The quest for the Islamic state: Islamic Fundamentalism in Egypt and Iran

'Islamic Fundamentalism' is a term which has been created in current discourses on the Middle East and elsewhere which has an identifiable but not strictly limited range of reference. It refers to modern political movements and ideas, mostly oppositional, which seek to establish, in one sense or another, an Islamic state. The model for an Islamic state is sought by these movements in a 'sacred history' of the original political community of the faithful established by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina in the seventh century and maintained under his four successors, the Rashidun (rightly guided) caliphs (in Shi'i Islam, it is only the rule of one of them, Ali). Identifying the essential elements of this model, and the way in which they can be constructed into a contemporary state and society, varies widely according to different political and ideological positions. I would argue that all 'fundamentalism' is modern in that it attempts to reconstruct the fundamentals of an ideational system in modern society, in accordance with political and ideological positions taken in relation to current issues and discourses. Identification of the fundamentals and their combinations are effected in relation to these current political processes. In what follows I shall examine the development of themes and issues in Islamic political discourse and activity in two Middle East countries in which these developments have been prominent and influential, and which provide strikingly contrasting examples. I shall concentrate primarily on Egypt, concluding with a general sketch of religion and politics in Iran to draw out the main contrasts. I shall discuss these developments in the context of their relation to the ideas and realities of the modern nation state, at first in anticipation of this political form and by reference to European examples, and later in the project to Islamise the nation state, or to deny it in favour of a universal conception of faith. In Egypt modern political Islam started in the second half of the nineteenth century in anticipation of a modern state on the European model which it mostly welcomed, but constructed in terms of 'original' Islam, as against the degenerate religion of the dynastic polity it opposed. Subsequent movements in Egypt assumed the model of a modern nation state and sought ways, intellectually and politically, to Islamise this model. Unlike Egypt, religious developments in Iran remained largely within the religious establishment, which feared and resisted the modern state (itself a very different pattern from the Egyptian), then acquiesced in its inevitability while retaining an important base of autonomy in relation to that state. This was to be a crucial factor in the leading role it came to play in recent political events.

The terms 'modern state' and 'nation state' do not refer to an unvarying common form, but more to combinations of elements and characteristics constituting perhaps an 'ideal type'. To use Max Weber's 1 characterisation, the modern state is 'legal-rational', in that government rests on codified law which regulates hierarchies of office with specified powers, obligations and limits, thus constituting a specific type of bureaucracy. The form of society which typically corresponds to this state and provides the conditions for it is one in which extensive social division of labour has led to individualisation of economic and political subjects from communal and collectivist organisation of tribe, village, kinship or other corporate forms. The constituents of the state are then individual citizens with legal personalities and specified rights and obligations. Whether such a state has a democratic representational form or not, its political processes and struggles involve the organisation and mobilisation of citizens in constituencies of support based on common interests or ideological commitments. A certain degree of general literacy is essential for the communications which form an important part of this form of politics. Literacy in a common language is also an important constituent of the ideological conceptions of common national belonging, what Benedict Anderson (1983) has called 'imagined communities'. In reality, as we all know, primordial loyalties of ethnicity, religion, regional origins and so forth play a very important part in the politics of modern states, but these loyalties are cast in the political idiom and mode of political parties employing methods of organisation and communication characteristic of this model of the modern state. 2 I shall have
occasion in what follows to elaborate on these different political modalities.

The currents of Islamic fundamentalism I shall discuss here have developed discourses and practices which refer, explicitly or implicitly, to the modern state. The creation or the transformation of the modern state along the lines of the ‘sacred history’ of Islam is a recurrent theme. There are fundamentalist currents which do not fit into this mould, most notably the Wahhabi movement which culminated in the formation of modern Saudi Arabia (see Chapter 1, pp. 10–13). I would argue (see Zubaida, 1986) that this is an example of a historical genre of tribal movements which start with religious zeal and culminate in routinised dynastic states, which is precisely what happened in Saudi Arabia. It is quite distinct from Islamic politics in the context of the modern state (although it did have important intellectual effects in that context).

