

Islam's civil war

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An intra-islamic problem

Islam is at war, but as opposed to what one might think, it is not at war against the West but rather, it is at war with itself. We are talking about a real civil war, a great rebellion or *fitnah*, and one which is very complex, because there are not only two sides that are fighting each other, but instead a huge number of strands and currents which are joining forces against another side, or against each other, depending on the circumstances. The West sometimes appears then more like an “excuse” or “pretext”, covering up a problem which is actually an intra-Islamic one. This is why the first and the greatest number of victims of this conflict have been Muslims themselves, rather than Jews or Christians. The attacks against these latter groups have been seen as more of a “safe bet” rather than being related to the actual issues at stake.

The jihadist attacks that are taking place periodically across Europe, instead of just being about a clash of cultures, represent the importation of an internal Islamic conflict which is affecting us through the population that has come from countries with a Muslim majority, and from the political interference of the West on the international scene.

Islamic law, the ultimate law

Without a doubt, several Islamic groups see the West as *the Great Satan* but this is mainly an internal debate for Islam: the real question is, what relevance does medieval Islamic law have for today? The issue is not just a political or sociological one, but is essentially a matter for religious law: if Muhammad received the last legislative revelation from God, what authority has man to repeal some of his directives (however barbaric they may seem today), to suspend their application or even to create a new body of legislation capable of governing a modern and complex State?

In Islam, God intervenes to guide humanity, in every era revealing Himself through a *guide* and giving direction through the form of divine Law. He revealed the Law to Moses for the Jewish people through the Torah, and this was then superseded by the Christian law of love. All the Jewish people should have converted to Christianity at that point. However, following on from that in the seventh century, God revealed a Law to Muhammad, *sharia law*, which superseded Christian law. As a result, every Christian should have converted to Islam. Nevertheless, due to the importance

of Moses and Jesus, the early Islamic community was very tolerant towards the Christians and Jews that did not follow the new *sharia* law, and instead got them to pay a special tax. That is the traditional teaching. But what happens when the world definitively leaves behind the Middle Ages, enters into Modernity and new legislative requirements emerge which are necessary in order to respond to the complexities of modern States? Ignoring *sharia* law would mean implying that Muhammad was not the last prophet of the Law. This makes up the basis for the argument which drives Islamic fundamentalists.

Islamic fundamentalism

The Salafī movement can be understood fairly accurately as fundamentalism, because it is following the same pattern as the American Protestant movement that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century which, when faced with huge modern changes, returned to the fundamentals of Christianity, that is, the Bible, but with a literal interpretation. Salafism emerged from the same realisation, the same concerns and came up with the same “solution”: the world has changed, Islam has become contaminated over the centuries by “innovations” coming from Christianity (the celebration of the Prophet’s birth similar to Christmas), from paganism and from animism (pilgrimages to the tombs of saints, the divinised exaltation of the spiritual guides of Sufism ...), from the modern world (democracy, human rights...), etc. This is the interpretation of Salafism. Its solution then is to return to the origins of Islam, or rather, to what they consider to be the origins of Islam, in order to apply it to today literally. This literal application happens at an almost neurotic level, ranging from the currency of the time, to urinating, and even covers eating or dressing the same way that would have been customary in the time of Muhammad.

Salafism is not of itself identified with terrorism, but it has logically become a breeding ground for jihadism, or in other words, the use of violent means in order to achieve this return to its roots. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are two forms of jihadi Salafism. The main difference is that the Islamic State has also decided to set up what it believes the Islamic State to have been in the time of Muhammad in Medina. It has added a political dimension therefore, rather than simply recommending a return to the old form of dress. It has also added an eschatological dimension to its vision: they believe that the world is on the point of the great final battle between good and evil, between the armies of real Islam and that of the Crusades, the Jewish people and impious Muslims. More specifically, the armies of evil will be made up of a coalition of 70 flags, with the American coalition already being signalled as having 60 of them! In these end times, Jesus will also descend to become Caliph of Islam. His expected descent will occur in Damascus itself, which is why there is such urgency over taking control of this city. This apocalyptic literature forms part of the Muslim tradition. Salafism, along with a good part of the Muslim community, is setting aside its symbolic meaning and interpreting it as a series of historical events to happen at the end of time. The Islamic State has been the only group to identify the modern world with this description of the end of time. This different viewpoint led the Islamic State to separate itself from Al Qaeda in July 2014, even to the point of confrontation: the Algerian branch of Al-Qaeda cooperated with the country’s army in the arrest of the leader of Islamic State in the region.

The cold war between Saudi Arabia and Qatar

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are the main countries exporting the more medieval version of Salafī ideology. Qatar, for its part, is engaged in an ideological warfare

with these two countries because it defends a reformed type of Salafism which, although it seeks to Islamise the population, also allows the structures of a modern State to exist. For this reason, Qatar financially supports all movements of the Muslim Brotherhood, and supported them when they entered the democratic process to reach power in Egypt. When the coup d'état of General al-Sisi took place, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates offered more than 10,000 million in order to support the new regime. What made these Salafi countries support a regime which was less Islamic than the Muslim Brotherhood? The reason the military pursued the Muslim Brotherhood is because they are at the forefront of opposition against the medieval system promoted in Saudi Arabia. Qatar Airways and Emirates are doing no more than bringing the opposition between their two countries to the football pitch.

