

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
ISLAMISM



CONCEPT SERIES 1
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QUILLIAM

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Introduction

On the morning of the 19th of Ramadan of the year 40 AH (CE 661), Ali ibn Abu Talib, the fourth Caliph of Islam and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, entered the Great Mosque of Kufa in Iraq and began the call to prayer. After completing this call, he calmly took his place in the alcove and waited for the worshippers to arrive. Once they had gathered and taken their places behind him in serried ranks, the prayer began. However, this prayer gathering was slightly different. Standing in the front row, with other worshippers, was a man called Abdur Rahman bin Muljam who had arrived in Kufa a few days earlier for a very specific purpose.

A few years earlier, in 37 AH (CE 657), Ali had temporarily ended hostilities with his long-time rival Muawiyah, through arbitration. As Ali and his army marched back to Kufa, a group of 12,000 men kept their distance from the main part of the army – they were not happy with the way things had ended. They denounced Ali and Muawiyah for accepting arbitration as a means of resolving hostilities because in their view, only God could decide such matters. They adopted 'La Hukma Illa Lillah', meaning, 'No rule except by Allah' as their slogan and they became known as the Khawarij (Arabic for 'renegades'). The Khawarij became very hostile to the Muslims around them to the extent that Ali had no choice but to face them on the battlefield; in 38 AH (CE 658) the Battle of Nahrawan took place. The Khawarij stood no chance against the far superior army of Ali, and they were all killed save for nine men who managed to escape. Abdur Rahman belonged to the Khawarij and he was also on the battlefield in Nahrawan that day. He was one of the lucky ones who had escaped but he was consumed with the desire to kill Ali, and was on a quest to do so.

Abdur Rahman watched Ali very closely as he stood behind him in the great Mosque of Kufa. He had come prepared with a sword soaked in poison that he hid under his cloak. When Ali's head touched the ground in prostration, Abdur Rahman crept up behind him. As Ali lifted his head from the ground Abdur Rahman struck and shouted at the fallen Ali, 'authority belongs to God, Ali, not to you'. The Muslims of Kufa were devastated, but little did they know that the Khawarij slogan was to be revived 1,300 years later.

Egypt: Mother of the World

By the end of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire was in rapid decline and many of its former territories had been taken over by European colonial powers. European political ideas along with social and cultural values were highly visible in a number of Muslim-majority countries. In this context, a number of progressive Muslim reformers arose who sought to advocate a simple and crude form of pan-Islamism as a form of resistance to European colonialism. Prominent amongst these were Jamal ad-din al-Afghani (1837-97) and his student Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). These individuals maintained that whilst Muslims needed to adopt certain ideas from the West in order to progress,

they should also formulate a Muslim response to Western cultural and political hegemony. They suggested that Muslims should reject the blind following of earlier Muslim authorities, whom they accused of having deviated from the true message of Islam whilst emphasizing the need to follow the example of the first generation of Muslims. They were also strong advocates of rational thought and hence many of their contemporaries called them 'neo-Mutazilites' (a reference to a movement of Muslim rationalists established in 8th century CE).

Rashid Rida (1865-1935) was a devout follower of Abduh and in 1897 he left his home near Tripoli, now in Lebanon, in order to work with Abduh in Cairo. Rida published a Magazine called *Al Manar* from 1898 until his death in 1935. Like his predecessors, Rida focused on the relative weakness of Muslim societies that in his view had facilitated European colonialism. He blamed this on Sufi excesses, the blind imitation of past scholars and stagnation of learning and knowledge among the scholars, which had resulted in the failure to achieve progress in science and technology. He believed that these weaknesses could only be surmounted by a return to what he saw as the 'true Islam'. An Islam purged of pagan and Western influences, as practised by the first generation of Muslims, an Islam that was in tune with the needs of modern society.

Rida's magazine managed to attract a number of regular readers, including a former school teacher by the name of Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949). Al-Banna had moved to Cairo from the small town of Mahmudiyya in the early 1920s, and was disturbed by the perceived Westernization he experienced there. As well as being an avid reader of *Al Manar*, he also immersed himself in the writings of Abduh and Afghani. Al-Banna shared Rida's central concern about the decline of Muslim societies in relation to the West. He decided that the key to reform was to resist Western secular ideas and in turn to promote Islam as a political ideology. To this end, he established the *Ikhwan al-Muslimeen* (The Muslim Brotherhood) in Cairo in 1928. His organization decided to adopt the motto:

'Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our leader. The Qur'an is our constitution. Jihad is our way. Martyrdom is our highest hope'.