The event which above all others has focused world attention on ‘fundamentalism’ was the Iranian revolution of 1979. For the European and American media and their audiences it was an object of fascination and fear: a demonstration to many that the deep-rooted bases of ‘traditional belief’ cannot be overridden with ‘modernisation’ which is only a superficial veneer. To ‘Third World’ nationalists and some ‘Third Worldists’, it represented not merely an anti-imperialist revolution, but one with the special distinction of cultural authenticity, challenging the most insidious dimension of imperialism, the cultural. In other Islamic countries, especially in the Arab world, the impact was tremendous. Naturally enough, those already inclined to Islamic affiliations drew great inspiration and strength from the demonstration effect of the revolution; suddenly their ideas were firmly on the world stage and within the realms of political possibility. What is even more important, however, was the impact on other oppositional political groups and individuals, including those on the left, who have traditionally opposed Islamic currents, usually ranged to the far right of the political spectrum. Here was an Islamic revolution which was populist and anti-imperialist, which had sported some of the vocabularies and slogans of the left. For some it seemed that, unlike the ‘imported’ ideologues of Marxism or nationalism, Islam in its political and ‘progressive’ form was more accessible to the people, springing as it does from their historical cultural roots. Political Islam acquired many recruits, a political respectability and viability, it became firmly established in the political mainstream. This was to the embarrassment and discomfort of political regimes which had adopted or encouraged Islam as a means of discipline and control (Saudi Arabia), or as a counter against the left (Sadat in Egypt).

The Iranian revolution underlined the salience of political Islam in current Middle East and world politics. But it is clearly neither the starting point of political Islam, which has a long history in the modern world, nor the political or sociological prototype of Islamic political movements elsewhere. It is important to emphasise this point, because it is often assumed, both by the Islamic propagandists themselves and by some Western commentators, that there is some unity underlying the Islamic phenomenon, provided by the receptivity of Middle Eastern peoples to religious appeals, which they understand and accept more readily than they would ‘imported’ politics and ideology. The argument I shall present here is that the significance and outcome of Islamic politics can only be determined in the contexts of particular institutions and struggles, which in the case of Egypt are vastly different. This difference, I shall show, cannot be explained in terms of the contrast between Sunni and Shi‘i Islam. Let us turn to a consideration of these contexts and conjunctures.

The historical background

While the concern of this paper is primarily with the modern world, a brief glance at the historical background is nevertheless essential. The very use of the term ‘political Islam’ may be at issue: what other form of Islam is there? Islam has been political since its inception, it may be argued, a unity of state and the community of the faithful. That is at least the theory of Islamic jurisprudence, but the practice for most of the centuries of Islamic history is quite different, a fact also recognised in theology and jurisprudence. Islamic empires, at least since the time of the Umayyads, have maintained a de facto distinction between the state and society, and religion entered both but in different ways, and except for brief periods, was neither dominant over nor coincident with either state or society. The state consisted of the ruling dynasty with their retainers, functionaries and soldiery. The early Islamic armies which conquered the vast territories which later constituted the Islamic empires consisted of Arab tribesmen. As such the Caliph could be seen as the chief of the community, the state as the political form of the community, and the soldiers as the faithful in
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arms. This state of affairs was not to survive dynastic rule, under which the Arab armies were disbanded and replaced by professional soldiers, mostly Turkish. This state, now structurally and socially separate from its subjects, remained theoretically the Islamic state. Its head still bore the title of Caliph (successor and deputy to the Prophet), who encouraged and facilitated Islamic worship, punished heresy and generally upheld the symbols and rituals of Islam. In the constitution of the state Islam was confined to particular institutions, almost exclusively the legal institutions. The law, however, was in practice only partially based on religious sources, and it only applied to limited spheres of mostly private and civil statuses and transactions. The ruler and his servants were bound by the law only in theory and in the most general ethical terms. Models and procedures of government were drawn from pre-Islamic imperial traditions of Persia and Byzantium. The primary source of legislation was by decree of the ruler, although this in theory should not contradict the principles of shari'a (Islamic law). Some taxes are specified in shari'a, but most of the forms of taxation were in addition to those stipulated; some rulers even taxed the sale of alcoholic drinks, thus legally admitting what in religious terms is prohibited. In the sphere of the state, therefore, religion occupied a distinct but limited and subordinate position. Middle Eastern polities were in practice as Islamic as their European counterparts were Christian.