Nevertheless, Qatar and Saudi Arabia both fear Iran as their greatest enemy. The Gulf states also have significant Shi'ite minorities (or majorities as in the case of Bahrain), which are looked upon with suspicion. This is why a large initial sum of money came from these countries to support the rebel Sunni groups fighting against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria and the Iraqis upset by the anti-Sunni policies of the Shi'ite president that were introduced after the Gulf War. This last group, not always necessarily Islamic, looked for support from Al-Qaeda, and became the Islamic State, and thanks to oil fields, they came to occupy a third of Iraq and another large area of Syria. But who was buying oil for them and why was no action taken against this source of financial support?

In Syria, there are not just two sides struggling against each other, but rather many groups fighting against each other. The Syrian map is like a board game where each side is moving their pieces with secret *unnatural* alliances at play behind the scenes. We find the Shi'ite government forces supported by both Iran, the Iraqi government and the Lebanese

political army called Hezbollah, which is also Shi'ite. Fighting against the regime, but also fighting amongst themselves, we find a group linked to Al-Qaeda called the Nusra Front, the Islamic State, and the Free Syrian army, though the latter is now disappearing, even though it was the first group to have received military aid from among others America, Turkey and France. There is also a large Kurdish population in Northern Syria, just as in Northern Iraq. They are Sunni Muslims but they base their identity more around their own ethnicity and the culture of socialist influences that surrounds their religion. There have been cases of Spanish people from the extreme left who have joined ranks with the Kurdish forces to fight against what they call the "fascism of the Islamic State".

Sunni and shia islam

What are the differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites? Apart from a tragic memory of the war which was faced by supporters of Ali (the Shi'ites), and those who found their origin in the Omeya Dynasty of Damascus, and the persecution of the Shi'ites which lasted for centuries, there are also strong theological reasons. Sunni Islam is a strand of Islam that has no religious hierarchy. The imams are not "clerics" but instead just prayer leaders. Any member of the faithful can make himself an imam and any imam can stop being one when he chooses. They must be (or should be) well trained in Islamic law and carry out their duties as citizens. Sunni Arab countries each have a Ministry of Religious Affairs which hires public imams like civil servants. Shi'ites on the other hand, consider certain people to be gifted with a special divine light which gives them a special insight and knowledge of reality, making them not dissimilar to prophets. This is unacceptable and blasphemous for a Sunni after the death of Mohammed. The Shi'ite cleric, therefore, has the divine authority to "innovate" in the legislative sphere. The

Sunni branch has a mystical movement with a theology similar to that of the Shi'ites: Sufism. In this case, the mediator and dispenser of divine *bāraka* (blessing) is the spiritual master of each brotherhood. It is understandable then, that anti-Shi'ite Salafism from Saudi Arabia is a fierce opponent of Sufi mysticism.

Internal debates

The Sunni-Shi'ite opposition is the sectarian element of this internal war of Islam. The problem and its complexity increases when we examine the internal workings of these two irreconcilable denominations which paint a picture of a whole spectrum of Islam which ranges from the most extreme fundamentalism to mysticism, and takes in a variety of different stances against modernity along the way.

The internal debates of the Shi'ite majority, the Duodeciman imamites, often revolve around the legitimacy of the political Shi'ite movement inaugurated with the Khomeini revolution. The original Shi'ite movement developed a practice of concealment in the context of persecution by the Sunnis and looked with suspicion upon any political participation until the return of the Messianic figures of *Mahdi* and Jesus. The Shi'ite movement by its very nature sees a distinction between politics and true religion.

The Sunni branch (which makes up 90% of Islam), for its part, argues over the influence and application of Islamic law. The majority could be called "traditionalists". They accept Islam in its current form as it has reached the present day, without questioning the cultural and religious traditions handed down from previous generations too much. On this matter, it is "healthier" than the Salafi neuroticism. Nevertheless, some of these traditions may have further emphasised the patriarchalism of the Quran, which is why we sometimes find

women with fundamentalist groups who paradoxically call themselves feminists.

There are also reform movements which allow themselves to be influenced by modernity. The Muslim Brotherhood only take aspects from the modern world that will be useful to Islamise society, with a more enlightened form of fundamentalism. Traditional Egyptian society is strongly resisting this. Other reform movements are much more sincere because they reread the Quran and the Sunnah in order to find Islamic teachings that are closely linked to Human Rights. Without denying the dogma at the end of the legislative revelation, they take a more "interpretative approach" in order to separate Islam from the political Caliphate system, situating the question of the veil in its proper place and even finding Quranic references which point to the prohibition of polygamy, even though this was allowed at the time of writing.

This interpretative spirit plays a crucial role in discussing the authenticity of many of the *hadith* or stories about the life of Mohammed which were put in writing two centuries later. There remains the need however for a more comprehensive scientific study of the origins of Islam and the history of the redaction of the Quran. Although this may cause panic, it is the only way to dismantle the violent Salafi interpretation of Islam from its very roots. The way ahead is long, perhaps even a century of work lies ahead, but the face of Islam will change radically. Otherwise, reformists, modernists and fundamentalists will keep on finding fault with each others' interpretations of the same Text, and maybe many more Muslims who are disturbed by the level of barbarity, as has happened in Europe will, little by little, quietly abandon religion.

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