Over the next two decades, al-Banna worked relentlessly at the grassroots level to establish a complex but structured organization that propagated its ideas effectively. The *Ikhwan* attached itself to, and built strategic relations with mosques, welfare associations and neighbourhood groups, whilst seeking to influence existing activists with its revolutionary ideas. By joining local cells, members could access a well-established and well-resourced community of activists who would help them in all aspects of their lives. The foundations of what we now know as Islamism were being laid.

By 1948, the Ikhwan had become quite successful, buoyed by the establishment of Israel; they had over one million members in Egypt and had branches in other parts of the Middle East. 1948 was also the year in which tension between the ruling monarchy and society was reaching its zenith. In December 1948, then Prime Minister Mahmoud an Nukrashi Pasha was increasingly concerned with the assertiveness and popularity of the Ikhwan and so, shortly after rumours of an Ikhwani coup, the group was banned and its assets were impounded. Less than three weeks later, the prime minister was assassinated by a member of the Ikhwan, a veterinary student called Abdel Meguid Ahmed Hassan. This in turn prompted the assassination of al-Banna a month and a half later.

Al-Banna was only 43 years old when he was killed and, according to many, was at the height of his career. His assassination did not signal the end of his movement and certainly not the end of his ideas. Indeed, many of the young middle class individuals who had joined the Ikhwan would go on to form and inspire the vast spectrum of Islamist and jihadist movements we see around the world today, including a young newly-qualified pediatrician called Ayman al-Zawahiri. Only a few years after al-Banna's death, the Ikhwan also managed to attract a young man who had just returned from the United States (US). This man was about to have a huge impact on the future direction of the newly-born political ideology of Islamism. In the meantime, Islamism was being developed and shaped by other ideologues in different parts of the world.

Trouble in the Holy Lands: Hizb ut-Tahrir

*'Resisting a ruler who fails to implement the true Islamic system is also of immense importance. So much so that the rule by a Kufr [non-Islamic] system must be prevented even if this led to several years of fighting and even if it led to the killing of millions of Muslims and to the martyrdom of millions of believers...'*¹

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) was founded in 1953 by an appeals court judge from Palestine called Taqiuddin al-Nabhani (1909-1977). Galvanized by the establishment of Israel in his homeland and the creeping influences of Western political ideas, Nabhani had formed this political party with the sole objective of establishing an Islamist super state. Nabhani too was close to the Ikhwan in his early years and many viewed HT as an offshoot of the Ikhwan. Nabhani, being a former Ba'thist, was also heavily influenced by Arab nationalism. He maintained his Arab-centric outlook but presented it in the Islamic language of a super 'Islamic' state – concentrating on the Arabic-speaking Muslims – superimposed on his Arab super-nation state concept. He was also regarded as a neo-Mutazilite by many of his contemporaries for his emphasis on rational thought in theology and his dismissive attitude towards the spiritual dimensions of life.

¹ Abdul Qadeem Zalloom (2000), *How the Khilafah was Destroyed* (London: Al-Khilafah Publications), p.199.

After establishing his political party, Nabhani took the bold step of taking the Islamist ideology, which had been evolving for more than 30 years, to the next level. For the first time ever he produced a detailed constitution for a future 'Islamic state', also outlining so-called 'Islamic' social, political, judicial and economic systems. Nabhani maintained that Islam was not a faith but a political ideology that pre-defined how a government should be structured and run. Whilst al-Banna had spoken in vague terms about 'Islamic governance', Nabhani crystallized these ideas and produced a blue print. This attention to detail, however, was to prove to be a strategic blunder, since it allowed followers very little room for creativity and instead contributed towards creating a personality cult, rather than an inclusive political party.

It is fair to say that HT was not very successful as a party. In the early 1950s many of its senior members stood in the Jordanian elections but failed to win a seat. They then withdrew from the political process, condemned democracy as being anti-Islamic and instead focused on building support for their ideas through political activism. The masses, however, were not responsive to their message and they failed to garner sufficient support for a revolution. Over the next few years they were outlawed in Jordan, Syria and Palestine. The resulting frustration inspired coup attempts in 1968-69 and in 1971-72 in Syria, Jordan and Iraq. Needless to say, all such attempts were unsuccessful and subsequently the groups' members were oppressed. Support for the party continued to decline to the extent that in the late 1970s, the party admitted that their activities had come to a standstill. The masses were simply not inspired by their shallow sloganeering and many of their members either left to join more radical groups or simply gave up struggling for the cause. Help, however, was on its way from the most unlikely of sources.

