

Islam, Islamism, and the Need for Clarity in Terminology

By [Hassan Mneimneh](#)

October 1, 2009



Sultan Ahmed Mosque, known as the Blue Mosque, in Istanbul, Turkey
(Photo by Oberazzi, available at [Flickr](#))

Islam is a centuries-old faith, the adherents of which are Muslims. While preserving strong and common religious and cultural bonds across their diverse societies, Muslims have lived their faith differently as a function of time and space. This plural Islam is today spread around the globe, and Muslims constitute a larger fraction of the world's religious population now than ever before.

Islamism is a spectrum of political propositions rooted in particular readings of the Islamic intellectual heritage. Its followers are called "Islamists," and they account for only a minority of Muslims. Islamism is to Muslims what Communism once was to the blue-collar working segments of society. In both cases, the two ideologies have claimed to represent the essence and interest of their target populations, irrespective of the ideological stands of those populations.

Individual workers satisfying certain socioeconomic criteria were subsumed by communist ideologues under the collective rubric of the "proletariat," an entity destined to rule prior to communism's fulfillment. Presented as an objective "scientific" reading of history and society, communism not only sought to recruit workers, but it also operated with the conviction that the communist "vanguard," with its "class-consciousness," would act on behalf of the proletariat, whether or not workers joined the cause. The communist usurpation of workers' causes did not invalidate the fact that workers' concrete concerns still existed and that they had an interest in organizing in unions.

Similarly, in the discourse of Islamist ideologues, Muslims are the Ummah, a nation divinely endowed with the prerogative of dominating humanity. Some Islamists also assume that Muslims may lack the proper Islamic consciousness and thus are to be overruled and/or overpowered by militants. Islamist claims notwithstanding, Muslims continue to adhere to their faith, congregate, and practice their diverse rituals in a multitude of forms.

In the heyday of the communist threat, some may have displayed wariness toward workers in general, especially if they were immigrants, and unions in particular. In a few cases, the suspicions proved to be justified. In most cases, however, they represented the fears and occasional tendencies of bigotry of a society under attack. The situation today is no different. The United States is indeed under attack. Al Qaeda and a plethora of Islamist formations have declared an all-out war upon the United States. Al Qaeda's potential to inflict damage is checked only by the U.S. ability to intercept and interdict. It is thus not surprising that a wide net of suspicion is cast over Muslims and Muslim organizations in the United States and abroad. A better understanding of labels and ideas by public figures and law enforcement officers would allow for a more appropriate use of terminology, which could help avoid exacerbating some of the tensions resulting from the current political and security climate.

As a general rule, terminology ought to reflect the distinction between Islamism, a spectrum of political ideologies, and Islam, a diverse faith and culture lived by Muslims. The rejection of this distinction is an ideological position promoted by Islamists and occasionally espoused in Western media and academia. Tracts and essays purporting to demonstrate that "a good Muslim cannot be a good American" on the basis of a contradiction between core Islamic principles and U.S. values trace their pedigree to xenophobic anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish postures that are stated with quasi-identical arguments. Such arguments, though, will remain marginal. A more serious phenomenon is the emergence of polemical reporting and scholarship that apply questionable approaches to the issue, implicitly or even explicitly endorsing the Islamist view. This, in turn, is partly in reaction to an apologetic trend in other segments of the media and academia that ignore and/or explain away the controversial aspects of Islamic history, faith, cultures, and societies. Excesses in one direction ought not justify excesses in the other; scholarship and the general public are served neither by the romanticization nor the demonization of Islam as a faith and history. Paradoxically, both of these treatments create a better environment for radical Islamism.

Radical Islamism is a set of currents within Islamism further identified by their rejection, in word and/or deed, of universal values and the global order. This rejection may be violent or nonviolent. It can be argued that radicalism is an innate potential of all expressions of Islamism. It can furthermore be argued that violence is an innate potential of all radical expressions of Islamism. Many Islamist ideologues, however, strive to position their views in a non-radical and/or nonviolent framework.

Categorizing Islamism can follow either a functional method (concerned with its impact) or a formal one (focused on its self-definitions). A functional classification of Islamism thus would divide it into four categories: (1) violent radical Islamism (Al Qaeda is the principal example); (2) violent Islamism with a non-radical discourse (rooting the violence in the right of resisting occupation (Hamas and Hezbollah are prominent examples); (3) radical Islamism with a nonviolent basic position (Salafism being its primary expression in the Sunni realm); and (4) Islamism that espouses nonviolent, non-radical views (the local organizations of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East and the Jama'at in South Asia are representative of such Islamism). Despite intra-Islamist debates and feuds, migration among these categories is common. A more formal analytical view of Islamism would cover the overlapping formulations of Jihadism, Salafism, and Takfirism within it.

Recognizing the complexity of Islamism—and the difference between it and Islam as an expression of the wealth of religious and cultural expressions of Muslims—favors the use of the term "Islamism" over others. Other terms used by the media and academia include "political Islam," "Islamic fundamentalism," "Islamic extremism," and "Islamofascism." While there is some merit to each of these four expressions, they all contain problematic aspects that militate against their use.

“Political Islam” and other variants of a qualifier for “Islam”—such as “militant Islam” and “radical Islam”—use the name of the religion to denote an ideology. The identification of religion and ideology is itself an ideological stand that this use therefore endorses. “Islamic fundamentalism,” while a term originally taken from Protestant Christianity, has gained considerable currency in Arabic translation as al-Usuliyyah al-Islamiyyah. In the non-Islamist discourse, this term is problematic in both English and Arabic. In English, it implies theological and methodological bases for Islamism similar to that of Protestant fundamentalism, which is inaccurate; in Arabic, it misuses the name of an actual Shi‘i denomination to denote a broader phenomenon. “Islamic extremism,” often contrasted with “moderate Islam,” uses an ill-defined referential framework of a functional character that it presents as formal. “Islamofascism” may be an attempt at reifying the twentieth-century totalitarian roots of Islamism, but it is a cumbersome and perplexing term that translates offensively into Arabic (al-fashiyyah al-Islamiyyah).

“Islamism” is an accurate self-reference that ought to be favored in English-language use. Any political activity or act of militancy or terrorism is best attributed to Islamism, not Islam. “Islamic terrorism” and “Islamic militant” are not useful expressions, for they confuse Islamism with Islam; more appropriate expressions would be “Islamist terrorism” and “Islamist militant.” In contexts in which types of Islamism need to be identified, the use of functional (rather than formal) categories is more appropriate: “Islamist violence,” “Islamist terrorism,” and “Islamist radicalism,” as well as “violent Islamism” and “radical Islamism,” are all meaningful expressions. While the distinctions within the various formulations of Islamism (Salafism, Jihadism, and Takfirism) may be of limited significance in the lay U.S. context, a clear distinction between Islamism and Islam is important for a correct understanding of the subject at hand.

© Copyright 2009 American Enterprise Institute