In the context of society, the first point to note is the diversity of religious manifestations. The most important divide is that between the city and the non-urban sphere of nomads and tribesmen of desert and mountain (in Middle Eastern geo-history, these are the two main spheres, the rural being an appendage of one or the other, see Zubaida, 1986). The nomadic was considered by the orthodox (often quite rightly) to be the sphere of heterodoxy and the refuge of heresy outside the reach of political and religious authority. Scriptural orthodoxy claimed pride of place in the city: it was the official state religion, and one of the main connecting links between state and civil society. The religious institutions of the state were manned by personnel drawn from the strata of urban notables, the same strata which included merchants and landowners. These were also the leaders of urban society and the intermediaries between the state and the other urban strata. Orthodoxy existed side by side with Sufism, and since about the eleventh century, in harmony with it. In terms of belief and ritual, Sufism is a mystical, spiritual and gnostic stream within Islam, but beyond this general

characterisation exhibits, in turn, considerable diversity. To sum up, religion took diverse and overlapping forms, many of which bore only a tenuous relation to orthodox, scriptural Islam.

Modern Islamic political thought has to be seen in the context of a conjuncture between this historical background and the European impact. The reformist intellectuals of the Ottoman Empire and of Iran, concerned at the weakness and backwardness of their countries in the face of European might, believed that the superiority of the European powers (mainly Britain and France) did not depend solely on economic and military power, but that behind these factors lay a socio-political system which produces awareness and commitment among the people and an effective organisation of state and society. Ottoman, including Egyptian Islamic intellectuals argued that the perceived inferiority of their countries was not attributable to Islam as such, as Europeans may think, but to the degeneration and corruption of Islam. Islam was seen to have anticipated the European systems. This line of thought was shared by two major figures in the late nineteenth century, often cited as the founders of the reformist movement in Egypt, Jamal Eddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abdu.

Political Islam in Egypt

Egypt was the Middle Eastern country which experienced the earliest direct European conquest and thereafter its continued presence and influence. It started with the Napoleonic invasion, soon followed by the modernising rule of Muhammad Ali, who attempted, with some success, economic and administrative reforms. These included institutions of modern education and scholarships for promising students to France. French and other European literature and social thought were eagerly taken up by a wide circle of intellectuals, including, significantly, some with religious education and training. Muhammad Ali’s successors (dynastic descendants) took Egypt into ever-closer involvement with and dependence upon Britain and France, culminating in debt crises and more direct economic, military and political controls by these powers throughout the nineteenth century and for the first half of the twentieth. These developments included profound social and cultural effects: considerable measures of industrialisation and urbanisation, capitalist penetration of important sectors of agriculture, with consequent break-up or loosening of old
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communal bonds. Together with the limited development of education and literacy, these developments created more or less politicised publics, especially in the major cities, who were increasingly aware of the inequities of foreign domination, and of the gap between the promise of European ideas of liberty and the realities of continued restrictions under dynastic rule. Islamic political thought has to be considered in this context.

The picture of religion in relation to society and the state given in the foregoing historical sketch still applied to nineteenth-century Egypt. Muhammad Abdu's reforms were aimed first at religious ideas and institutions, and then at the wider society. Religious institutions, including the great university of al-Azhar in Cairo, were still partaking in the wisdom of the Middle Ages, and teaching medieval geography, mathematics and science as well as the religious studies of theology and jurisprudence. This archaic scholasticism existed side by side with popular religiosity imbued with magic and saint worship. Abdu, himself a prominent 'alim (a learned man of religion) succeeded in enlisting the support of the authorities in reforming and modernising these institutions. But the task which he and his mentor Afghani had set themselves was much wider: it was to liberate Islamic countries from their weakness and backwardness, and their subjugation to the European imperial powers. They attributed this weakness to ignorance, corruption and fragmentation characteristic of Islamic politics and societies including the religious institutions. But these failings, they argued, were certainly not intrinsic to Islam, quite the contrary; witness the glories of the Islamic past, both in knowledge and in might. In particular, the socio-political system which contributed so much to the might and civilisation of the West was anticipated by Islam many centuries previously. The Islamic community founded by Muhammad in Medina in the seventh century exemplified all the principles of citizenship and democracy in a purer and clearer form. For while in Christianity religion is separated from the state, in Islam the state is one with the umma, the community of believers; religion, state and people form one body. In the Medina community the state was but the plurality of its citizens unified by faith and obedience to the commands of God. No man could rule over another because rule belonged to God alone. The army was but the citizenry in arms. Institutions like shura, the imperative that the ruler consult his followers in all important matters, and bay'a, the collective oath of allegiance to a new leader before he could assume the Khilafa (caliphate) – the succession to Muhammed as commander of the faithful – ensured representativeness and responsibility of rule in a form more original and direct than the equivalent institution in modern Europe. What Muslims needed now was not so much to follow Europe, but to revive their original heritage, which had been subverted by the dynastic empires, and forgotten in the degeneration and corruption of religion in the later centuries.