During the 1980s, a number of HT activists fled the Middle East and found refuge in the United Kingdom (UK). They immediately recognized the opportunities offered by a secular democratic state like the UK that had a proud tradition of free speech and tolerance for diverse political ideas. HT was given a new lease of life and a whole new generation to reach out to – they were not about to waste the opportunity. By targeting higher education institutions, these exiled activists managed to appeal primarily to a section of disillusioned second generation British Muslims of South Asian heritage. This required slightly tailoring their message whilst remaining faithful to their Arab-centric roots. Within the next few years, HT was able to export these new recruits back to their fathers' homelands to establish cells in South East Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

We Want the World: Jamaat-i-Islami

In the wake of Pakistan's nuclear test, young fresh HT activists began arriving in 1999. They soon realized that the Indian subcontinent was no stranger to Islamism. Indeed, roots had already been put down by an Indian journalist-cum-pseudo-theologian called Syed Abul ala Mawdudi.

'Islam wishes to destroy all states and governments anywhere on the face of the earth, which are opposed to the ideology and programme of Islam regardless of the country or the nation which rules it. The purpose of Islam is to set up a state on the basis of its own ideology and programme, regardless of which nation assumes the role of the standard-bearer of Islam or the rule of which nation is undermined in the process of the establishment of an ideological Islamic State. Islam requires the earth — not just a portion, but the whole planet'.²

Mawdudi was born in Aurangabad, in what was then British India, in 1903. His early education came primarily from home tutoring and a range of Islamic schools and seminaries. His formal secondary education was disrupted by the death of his father and so was completed away from mainstream educational institutions. In 1918 he turned his hand to journalism and wrote for, and edited, a number of newspapers that were primarily aimed at the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. In 1927, he wrote a book called *Jihad in Islam* in which he highlighted his view that the role of jihad was to fight to establish Islam as a political ideology and then use jihad to forcibly spread the ideology to the whole world. Mawdudi was writing at a time when the people of the subcontinent were struggling for independence from the British and so his ideas hit a nerve. Despite being denounced by most of the mainstream scholars of the time, his prominence grew and in 1941 he established a political party called Jamaat-i-Islami (JI).

After partition, JI was split into three factions: one for India, one for West Pakistan and one for East Pakistan. Mawdudi decided to move to Lahore in order to focus on pushing for Pakistan to become an Islamist state. His activity resulted in him being frequently arrested and incarcerated, often for long periods of time. After being released from prison in the 1950s for opposing the Government's policy of sending fighters to fight the Indian army in Kashmir, Mawdudi decided to stand in provincial elections. He did disastrously at the ballot box. He did, however, succeed in generating tension on the streets. In 1953, he was sentenced to death for writing a seditious book against the Ahmadiyya³ community, but strong public pressure and support from Saudi Arabia ensured that he only received a prison sentence and was released a few years later.

By 1956, Mawdudi and his party had become a powerful force in Pakistan, and this was reflected in the final shape of the 1956 constitution that Mawdudi helped to draft. The Government of the time saw this as a way of keeping the Islamist groups quiet and strengthening their own weak position.

² *Syed Abul ala Mawdudi (1927), Jihad in Islam (Beirut: The Holy Koran Publishing House), p.6.*

³ *The Ahmadiyya movement was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmed in 1889 in Qadian, India. Mirza claimed to be the promised Messiah for all Muslims and as such his followers today view themselves as revivers of the true Islam. They remain a controversial movement in the Indian subcontinent and were declared non-Muslims by the government of Pakistan in 1984.*

This constitutional victory was to be short lived for in 1958, under the orders of General Ayub Khan, the armed forces seized power, shelved the constitution and banned JI. During the next decade JI and similar groups remained on the back foot as Ayub Khan tried to implement his modernization programme and keep religion out of politics. JI continued to operate and frequently built alliances with other secular parties in order to restore democracy and end military rule.

In the post-Ayub era, JI re-emerged as a political force and fielded 151 candidates for the national assembly in the elections of 1971. However, they were bitterly disappointed when they managed to win only four seats. At the onset of civil war later that year, Mawdudi, in the name of Muslim unity, supported the Government's military actions against the people of East Pakistan. The West Pakistani military sought to curb Bengali nationalism with 'Operation Searchlight', in which the military were accused of rounding up and killing Bengali students, intellectuals, artists and poets. According to most estimates, anywhere between 300,000 and three million Bengalis were killed and a large number of women were reportedly systematically raped. These actions ultimately resulted in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, with the assistance of India and the international community. It also created widespread unpopularity for JI and Islamist parties in Bangladesh – an unpopularity that continues to this day.

