa’idah’s strength. Like the anarchists of the 19th century who believed in the ‘propaganda of the deed’, Bin-Ladin and his comrades carried out spectacular attacks in the name of popular causes. They did not try to build a mass protest movement, nor contest elections. Instead they relied on a handful of activists, only loosely connected to each other, who often had little direct contact with the organisation’s leadership. This made their organisation difficult for the security services to penetrate, and the continuing crisis in Iraq and Palestine generated a steady stream of potential recruits.

The US attempt to crush the organisation, with the attack on Afghanistan in October 2001, did not succeed. In a series of video messages, broadcast on the Arabic satellite channel Al-Jazeera, Bin-Ladin taunted George Bush for his failure to destroy him. Al-Qa’idah claimed credit for further attacks on allies of the US, including a rocket attack on Israeli tourists in Kenya in December 2002, the bombing of the Madrid railway system in March 2004 which killed 191, and the bombing of the London transport system in July 2005 which left 52 dead.

In Iraq, radical Islamist activists, claiming allegiance to Al-Qa’idah and led by Abu-Mu’sab al-Zarqa’awi claimed responsibility for the kidnapping and murder of several westerners. US forces also blamed the group for car bombings targeting the Iraqi Shi’a community which week after week killed hundreds and threatened to provoke civil war.

The Taliban

The Taliban movement emerged in the 1990s among the students of Islamic colleges (known as madrassas) in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Its leaders were drawn from former mujahidin, many of whom were affiliated with Harakat-e Enqelab-e Islami, a party of traditional clerics. Its extremely conservative interpretation of Islam was heavily influenced by the Deobandi school and shaped by the harsh conditions of life in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. The movement enforced severe hudud penalties for crimes, such as amputation for theft and stoning for adultery. Women were banned from education and employment and forced to wear a burqa, a traditional Afghan cloak covering the whole body. Other edicts banned kite-flying, TV, alcohol and chess.

Many Afghans, however, craved stability after years of war and were impressed by the Taliban’s ability to impose order on the squabbling warlords who dominated the country. Foreign powers, such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, funded the Taliban for the same reason. The movement took control of Kandahar in 1994, Herat in 1995 and the following year seized the capital, Kabul. The US government was initially optimistic about the Taliban’s rise to power, hoping the movement would be a bulwark against Russia and Iran. The US/Saudi firm UNOCAL wooed the Taliban, with the aim of constructing pipelines to pump oil and gas from Central Asia through Afghanistan and Pakistan rather than Iran.

After 9/11, the US government moved swiftly against the Taliban, accusing it of complicity in the attacks on New York and Washington because Usamah Bin-Ladin was living in Afghanistan under the movement’s protection. A campaign of US air bombardment followed while the Taliban’s rivals among the former mujahidin factions united to take control of Kabul. The new US-backed government under Hamid Karzai remained precarious, however. Taliban forces regrouped and continued to attack international and Afghan troops. In December 2005, NATO commanders, leading the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) announced the deployment of an extra 6,000 troops while the US raised the possibility of withdrawing 4,000, despite warnings from Afghan leaders that a US pull-out could encourage the Taliban.
Islam in the West

Although Islamist organisations have expanded in recent years, most British Muslims vote for mainstream political parties, despite media portrayals of growing extremism.

Muslims have been visiting Britain for nearly a thousand years. The traveller and scholar al-Idrisi (1100-1166) was one of the first recorded. Others have included ambassadors and merchants. British rulers established diplomatic relations with Muslim countries early on, sometimes with the aim of making alliances against their Christian rivals in Europe. In 1588 for example, Elizabeth I asked the Ottoman Sultan, as a ‘fellow monotheist’, to join her in alliance against the ‘idolatrous’, Catholic King of Spain.

However, few Muslims were resident in Britain then, and the communities they formed were generally transient. It was only after World War II that Britain experienced mass immigration from Muslim-majority countries, with the large-scale recruitment of labour from Britain’s former colonies. Paradoxically, one of the factors turning the post-war generation of migrant workers into settled communities was legislation designed to curb immigration. The New Commonwealth

Immigrants Act of 1961 placed restrictions on future immigration, leading many migrants to choose permanent settlement rather than risk losing the chance to return to Britain by going home.