It may be instructive to draw a parallel between Islamic thinkers seeking reform in the revival of original elements of their history with their European (especially German) equivalents in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Goethe, Schiller, Holderlin and Hegel, the ancient Athenian republic fulfilled a similar function as the Medinan community for our Islamic thinkers — a model of the unity of the state and civil society, and the identity of private individual and citizen, in contrast to the social, political and psychological fragmentation which they perceived in their contemporary world. Some, like the young Hegel, saw in the French Revolution the possibilities of a regeneration at a higher level of the Athenian model. But it is the significance they attached to religion which is of particular interest here. They contrasted the subjective and individualistic elements of Christianity to the civic and folk religions of Greece and Rome, and attributed the fragmentation of life in contemporary society at least in part to the prevailing religious spirit. We do not know whether Abdu or any of his followers knew about this discussion, though we do know that Abdu was familiar with contemporary European thought, and was specially impressed with Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. What is interesting, however is that he presented similar arguments when contrasting Christianity with Islam: Christianity separated religiosity from politics and public life, whereas Islam, as we have seen, he considered to be an eminently political and civic religion. But unlike the German thinkers who could not argue for a revival of ancient Greek religion, Abdu's Athenian republic was Islamic Medina; all he was doing was advocating a revival of true and original Islam.

Abdu is not normally identified as a fundamentalist but rather as a liberal reformer with a nineteenth-century faith in progress through enlightenment. The major contrast between Abdu and, say, the Muslim Brotherhood (see below) is his liberalism with regard to the application of Islamic law, particularly elements of the penal code and the restrictions on women. At the present time the insistence on these elements of shari'a is the hallmark of
fundamentalism, and by these criteria Abdu is not a fundamentalist. It may be argued that this insistence on the letter of the Quran is a defining characteristic of fundamentalism. But any call for the application of the shari'a must implicitly accept many interpretations and elaborations beyond the letter of the holy sources. Abdu was doing no more than the Islamic jurists have done throughout the ages in using very wide and vague principles of legal methodology of deduction and analogy in arriving at judgments. A fundamentalist position calling for the application of the shari'a must accept that any version will already contain many constructions which have a very tenuous connection to the holy sources. What underlies the contrast between Abdu and later fundamentalists are their different attitudes to European ideas and models: whereas for Abdu Europe, the oppressor, was at the same time the model for progress and strength, for the later fundamentalists the West was both oppressive and culturally threatening. The insistence on the Quranic penal code and on the restrictions on women are emotionally and symbolically potent proclamations of cultural identity and antagonism to the Westernised sectors of society who have betrayed this heritage. While Abdu is clearly not a fundamentalist in the current sense, his construction of the 'sacred history' as a model for the modern state was a very important episode in the quest for this Islamic state.

An event which symbolised the institution of the modern state in the former Ottoman lands was Ataturk's abolition of the caliphate in 1924. The modern state which Abdu sought had arrived, but with hardly any Islamic trappings in its organisation or ideology. Ataturk's republic was explicitly anti-religious. Iraq, Palestine and Syria were under European mandates, and Egypt, while nominally independent was in reality a European colony. Islamic presence within the state, in so far as it existed at all, was confined to the law of personal status. The loss of the caliphate stimulated diverse reactions throughout the Islamic world, from the caliphate movement in India, to the various schemes advanced by would-be candidates for the vacant position among Arab rulers and dignitaries, including the Egyptian monarch. At the level of politico-religious ideas, the most prominent response was that of Rashid Rida (d.1935), a religious intellectual and disciple of Abdu. He sought a formula for re-establishing the caliphate under modern conditions of separate nation states (see Chapter 1, pp. 15-16). His solution was a caliph who would enjoy spiritual authority in all the Islamic lands by virtue of his learning and religious stature, and possibly of his descent from one of the respected Arab dynasties who claim the ancestry of the Prophet. This authority would be superimposed on independent sovereign governments, much like the papacy in the Catholic world. Politically Rida's advocacy came to nothing. Like Abdu, Rida exerted considerable intellectual influence, which had practical consequence in the religious and educational spheres. But neither of them succeeded in transferring his ideas into the field of political struggle or of incorporating them into the modern state. It was the Muslim Brotherhood which took the quest for the Islamic state into the political field of popular agitation and organisation.