Despite failing once again to win more than a handful of seats in the election of 1977, the JI retained political influence in Pakistan. It was galvanized into action with the arrival of Zulfikar Bhutto and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which it felt would threaten the Islamic foundations of Pakistan. JI worked tirelessly to mobilise the masses against Bhutto's Government and helped to shape an opposition alliance called Nizam e Mustafa (Order of the Prophet). Within a few years there was yet another military coup, Bhutto was overthrown by General Zia ul Haq, and the JI had bolstered its image and support base.

According to author Seyyed Vali Reza Khan in his book *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (1996), Mawdudi was disappointed with what he had created. In Mawdudi's eyes, JI had lost its innocence and frequently found itself entangled in moral dilemmas that political life gives rise to. After this period of active opposition to the socialist policies of Bhutto, Mawdudi passed away in April 1979. He did not live to see the 'Islamization' programme of General Zia ul Haq, which changed the social fabric of Pakistan irreversibly.

Mawdudi was condemned by many orthodox religious scholars of his day, but despite this he has had a lasting impact on religion and politics in the Indian subcontinent. He continues to be an inspirational figure for a number of 'revivalist' movements which are still active in the UK and North America. His popularizing of religious slogans as a means of galvanizing the masses continues to be a popular tactic adopted by political parties in Pakistan. The JI student wing, Islami Jamiat e Taliba (IJT), remains active on

the campuses of Pakistan's higher education campuses. This student group stands accused of frequently attacking, bullying and even murdering other students in its quest to prohibit 'vice' and promote 'virtue'. Mawdudi also left behind a body of works that provide inspiration for Islamists and Jihadists all over the world. His work also influenced the ideas of a young Egyptian man, who had just returned from a difficult spell in the US.

The America that He Saw: Syed Qutb

*'.....the American girl is well acquainted with her body's seductive capacity. She knows it lies in the face, and in expressive eyes, and thirsty lips. She knows seductiveness lies in the round breasts, the full buttocks, and in the shapely thighs, sleek legs — and she shows all this and does not hide it...'*⁴

Syed Qutb (1906–1966) was not happy with what he saw in America, and after a two-year stay he returned to Egypt. On his return, Qutb wrote a book called *Amrika allati Ra'aytu in 1951 (The America That I Saw)*, in which he complained about the free mixing of the sexes, materialism, individual freedoms and the lack of emphasis on moral and spiritual values. This experience had a profound effect on Qutb and helped shape his future thoughts and ideas – ideas that would one day inspire another young Egyptian to also travel to the US to take part in one of the most infamous terrorist atrocities of all time.

Qutb was born and raised in a small Egyptian village called Musha but moved to Cairo in 1929 where he received a Western education before he embarked on a career as a teacher. Qutb was also very fond of literature, becoming an author and a critic until he eventually obtained a job at the Egyptian Ministry of Education. From 1948 to 1950, he was in the US on a scholarship to study the education system, spending several months at Colorado State College of Education. On his return from the US, disillusioned with increasing Western influences in Egypt, he resigned from the civil service and joined Egypt's largest Islamist group, the Ikhwan al-Muslimeen.

By June 1952, Egypt's pro-Western government had become widely unpopular and was eventually overthrown by the nationalist Free Officers Movement headed by the charismatic Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser. Prior to the coup, the Ikhwan had enjoyed a good relationship with the Free Officers Movement having worked together for a spell. Nasser, being an astute politician, had paid lip service to the Ikhwan's ideas, provided he received their support. After all, they both aspired to overthrowing the Government of the time and claimed to oppose British colonialism. Naturally, the Ikhwan welcomed the coup but they expected Nasser to establish an Islamic government.

⁴ Syed Qutb (1951), *The America that I Saw* (Kashf ul Shubuhah Publications), p.13.

It soon became clear that this was not Nasser's intention and so relations began to turn sour. The Ikhwan were once again said to resort to their favoured tactic of expressing their dissatisfaction. The attempted assassination of Nasser, allegedly by Mahmoud Abd al-Latif, a member of Ikhwan, was followed by a brutal crackdown on the Ikhwan that included the imprisonment of many of its senior members. This included Qutb who, after joining the Ikhwan in the early 1950s, had rapidly risen through the ranks to become chief editor of their weekly magazine and a member of their 'Guidance Council', the most senior authority in the Ikhwan.