When industrial production fell after the oil crisis of 1973, Muslim migrants were among the first to suffer unemployment. The industries where most post-war Muslim migrants to Britain were concentrated, such as textiles and heavy industry in northern England, went into decline, leaving many trapped in poverty.

Much of the media and official interest in British Muslims has focussed on small radical Islamist groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir* and al-Muhajiroun, creating an image of an ‘enemy within’, terrorist organisations hostile to a ‘British way of life’ who find a sympathetic audience among young British Muslims.

In fact, Political Islam, radical or not, is the choice of only a minority of British Muslims, who have in general engaged with mainstream politics, particularly the Labour Party. Those in favour of such an immersion in the politics of a Western democracy have found support from some Muslim scholars, who reject the traditional polarisation between Muslim and non-Muslim societies in Islamic thought.

Overall, the last 30 years have seen increasing political engagement among British Muslims. They are

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**The British example**

*During sixty years of immigration Britain has pursued a policy of multiculturalism rather than assimilation. Its Muslim population is not homogeneous, unlike that in some other European countries. Recently, however, like those countries, it has witnessed the growing influence of organisations seeking to represent Muslims as Muslims, rather than as different ethnic minorities. The benefits of multiculturalism are increasingly being debated.*

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Community, Religion, Nationality

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) acts as an umbrella group for its 350 affiliates. It rejects the term ‘ethnic minority’, preferring to talk about ‘British citizens with an Islamic heritage’. It encourages British Muslims to engage with the political process, but does not back any specific political party. The MCB’s campaign for the general election of 2005 used the slogan ‘Vote Smart: make the Muslim vote count’. The present Labour government seems to have accepted the MCB as a legitimate and influential representative of the ‘Muslim community’ – the council’s former secretary, Iqbal Sacranie has received a knighthood and membership of the Order of the British Empire.

The Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) pursues a different strategy, although it shares some similarities with the MCB. The MAB calls on British Muslims to participate in mainstream political system, campaigning for “Muslims to become involved in the making of laws, the shaping of political and social decision-making procedures and the installation of government.” Unlike the MCB, however, the MAB is a ‘da’wa’ (preaching) organisation, seeking actively to win converts to Islam, and to convince Muslims of its views. As it is not an umbrella group, MAB can more easily call on its supporters to follow a specific political ‘line’. The organisation, alongside the Stop the War Coalition and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, has called numerous protests against the British government’s involvement in Iraq, including the demonstration of 15 February 2003 which brought over one million people onto the streets of London. It also supported candidates from the anti-war Respect Party in the general election of 2005.

In contrast to the MAB and MCB, small radical Islamist groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir* argue that British Muslims should shun the mainstream political process – boycotting both elections and protest marches alongside non-Muslims as ‘un-Islamic’.
increasingly visible as a constituency for mainstream political parties. More have registered to vote, more have stood for office in local and national elections. The first British-born Muslim MP, Shahid Malik, was elected in the general election of 2005.

Increased engagement has been accompanied by some diversification of British Muslims’ political allegiances. In previous generations they voted overwhelmingly Labour, and even today 90% of all British Muslim party-membership is with the Labour Party. However, support for Labour among British citizens of Pakistani origin has dropped from over 80% in the 1970s to just over 50% in the 1990s. Some first-generation British Muslims have switched to voting Conservative, perhaps reflecting identification with ‘family values’. Most of the decline in Muslim support for Labour happened under Conservative governments. But in the period since Labour came to power in 1997 British Muslims have participated frequently and very visibly in protests against Labour’s foreign policy, particularly Prime Minister Tony Blair’s support for the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Another feature of British Muslims’ participation in British politics is the increasing visibility of community organisations and lobby groups such as the Muslim Council of Britain and the Muslim Association of Britain, (see box opposite) seeking to represent Muslims, as opposed to ‘Asians’, ‘Pakistanis’ or ‘Bangladeshis’.