The Muslim Brotherhood

This is the movement which, in one form or another, has been the most prominent fundamentalist current in Sunni Islam since its inception in Egypt in 1928. While clearly influenced by the ideas of Abdu and Rida, it eschewed the European influences of Abdu's reformism and the intellectualism of Rida, aiming for a popular and populist appeal, with considerable success. The Brotherhood was founded by Hassan al-Banna, a school teacher in Isma'ilia in the Canal Zone. By all accounts al-Banna was a person endowed with great charisma and a prophetic zeal. He was struck by the corruption and degradation of Muslims, especially the young, of his time, and their subordination politically, economically and culturally to the dominant foreigners. He launched the Brotherhood as a movement for education and reform of hearts and minds. He taught the children in the daytime and their parents at night. The movement soon grew and spread to many parts of the country, acquired premises and funds. It very soon acquired a political dimension, calling for the Islamic reform of society and government. It became bitterly opposed to the secular, liberal-constitutional parties, especially the Wafd (the main democratic party in Egypt before the Free Officers' revolution in 1952), and in the process was firmly identified with the right. At times the Brotherhood flirted with the Royal Palace and participated in its intrigues against the elected Wafd government. Its members participated in the nationalist agitations against the British in the Canal Zone and then as volunteers in the Palestine conflict. It clearly had a potent influence in the lower ranks of the armed forces. Eventually (early 1940s) it developed its own armed
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'secret apparatus' and engaged in political assassinations, the most prominent victim being the prime minister of Egypt, al-Nuqrashi, killed in 1949. Al-Banna himself was soon to fall in what was evidently a reprisal killing by the secret police. The Brotherhood, it would seem, had close connections with the Free Officers movement which staged the coup d'etat in 1952, and enjoyed official favour in the early days of the new regime. But they were soon to fall out with Nasser after he took over in 1954, and he was to become the target for an assassination attempt, after which the Brotherhood was fiercely suppressed. In spite of the flourishes of Islamic rhetoric, Nasser's regime was essentially secular, and the dominant official ideas were those of nationalism and socialism. The bitter enmity between Nasser and the Brotherhood persisted and flared in another episode in 1965 when the police claimed to have discovered an armed plot against the government, arrested many of the cadres of the Brotherhood and executed some of the leaders, including Sayyid Qutb, theoretician of more recent trends to be discussed in a following section.

The original aim of the Brotherhood was the reform of hearts and minds, to guide Muslims back to the true religion, and away from the corrupt aspirations and conduct created by European dominance. The early politicisation of the movement placed this objective in the context of a virtuous community and an Islamic political order. Hassan al-Banna, in an essay entitled 'The Reform of Self and Society', wrote:

Our duty as Muslim Brothers is to work for the reform of selves (nafs), of hearts and souls by joining them to God the all-high; then to organise our society to be fit for the virtuous community which commands the good and forbids evil-doing, then from the community will arise the good state. (Hassan al-Banna, n.d., pp.62–3)

The main plank of their (rudimentary) political thought is a construction of the 'sacred history' similar to what we have already outlined, the recreation of the early Medinan community of the Prophet; their most persistent slogan is 'the Quran is our constitution'. But their model of the 'sacred history' is quite different from the liberal-constitutional image which emerges from Abdu's construction. In their version piety, order and authority play a central role. They advocate a presidential system with an elected shura (consultative) council, also part of the 'sacred history' model, postulated as an equivalent to a parliament. However, al-Banna strongly objected to political parties, arguing that they represent sectional and egoistic interests which divide and corrupt the body politic of the umma. This element in their thought reinforced their identification, by their opponents, with fascist organic-statist ideologies. The social and economic programme for such a regime is even more rudimentary and vague than the political thought. First is the axiomatic duty to facilitate and enforce the conditions and means for Islamic piety and ritual observance. This includes facilities for women, including working women, to maintain appropriate standards of dress and of insulation from contact with men. After that it is the maintenance of social justice as specified in the Quran. This of course gives wide scope for interpretation. Some thinkers from the ranks of the Muslim Brothers advocated Islamic socialism (see for instance Mohammad al-Ghazzali 1951). These treaties always start with a denunciation of Marxism and materialism, then elaborate on the inequities of capitalism seen as a system of riba, usury, which is forbidden in Islamic law. Al-Ghazzali interprets the sacred sources as supporting a distrust of private property, all goods belonging to God and disposable by those who rule justly in his name, the Caliph or his equivalent in an Islamic order. Private property is only justified if it fulfils a social function. The programme of an Islamic government must, therefore, include nationalisation and land reform. Some commentators have remarked on the similarity of this picture to the Nasser regime's 'Arab socialism' which was to follow. But as we have seen the Brothers were to denounce that regime as ungodly tyranny, and one that neglected all the tenets of Islam. These ideas of Islamic socialism have persisted in one form or another among progressive intellectuals with an Islamic orientation, but not so much among the Muslim Brothers as such. They have maintained vague notions of social justice, but have not used the vocabulary of socialism, or shown any hostility to private property. An obvious interpretation of this reticence regarding socialism is the maintenance of a clear ideological boundary against the rhetoric of the Nasser regime, and its apparent friendliness in foreign affairs to the socialist bloc. This hostility to socialism and to socialists has crystallised even more clearly in the ideas of the new Muslim Brotherhood which emerged into semi-legal public operation under Sadat in the 1970s and continues to the present day. Many of the leading personalities of the Brotherhood found refuge from Nasserite repression in Saudi Arabia, and the Saudi connection has
been maintained as an important source of moral and financial support to the present time. This connection will no doubt have had significant political influence. More recently, persons and organisations associated with the Brotherhood have been very active in business and finance, especially with the rise of the Islamic banks and investment companies.