During his first three years in prison, Qutb was made to reside in appalling conditions and was routinely beaten and tortured. This, however, only strengthened his resolve and conviction that only Islamism could rescue Egypt from the 'new pharaohs'. After this initial period of difficulty, life for Qutb was made slightly easier in prison in that he was offered greater mobility and far more importantly, he was able to write. This was to prove a huge blessing for Qutb who used the opportunity to compose two of his most important and influential works. During his incarceration, 1954-1964, Qutb wrote various volumes of a commentary of the Quran called *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an (In the Shade of the Qur'an)*. He also wrote a manifesto on Islamism called *Ma'alim fi-l-Tariq (Milestones)* in 1964. According to Anthony Black in *The History of Islamic Political Thought (2001)*, this book was heavily influenced by the works of Lenin in that it advocated a clandestine armed vanguard movement that would engage in a liberation struggle.

Qutb's ideas had been steadily evolving up to that point and these books represented the culmination of his thoughts. His disgust with American society, his disillusionment with Western influences in Cairo, his time with the Ikhwan and the torture he had received at the hands of the Egyptian state had all shaped Qutb's thoughts. In these works, Qutb expressed his radically anti-secular and anti-Western ideas based on his interpretation of Islam.

*'We are also surrounded by Jahiliyyah [ignorance] today, which is of the same nature as it was during the first period of Islam, perhaps a little deeper. Our whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws – is Jahiliyyah, even to the extent that what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy and Islamic thought are also constructs of Jahiliyyah!'*⁵

*'There is only one place on earth which can be called the home of Islam (Dar al-Islam) [sic], and it is that place where the Islamic state is established and the Shari'ah is the authority and God's limits are observed, and where all the Muslims administer the affairs of the state with mutual consultation. The rest of the world is the home of hostility (Dar al-Harb) [sic]. A Muslim can have only two possible relations with Dar al-Harb [sic]: peace with a contractual agreement, or war. A country with which there is a treaty will not be considered the home of Islam.'*⁶

⁵ Syed Qutb (2007), *Milestones (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service)*, p.20.

⁶ Qutb, *Milestones*, p.118.

Qutb's main argument was that the so-called 'Muslim societies' all over the world had reverted to pre-Islamic ignorance (Jahiliyyah) because they didn't refer to Allah in all matters. Hence all leaders in Muslim-majority countries were illegitimate and should be forcibly removed through offensive jihad. The ideas first espoused by the Khawarij 1,300 years ago which tore early Muslim communities apart had been revived to wreak havoc, but this time with a 20th century twist. The Jahiliyyah argument had been used before by reformers such as Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahab (founder of Wahabism) but Qutb combined it with a radical new socio-political ideology – Islamism. He was also perhaps the first to popularize the idea of forcibly removing governments through armed struggle and vehemently opposed the idea of democracy. Over the next 50 years these ideas were to become the bedrock of jihadist movements and they were transported to Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan by his younger brother, with devastating effect.

Saudi Arabia: Islamism, Wahabism and (Takfiri) Jihadism

In 1965, Qutb was charged with treason, tried in what many considered a show trial and sentenced to death. On 29th August 1966, Qutb was executed by hanging. In the aftermath of Qutb's execution a number of Ikhwan activists fled Egypt and found refuge in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States. Amongst them was Qutb's younger brother, Muhammad Qutb, who had been released from prison in 1972 after serving a seven year sentence for conspiring to kill leading political and cultural figures and plotting to overthrow the Government. In Saudi Arabia, he became a professor of Islamic studies at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah and used this opportunity to publish his brother's works and give lectures which were regularly attended by a wealthy young Saudi man by the name of Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden would go on to recommend one of Muhammad Qutb's books in a 2004 videotape. King Abdul Aziz University managed to attract a number of exiled dissidents during this period including a Palestinian activist who had just been expelled from Jordan for his radical views.

*'Jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences and no dialogues [sic].'*⁷

Abdullah Azzam was born in 1941 in a small village in the West Bank called as-Ba'ah al-Hartiyeh, near Jenin. After completing his education, he moved to Damascus in 1966 and studied Shari'ah at the university there. After completing his degree he moved to Jordan and joined the Ikhwan. The Arab-Israeli six-day war in 1967 and the subsequent occupation of the West Bank had a profound effect on Azzam and it propelled him to join the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). But he soon became disillusioned with the secular nationalist approach of Yasser Arafat and moved to Cairo to study Islamic sciences at the world famous Al-Azhar University.

⁷ Abdullah Azzam (1987), *Join the Caravan* [Azzam Publications] p.9.

During his time in Egypt, Azzam interacted with a number of senior Ikhwan figures and followers of Qutb including Omar Abdel Rahman (the blind Sheikh) and a rising star of the Islamist scene whom he would meet again in Afghanistan, one Ayman al-Zawahiri. In the early 1970s, Azzam moved to Saudi Arabia and lectured at the King Abdul Aziz University until 1979. Bin Laden also studied at this university during this period, and it is believed that this is where he first met Azzam, who went on to become his mentor.