Among British Muslims, as in other Western countries, there has been a trend towards ‘re-Islamisation’, with growing religiosity, and the emergence of religious in place of secular leaders. This raises questions of identity: if people have a multiplicity of identities (British, Muslim, Asian, Black) why do they prioritise one over another? Some writers argue that, while racism based on skin colour has become increasingly unacceptable in Britain, British Muslims still face prejudice and discrimination justified by supposed ‘cultural’ difference, leading many to reaffirm their Muslim identity in response. The ‘clash of civilisations’ hypothesis propounded notably by Huntington and Lewis (see bibliography), which sees ‘Western’ civilisation in conflict with ‘Islam’, has also been influential, prompting policy-makers, the media and others to identify British Muslims primarily by their religious background, rather than their national origin.

Developments in the wider Muslim world in the past 50 years have also played a part. The rise of Islamist movements in opposition to Western-backed governments, and the powerful example of the Iranian revolution, have provided both intellectual inspiration and organisational models. The same period has also seen a relative decline of secular nationalist and leftist movements. And disillusion with earlier models of political mobilisation may have played a role. Some British Muslim activists would argue that if decades of political engagement have not ended the problem of racism, nor shifted British foreign policy away from support for the US and Israel, a new approach is necessary. ‘Muslim’ forms of political mobilisation can thus appear untainted by the past failures, and an attractive alternative to simply joining the Labour Party, for example.

**Theological debates**

Permanent settlement in a non-Muslim society raises theological questions for Muslims. Traditionally Muslim scholars divided the world into *dar al-harb* (‘the realm of war’) and *dar al-islam* (‘the realm of Islam’), but this is a view from the perspective of sovereign Muslim-majority societies, rather than migrant communities. Some Muslims in the West hold to a ‘traditionalist’ viewpoint, which disapproves of permanent settlement on the grounds that it could lead to assimilation. On this view, the prohibition of the public call to prayer, or demonstrations in different European countries against the building of new mosques, highlight the lack of safety for Muslims in the *dar al-harb*. They should see themselves as members of a global Islamic community, rather than loyal citizens of their country of residence. Some supporters of this line would argue against any kind of political participation in the host country.

But this is a minority view, both inside and outside the Muslim world. Most Muslim scholars take a more pragmatic line. Many argue that religious freedom in the West, according to which Muslims have the right to uphold their beliefs in public, transforms such countries from ‘realms of war’ into ‘realms of treaty’. Thus Muslims should take an active part in politics, vote, accept existing secular legislation, perform military service and even fight for their non-Muslim country against Muslim states in case of territorial disputes. Another school of thought rejects the opposition between the realms of war and Islam, arguing that the primary relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims should be *al-da’wa*, preaching, rather than *al-harb*, war; living in non-Muslim countries should be seen as a positive duty, rather than a necessary evil.

Sir Iqbal Sacranie (centre in blue shirt) speaks to the media at the Leeds Central Mosque, one week after the London bombings in July, 2005. Then still head of the Muslim Council of Britain, he said he wanted to take “concrete steps” to make sure such atrocities are never repeated.
This briefing focuses on the Middle East, not simply because it is the most important area of Muslim population, but also because of the global significance of recent events there, in particular the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the US-led occupation of Iraq. These notes and the centre spread maps and statistics (pp 8/9) try to paint the broader picture.

The geography of Political Islam

The Middle East

The Middle East is home to some of the world’s oldest Islamist movements, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Most countries in the region have witnessed the emergence of more “Islamic” patterns of social behaviour in recent years – such as the adoption of Islamic dress by men and women. Many governments have attempted to deal with Islamist opposition movements by tolerating, and even encouraging Islamism as a social phenomenon but repressing Islamist political organisations.

Occupied Palestinian Territories

The Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas shares with the Muslim Brotherhood an emphasis on the need to ‘Islamise’ society, and providing welfare is an important part of the movement’s work. However, the founding of Hamas in 1987 marked a break from the approach of gradually building up Islamic institutions in favour of direct intervention in the armed struggle. Hamas activists have carried out numerous attacks, including suicide bombings targeting Israeli civilians inside Israel. Many of its leaders have been assassinated by Israeli forces, including its spiritual guide, Shaykh Yasin.

Hamas opposed the peace deals signed between the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Israel in 1993, and as the peace process stalled in the late 1990s, the organisation’s popularity grew. In January 2006 Hamas won the majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council, beating Fatah, the former ruling party and dominant faction in the PLO. Hamas’ victory in the elections was condemned by Israel, the US government and the European Union, all of which regard the movement as a terrorist organisation. In June 2006 Hamas’ military wing announced that it had captured an Israeli soldier. Israel responded by arresting dozens of Palestinian MPs including many government ministers and bombing the Gaza Strip.