In every respect the Muslim Brotherhood, from its inception, has operated as a political party, now legal, now clandestine. It is the first organised Islamic popular movement in a modern urban setting. Its organisation and ideology assume potential constituencies composed of individualised political subjects, a high proportion of whom are literate and approachable through the printed word. Its activities and strategies assume the space of a centralised modern state, and are directed at its institutions and powers. Part of their strategy is the infiltration of military and police establishments. The primary objective of the establishment of an Islamic state is construed within the context of a modern nation state. In fact of all the political parties operating in recent Egyptian history the Muslim Brotherhood is one of the most modern in its assumptions and operations. Alongside the various small parties of the left, it relied primarily on organisation and mobilisation of support on ideological-political appeal and on an individual basis, as against the predominant politics of notables and of patronage networks characteristic of the general political scene, including many aspects of the organisation of support for the leading Wafd party. Nasserism in its heyday enjoyed widespread popular support and enthusiasm, but much of that was spontaneous and unorganised. And where it was organised, it was based on a government party closely interlinked with authority. Finally, in terms of the territorial scope of its operation, the Brotherhood shared the dilemma of Arab political ideologies in the oscillation between a particular national perspective (Egyptian) and a pan-Arab or, sometimes, pan-Islamic one. Its political organisation and activity was primarily in Egypt, but Brotherhood organisations were founded in other Arab countries, notably in Syria and Jordan, and more recently in the Gulf and in Tunisia. While there is considerable contact and sometimes co-operation between these different national organisations, each in effect constitutes a unit in the national politics of its location. The political space of its operation is in effect the multitude of Arab political entities, each organised as a separate nation state, but with a formal commitment to 'unity' theoretically shared by all, but in practice a dead letter.

The most notable extra-Egyptian activity in the Brotherhood's history is its participation in the Palestinian conflict, in itself part of Egyptian national politics.

In case the foregoing passages create the impression that the Brotherhood was a continuously coherent party, I should add a note about its fissiparous tendencies, particularly under conditions of stress. After the death of Banna, and then under Nasserite repression, conflicting factions were formed which engaged in various struggles. Often, there was no strong central control or discipline over the activities of members and factions, some of whom pursued their own projects, without reference to others. Many members and followers were dissatisfied with the weak leadership which prevailed in the organisation after Banna. The development of dissident groups and currents, to which we shall now turn, was, in part, a reflection of this situation.

Recent fundamentalist currents

While the Muslim Brotherhood has maintained its position as a leading actor on the political stage in recent years, it was the other more militant Islamic groups, like the so-called Takfir wal Hijra, and Jihad who assumed the most spectacular roles, especially with the assassination of President Sadat in 1981. To understand properly the ideology and organisation of these groups and their difference from the Brotherhood, we have first to consider the ideological strand which inspired them in the first place, the ideas of Sayyid Qutb.

Sayyid Qutb (1906-65) was one of the main intellectual figures in the Muslim Brotherhood. A school teacher who was also a known and respected man of letters, he spent two years in the United States (1949-51) on a training programme, and was familiar with the major strands in modern Western thought. He joined the Brotherhood in 1951 and was put in charge of da'wa ('missionary') activity. Under the Nasser repression he spent 1954-64 in prison, released in 1964 only to be rearrested a few months later, implicated in an arms plot, condemned to death and executed in 1965. He wrote many books on Islamic religion and its modern social and political implications, including a highly original commentary on the Quran (see Carré, 1984). Ma'ālim fil Tariq, 'landmarks along the path' (Qutb, 1980), was one of his last books. It contains the ideational basis for much subsequent radical
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thinking. Let us consider the main ideas of this work.