Islamism as developed by al-Banna and Qutb first arrived on the shores of Saudi Arabia in the late 1960s. On arriving there it immediately came into contact with Wahabism, an ultra-conservative brand of Islam that had been developed by a cleric called Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahab in the 18th century. Abdul Wahab had become increasingly concerned about the type of Islam he had witnessed being practised around him. He sought to rid Islam of the traditional practices that he viewed as heretical innovations and corruptions such as mysticism, the visiting of tombs and Shi'ism. He viewed anything that did not come out of Arabia proper as 'un-Islamic' and sought to restore what he viewed as a 'pure Islam' informed by Bedouin Arab culture alone.

He pursued his vision with a puritanical zeal and deadly violence, which included the murder of rival scholars, the destruction of Islamic holy sites and the extermination of entire villages. This included the destruction of the homes and graves of members of the Prophet's family which had stood and been revered for hundreds of years. The Wahabi movement entered into an alliance with the 'House of Saud' quite early on and together they plotted to capture the holy lands of Hejaz which were held by the descendents of the Prophet. They also conspired to free Arabia from the Ottoman Empire and they successfully enlisted Britain's help in doing so. In later years the Saud family, with the help of petro-dollars, would export this harsh intolerant brand of Islam all around the world.

When Wahabism and Islamism first interacted they found that they had much in common. They were both revolutionary, they both condemned the vast majority of Muslims, they both ignored hundreds of years of traditional Muslim scholarship and they both relied on a literalist and vacuous re-reading of scripture. Whilst they clearly had their differences too it was the merging of this ultra-conservative and puritanical understanding of Islam with the socio-political ideology of Islamism that would go on to produce the most deadly concoction of all – takfiri Jihadism. This form of Jihadism made no distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim or between civilian and combatant. As far as Takfiris were concerned, whoever disagreed with them was an apostate and deserved to be killed, even if they were women and children. However, it was still early 1979 and, although the fusion of Islamism and Wahabism had already begun, another event later that year would accelerate the process and, for the first time in history, allow the disparate Islamist and jihadi groups from all over the world to come together in a common cause.

The year 1979 was an eventful one in the Islamist calendar. In April, the deeply unpopular Shah of Iran was overthrown in a popular revolution which brought Khomeini to power. In November, a group of radical Wahabis, led by a former corporal in the Saudi National Guard called Juhayman al-Uteybi, stormed the Grand Mosque in Mecca. The siege was initially blamed on the Iranians who subsequently issued a statement blaming the US and Israel for orchestrating the siege. This led to anti-American riots in a number of Muslim-majority countries, which included attacks on embassies, consulates and banks. The siege itself resulted in a lengthy and violent military confrontation, involving French commandos. Juhayman and his men were eventually overpowered and those that were not already dead were beheaded by the Saudis. However, Juhayman's influence remained and one of his former associates, a Palestinian preacher called Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, went on to become a leading ideologue for al Qaeda (AQ) and spiritual mentor of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Afghanistan: the Mujahidin and the birth of Al Qaeda

Another side effect of the Meccan siege was that the US decided to move a battle group to the Persian Gulf in order to protect its interests there. This alarmed the Soviets, encouraged their regional ambitions and in late December 1979 they invaded Afghanistan. The Soviets were initially invited into Afghanistan at the behest of the pro-Soviet Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin. Afghanistan's previous government had overthrown the monarchy a few years earlier and began instigating social reforms. Many of these reforms, such as land re-distribution and women's rights, were viewed as foreign and un-Islamic by the majority of the deeply conservative Afghan population. Mujahidin groups rose to resist and overthrow the Government plunging the country into civil war. The Soviets sought to support the communist regime of Amin and safeguard its interests in Afghanistan against Iran and the West. The US and UK viewed the Soviet invasion as the new front line in the cold war and immediately began to supply the Mujahidin with weapons and aid. Pakistan viewed Afghanistan as its 'backyard' and wanted to bolster pro-Pakistan elements in order to counter Indian influence. To this end, they also threw their weight behind the US/UK efforts to support the Mujahidin.