South Asia

India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are among the world’s most populous Muslim nations. Islamism in South Asia has been shaped by the emergence of all three states from British-ruled India. The Muslim League, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, opposed the Indian Congress Party’s attempt to create a single, secular state, arguing instead that Indian Muslims constituted a separate nation. In 1947 two independent states – India and Pakistan – emerged, and after a civil war in 1971 East Pakistan split off to form Bangladesh.

Pakistan

While battles between the Pakistani government and militant Islamist groups sympathetic to the Taliban movement of neighbouring Afghanistan have often dominated the headlines, the country’s Islamist movement is old and complex, including both Sunni and Shia groups. Sunni Islamists are divided between followers of the Salafist and the more moderate Wahhabis, and between these groups and modernist revival movements such as the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), founded in 1940 by Abul ‘Ala Mawdudi, before Pakistan itself was created in 1947. The Jamaat Ulama-e-Isalami (JUI) is led by Deobandi ulama (Muslim religious scholars) while their Barevi counterparts are organised in the Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP). The major Shia party is the Tehrik-e-Isaami (formerly known as the Tehrik-e-Jafaria Pakistan until it was banned in 2002). The JI, JUI and other three Sunni Islamist parties are allied in the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) with the Tehrik-e-Isalami. The MMA, Pakistan’s third-largest party, is deeply hostile to President Pervez Musharraf’s participation in the US-led “War on Terror” and won provincial elections in North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan in 2002 on a platform of supporting “Islamic” reforms.

Indonesia

Islamist organisations in Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim nation, range from large traditionalist bodies such as Nahdatul Ulama (NU), with around 40 million members, to small extremist Islamist groups such as the Jeemah Islamiya (JI) thought to be responsible for the Bali bombing of 2002 which killed 202 people. Nahdatul Ulama focuses on defending Sunni orthodoxy and encouraging Islamic education, rather than campaigning for an Islamic state. In 1999, the organisation’s leader, Abdurrahman Wahid, became president, but he was forced out of office two years later following accusations of corruption. Following the Bali bombing, the Indonesian government has cracked down on the Jeemah Islamiya, imprisoning the organisation’s suspected ‘spiritual leader’, the radical cleric Abu-Bakar Ba’asyir on several occasions.

Another important factor potentially encouraging the growth of Political Islam is the recent peace deal between the Indonesian government and the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM), agreed in August 2005. Autonomy legislation allows the province to apply sharia in full, and Aceh is currently expanding its Islamic courts to institute an entirely sharia-based legal system.

Somalia

The Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) controlled the Somali capital, Mogadishu and most of southern Somalia between June and December 2006. After years in which warlords dominated the country, many Somalis welcomed the UIC’s restoration of order, but others opposed the imposition of some aspects of Islamic law. Accused by the US of harbouring leaders of Al-Qaeda, the UIC was defeated in December 2006 by forces loyal to Somalia’s Transitional Government which is backed by neighbouring Ethiopia.

Nigeria

The adoption of Sharia’s law has also been a major issue in Nigeria in recent years. The introduction of Islamic law codes in several northern, Muslim-majority provinces has been blamed by some analysts for exacerbating communal tensions which have caused the death of more than 10,000 people since 1999. Below the surface image of Muslim – Christian conflict lie deep social inequalities, however: Nigeria is one of the world’s biggest oil producers but the majority of Nigerians live in poverty.

As in other countries, the “War on Terror” has had its echoes in Nigeria. In January 2007 newspaper owner Alhaji Bello Damagum was accused by state prosecutors of receiving $300,000 from Al-Qaeda in Sudan to fund terrorist training and promote the “Nigerian Taliban.”
Bibliography

Note on the spelling of names
Names transliterated from Arabic, Farsi or other languages not using the Latin script can appear in a confusingly large number of different spellings, which can make it difficult for non-specialists to find further information on this subject. This briefing uses the generally accepted English spelling, where there is a consensus, and a modified version of the standard academic transcription elsewhere. Below are a list of some of the names which appear in this briefing and common variants:

Sayyid Qutb (or Qub, Qotob, Qutub)
Ruhollah Khomeini (or Khomeyini, Khumayni, Khomaiini, Khomeini)
ulama (Islamic scholars - also ulema)
Al-Qa’idah (or Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaida)
Shi’i (or Shi’, Shia, Shia’ite)
Taliban (or Taleban)
Hezbollah (or Hizbullah, Hizbollah)

General sources
The Guardian; Financial Times; The Times; The Economist; Al Jazeera; Al Hayat; Al-Sharq al-Awsat; Al-Zaman; Al-Quds al-Arabi; BBC News Online; Encyclopaedia of Islam; International Crisis Group reports; Middle East International; Middle East Report; Middle East Journal; International Journal of Middle East Studies.

Selected further reading

Two controversial articles which have influenced many Western policy-makers in their relations with Muslims and the Islamic world.

Said’s discussion of the portrayal of Islam in the western media was originally written at the time of the Iranian revolution, but the introduction to the updated edition includes a counterblast to Lewis and Huntington.

An accessible introduction to Islamic history.

Islam, The Straight Path, John Esposito, Oxford University Press (OUP), 1991
A good introduction to Muslim beliefs and practices.

A History of the Arab Peoples, Albert Hourani, Faber and Faber, rev. ed 2005
The classic one-volume history.

Islam in Transition, Donohue J and Esposito J (eds) OUP, 2006
A useful collection of translated articles by key Muslim thinkers including Al-Aghani, Abduh, Al-Banna and Shariati.

Political Islam, Nazih Ayubi, Routledge, 1993
Three discussions of the development of Political Islam covering a range of case studies.

The Society of the Muslim Brothers, Richard P Mitchell, OUP, 1993
Classic study of the Muslim Brotherhood in mid-20th-century Egypt.

The Prophet and Pharaoh, Giles Kepel, Al Saqi, 1985
An excellent, up-to-date introduction.

A detailed analysis of Hezbollah’s thought and its impact on the Islamist movement in Egypt.

Palestine in Crisis, Graham Usher, Pluto, 1995
A research project which bridges the gap between journalism and academia, providing in-depth articles written by academics and short briefings aimed at a general audience including many related to Political Islam.

The phenomenon of ‘Islamic cyberspace’ is explored in Islam in the Digital Age by Gary Bunt (London: Pluto, 2004), which also has an extensive listing of Islamic and Islamist web sites. Radical Islamist groups use websites for propaganda, communication and recruitment, but the addresses frequently change. It is often difficult to determine the authenticity of such sites, however, and there is probably as much disinformation on the internet as genuine information about radical Islamist groups.

Political Islam

Muslim Britain: Communities under Pressure, Tahir Abbas (ed), Zed, 2005
A detailed history of Muslims in Britain and a collection of articles covering diverse questions relating to British Muslims’ political activity.

Websites
International Crisis Group
www.crisisgroup.org (Reports only available to registered users, but registration is free)
International think tank focuses on conflict resolution, publishes policy recommendations to governments and international organisations.
Numerous reports on Islamist movements and a strand of its research is devoted to Political Islam.

Royal Institute for International Affairs
http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk
A long-established foreign policy think tank based in London. Some of the site is restricted to members, but meetings attract a wide range of politicians and academics and transcripts and summaries are often released to the general public.

Middle East Research and Information Project
www.merip.org
A research project which bridges the gap between journalism and academia, providing in-depth articles written by academics and short briefings aimed at a general audience including many related to Political Islam.

Bladinet: The True Story of Radical Islam, Jason Burke, I B Tauris, 2004
An account of the rise of the Taliban written by a journalist with extensive knowledge of Central Asian politics.

‘The Infidel Within’: Muslims in Britain since 1800, Hamza Yusuf, Hurst, 2000
An account of the development of Bin Laden’s network by an investigative journalist.

Bibliography
The Rise of Political Islam
by Anne Alexander

Artwork The Chapman Partnership

The violent activities in the past 25 years of terrorists, mostly from the Middle East, and mostly professing Islamic ideals, and the ongoing carnage in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Middle East dominate the headlines. Although perpetrated by a tiny minority of fundamentalists, this violence has come to be seen as intrinsic to Islam, and has created much misunderstanding and misinformation, especially in western countries like Britain, with large Muslim communities.

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