The project of re-enacting the episodes of the 'sacred history' features prominently in Qubt's thought, only the episodes follow early Islamic history more precisely. The 'first Islamic generation' of Muhammad and his followers constituted themselves as a nucleus of believers separate from the jahili (ignorant, barbaric) society around them. As such they strengthened themselves in faith and numbers in spite of the waves of persecution they suffered. When they were sufficiently strong and confident in their faith, they broke away from jahili society in a hijra (flight, migration) from Mecca to Medina, where support was already assured. From there they waged an armed assault, a jihad (holy war) against the unbelievers, and with the help of the Almighty, triumphed and prevailed. They instituted the rule (sovereignty) of God (hakimiyet allah) as against the heretofore prevalent rule of man. But this holy realm only lasted for a brief period, to be subverted after the death of the Prophet and his close companions into a dynastic corrupt rule of man by man. Jahiliyya was restored, and it prevails to the present day. The task of the believer now is to follow in the footsteps of this first Islamic generation. A vanguard of believers must be formed which would insulate itself from jahili society. Given that the believers will have to live within jahili society (as Muhammad and his early followers had to live within Meccan society), the insulation will have to be a psychic or emotional insulation (in'tizal shu'uri). This vanguard, again following the example of the sacred history, would then strengthen itself in faith and numbers, and then launch a jihad against jahili society, which will only end when the rule of God prevails throughout the world (and Qubt made it clear that he meant the whole world, and not just the Islamic world). This would not entail any coercion in converting people to the true faith, but only the removal of the coercion of the rule of man; only then will individuals be able freely to choose their faith. Qubt contended that Western civilisation, while successful in providing material wealth (which merited his approval, because Islam is not an ascetic religion, but enjoins the production and enjoyment of wealth), has reached a point of crisis because of spiritual bankruptcy. Communism is no solution, as it has proved itself to be a guise for tyranny and corruption. Only Islam can maintain the material achievements of the West, but in the good society, under the rule of God.

Qubt, however, was quite insistent that economic and social considerations were only secondary; Islam is not a social doctrine, its concern is not social justice or freedom or any other ideological ideal, it is nothing but a faith. The sole object of the Islamic vanguard is to implant this faith in the hearts and minds of the believers. Part of this faith is to bring about sovereignty of God, so it has a necessary political project: to overthrow the rule of man and end the state of jahiliyya. Jihad is, therefore, an integral part of the faith. The effect of this element of Qubt's thought is to rule out as irrelevant the comparisons of Islam to democracy, to socialism or any other -ism. Islam is nothing but itself, a faith and a doctrine.

The political implications of Qubtic thought are quite startling. It departs radically from the central concerns of mainstream Islamic politics as represented in the different strand of the Muslim Brotherhood, or in reformist Islamic thinking. It implies that purportedly Islamic countries, like Egypt, are not really Islamic but part of the realm of jahiliyya. In terms of conventional religion it is a serious infraction to declare a Muslim (i.e. one who professes Islam) to be an infidel (takfir al-muslim). Politically it requires an abandonment of the populist stance of the Brotherhood in favour of vanguardist secret politics of cells (the Brotherhood reserved this kind of politics for its 'secret apparatus', the armed conspiratorial branch). In our terms, it means an explicit rejection of the political idiom of the modern nation state and of modern political ideologies in favour of a universalist project based on faith. These implications were realised to various degrees by the radical groups of the 1970s and 80s.

Modern radical groups

In the 1970s two main groups emerged on the political scene in Egypt; the 'Military Academy' (al-faniyya al-askariyya) group, deriving this name from the attack on the military academy in 1974 (as a prelude to a failed coup d'etat), and the so-called takfir wali hijra (inadequately translated as 'repentance and holy flight'), but which referred to itself as Jama'at al-Muslimin (the Society of Muslims). This group came into prominence with the kidnap and then assassination of the Minister of Religious Foundations in 1977. The so-called al-Jihad (holy war) group, some of whose members were responsible for the assassination of President Sadat in 1981, is reckoned to be a continuation of the 'military academy' group. The founders and core members of these groups were among those incarcerated and tortured in Nasser's prisons. It is related that their jailers often ridiculed their convictions and taunted them that
the Almighty was indifferent to their sufferings. These attitudes led many of the younger internees to the conviction that their jailers and the state which employed them could not be Muslims even when they professed Islam, they were kuffar (infidels). Sayyid Qub’s view of contemporary society as a jahiliyya from which the true believers must separate themselves until sufficiently strong to conquer it for Islam gave a coherent theoretical expression to these sentiments. These ideas are at the basis of the doctrines of the modern radical groups.