In 1980, Azzam set up an organization in Peshawar called Maktab al-Khidamat (Services Office) with the sole intention of providing accommodation and training for young recruits who had come to aid the Afghan war effort. He was joined a year later by the wealthy bin Laden who used his wealth to fund the transportation and training of the Mujahidin. Azzam was very successful in motivating and recruiting fighters from all over the world with his speeches and his writings. He believed that the defeat of the Soviets would allow for the establishment of an Islamist state in Afghanistan which would lead the jihad to liberate other Muslim-majority countries that were under occupation, starting with his homeland of Palestine. This view, however, was not universally shared. It put him at odds with another former Ikhwan member who had also joined the war

effort in Afghanistan and, more crucially for Azzam, was also hoping to exert influence over the wealthy bin Laden.

Ayman al-Zawahiri was born in 1951 to a wealthy and well-established family in Cairo. His parents and many of his uncles were in admirable professions and his family was well known and widely respected. At the age of 14, he joined the Ikhwan and came under the influence of his uncle Mahfouz Azzam who was a devout follower of Syed Qutb. Zawahiri initially set up an underground student cell which he hoped would work towards overthrowing the Egyptian Government. According to Lawrence Wright in his book *The Looming Tower (2006)*, Zawahiri developed a mission in life to put Qutb's words into action. Like many others at the time, Zawahiri became disillusioned with the Ikhwan who, with the tacit support of President Anwar Sadat who wished to use them as a countering-influence to secular- leftist groups, publicly renounced violence in the late 1970s. Instead, he joined a group called 'Tanzim al-Jihad'. This group was much more militant in its approach and they saw themselves as the true heirs of Qutbism. Their spiritual leader was the blind Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman who was later given a life sentence for conspiring to bomb New York's World Trade Centre in 1993.

In 1981, Tanzim al-Jihad plotted to assassinate Sadat who had angered the Islamists of Egypt by signing a peace deal with Israel. They succeeded in their mission, and subsequently many Islamists were rounded up and jailed, including Zawahiri. During their time in prison, Tanzim al-Jihad split into two factions, Islamic Jihad and Gama'a al-Islamiyya, with Zawahiri leading the former and Omar Abdel Rahman leading the latter. Zawahiri suffered heavy torture in prison and apparently revealed the whereabouts of an Islamic Jihad activist in the process. He was released in 1986 and moved to Peshawar to work in a hospital to treat wounded fighters. In Peshawar, he interacted with other Islamic Jihad fighters who had made the same journey as him and they began exchanging ideas. It was around this time that he befriended bin Laden. Zawahiri sought to influence bin Laden and channel his wealth towards his circle of fighters, but his takfiri philosophy was at odds with Azzam, who preferred to focus on fighting non-Muslim occupiers of 'Muslim lands'.

In 1989, after one failed attempt, Azzam was assassinated along with his two sons as he travelled to offer Friday prayers at a mosque in Peshawar. One of Jihadism's most illustrious and influential figures had been killed. Suspicion immediately fell on Zawahiri who had regarded Azzam as a rogue element and an obstacle that stood in his way. The Soviets also withdrew in 1989 after losing thousands of soldiers and being frustrated by the guerrilla tactics of the Mujahidin. This was a humiliating defeat and was followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ironically, both Western capitalists and Islamist jihadists celebrated the demise of the Soviets as a great victory for their ideology. However, the good times were to be short lived as jihadists now focused their attention on the near enemy (Muslim-majority governments) as well as the far enemy (the West).

In the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal, Mujahidin groups in Afghanistan turned on each other in their pursuit of power. It is said that Kabul received more shelling in the year after the Soviets withdrew than during the entire ten years that they were there. Many of the Arab takfiri jihadists rallied around bin Laden and Zawahiri and formed what we know today as al Qaeda (AQ). Amongst them were figures such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi who went on to lead a sectarian jihadist campaign in Iraq that took the country to the brink of civil war. Despite the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan continued to attract jihadists from around the world that were looked after and trained in facilities set up by the AQ leadership. This included many young Muslims who had been born and raised in the West, including a young teaching assistant from Leeds in England called Muhammad Siddique Khan. Western governments, however, had lost interest in Afghanistan but Pakistan continued to support elements that it thought would serve its interests.

One such group that attracted attention from Pakistan was made up of Pashtun and Pakistani Deobandi students who were fighting other ethnic and religious groups to control Afghanistan. They were known as the Taliban. The Taliban was run by a former Mujahidin commander called Mullah Umar who, as well as receiving support from Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), maintained a good working relationship with AQ. The Taliban, however, did not believe in expansionism and were quite content to govern the 'Islamic emirate of Afghanistan' with an ultra-strict interpretation of Shari'ah that was in fact more informed by the Pashtun tribal code than by Islam. The Pakistani policy of support towards the Taliban was about to backfire in spectacular fashion due to a plot that was being hatched on the streets of Europe.

Jihad goes Global: The Road to 9/11

During the 1990s, Islamist groups came close to achieving power in Algeria, only to be prevented by the military. The subsequent civil war gave birth to a number of much harsher and more violent groups such as Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) and AQ North Africa. They were also given the opportunity to form a government in Sudan with disastrous consequences. Causes such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya and Kashmir continued to attract young zealous jihadists and Islamist groups (eager to seek attention by pretending to represent Muslims) set up front organisations in Europe and North America. A number of Islamist and jihadist dissidents from the Middle East also found refuge and safety in Europe, using the opportunity to recruit young Muslim students to their cause. Europe proved to be a fertile recruiting ground and many Muslim students from Muslim-majority countries came to Europe to study. Many of these students hailed from largely middle class and moderate families in the Middle East and North Africa. However, some were to experience what Qutb had experienced in the US 40 years earlier. One such student was an Egyptian man called Muhammad Atta who arrived in Hamburg in 1992. Atta would go on to succeed where Omar Abdul Rahman before him had failed.

Atta's fellow students and flatmates found him to be introverted, shy and at times aggressively rude. They also found him to be closed minded and noticed that he had become increasingly ritualistic in religious observations since he had arrived in Hamburg to study Urban Planning. He often expressed his outrage over Western policies in Muslim majority-countries and was deeply affected by the Palestine-Israel conflict. By the mid-1990s Atta began attending a local mosque in Hamburg that was known for its hard-line views and he even taught classes there.

This gave him the opportunity to meet like-minded individuals with whom he shared his views. It is believed that around this time he was recruited to AQ by Muhammad Haydar Zammar who had just returned from fighting in Bosnia-Herzegovina. During the next few years Atta frequently went missing for long periods of time and is believed to have travelled to a number of countries including Afghanistan. What is known is that by March 2000 Atta, along with other AQ members based in Europe, had begun making enquiries at flight training colleges in the US.

In June 2000, Atta and a number of fellow AQ recruits moved to the US to focus on learning how to fly aeroplanes. Over the course of the next year or so, Atta and his accomplices honed their aeronautical skills in Florida, also frequenting the strip joints of Las Vegas whilst they were out there. By early September 2001, Atta (after months of lessons and hours spent with flight simulators) had become relatively competent with planes. On 10th September 2001, Atta travelled from Boston to Portland with fellow flying enthusiast Abdul Aziz al-Omari. The next day they boarded a Boeing 767 that was heading back to Boston, but the plane was not to reach its intended destination. Within 15 minutes of the flight taking off, Atta had taken over the controls and at 08.46 local time the plane collided into the north tower of the World Trade Centre.

Conclusion

What began as an attempt to re-assert Muslim pride in the face of unrelenting European colonialism by the likes of Abduh, Rida and al-Banna, led to the taking of more than 3,000 innocent lives in the most spectacular terrorist attack of all time. Muslims and non-Muslims around the world struggled to understand what could have inspired 19 young men, full of potential, to take their own lives along with thousands of others in such a shocking fashion. By 12th September 2001, the Manhattan skyline, along with the rest of the world, had changed forever.

Islamism was born in an age of empires, an age in which European colonial powers were exerting a huge amount of influence in many Muslim-majority countries. European ideological, political and cultural trends were beginning to influence societies the world over and the social values and norms of predominantly Muslim societies were being challenged. Islamism was a product of this environment. It was a rebellious child of colonialism, a child that hated its parents despite being shaped by, and inheriting much

from them. The very early Islamist ideologues felt threatened by the onslaught of Western secularism and sought to respond by incorporating aspects of ideologies such as socialism and fascism with a literalist and puritanical understanding of Islam. Their experiment failed to provide the Muslim masses with what they needed, and was rejected and condemned by the vast majority of orthodox theologians. But this rejection only agitated and frustrated Islamists further, forcing some to moderate but others to become even more extreme. Islamist terror attacks are symptomatic of the failure of Islamism in general, and they point to the self-righteous and arrogant nature of Islamists. Instead of accepting their own failures they continue to seek attention through more drastic and violent means. Years of frustrated attempts to seize power and galvanize the masses led to what we have today – a vast spectrum of always authoritarian and often brutal Islamist groups and movements that have in many cases turned on each other in their quest for domination.

Islamists remain frozen in an age of warring empires and cosmic wars. They desperately cling to their binary view of the world despite it not being supported by the reality around them. Dreams of an imperial future in which divinely-inspired warriors conquer and rule the world bring contentment to the hearts of some, but instil terror in the minds of others.

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