Jama’at al-Muslimin, was the group that took these ideas to their logical extreme. Under the leadership of Shukri Mustafa, they considered themselves to constitute the only true Muslims; anyone called to join but refusing is an infidel. The life and property of all infidels are licit to the believers. Their separation from jahili society was accomplished within urban spaces by housing their members in ‘furnished apartments’, a term which has specific significance in current Egyptian vocabulary. In modern Cairo, property values and rents are so high that to rent a house or a flat which is subject to rent control requires considerable capital outlay in ‘key money’. The poorer entrants into the housing market, as well as various marginal oils like prostitutes and petty criminals, are pushed into ‘furnished apartments’ (which do not in practice have much furniture), mostly located in the outer suburbs. It was in this space of marginality and transience that the true believers found their separation from jahili society. In common with the other radical groups they indicated their separation by refusing to recognise the religious and social institutions of jahili society. For instance, they refused to pray in the official mosques, and they arranged their own marriages without the customary monetary payments (mahr), or the parties and ceremonies. Some of the Society of Muslims went further and effected a total spatial separation, a hijra (following the example of the Prophet and the early followers in the sacred history) into the mountains and caves of Upper Egypt, where they engaged in worship and physical training.

What is the political significance of this separation? First we must note an important difference between the two groups. While the Society of Muslims declared all the people outside their group to be infidels, the jihad group declared only the rulers to be infidels, while ordinary people were Muslims. Their task, therefore, consisted in attempting to remove these rulers and restore the rule of God (the assassination of Sadat was fully consistent with this view). The view of the Society of Muslims required taking on the whole of society as jahili enemies, a much more difficult task. Both groups display characteristics of a messianic view of the world. This is not in the sense of postulating the coming of a messiah, but in aiming to achieve a perfect state of socio-political being without even a remotely realistic account of the current situation or a strategy for achieving such a state, except perhaps a ritual one. An element of this ritual is their insistence on the imperative of bay’a, the duty of every Muslim to swear allegiance to an amir and thereafter to obey his commands. In this step the group constitutes itself as a political society in the ritual sense of being subject to the rule of a Muslim prince, who will govern in accordance with God’s commands. The question of how this microcosm of the Islamic body politic is to achieve its victory over jahili society and its rulers is answered primarily in terms of spectacular gestures.

All the Egyptian Islamic currents under consideration have been located outside the religious institutions and hierarchies, and often in opposition to them. But individual ‘alims or shaykhs (clerics for lack of a better English equivalent) have participated in leadership of movements: Abdu, as we have seen was a shaykh, but one who found the religious establishment archaic, and embarked on a programme of reforms. More recently, some of the most vociferous demands for the application of the shari’a in Egypt have come from clerics. But these mavericks do not speak for the religious establishment, which is generally quiescent in relation to the government of the day. In this respect the religious institutions in Egypt still follow the Ottoman pattern of forming part of the state, for the most part supporting its policies, or at least not voicing strong opposition, unless some outrage is being committed against religion. To conclude the discussion I want to identify a number of salient contrasts between the Egyptian context I have outlined and recent Islamic politics in Iran.

Islamic politics in Iran

The difference in religion between Iran and Egypt which immediately comes to mind is that between Shi’ism and Sunnism. There is a view that Shi’i Islam is inherently revolutionary or dissident. The recent revolution in Iran, followed by Shi’i militant activism in various other parts of the world, notably the Lebanon, has lent credence to this view. I have argued elsewhere
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(Chapter 1, pp. 26-32) against this view. The gist of the argument is that Shi'ism has not been a uniform phenomenon unified by a historical essence, but that many diverse groups, sects, movements and dynastic states have claimed the designation of Shi'ism, and that these diverse Shi'is have for most of Islamic history been quietist, quiescent or active participants in government. This is not to deny the Shi'i inspiration of many dissident and rebellious movements, they are part of the diversity.

The specific character of modern Iranian Shi'ism is not to be sought in some inherent essence of Shi'ism in general, but in the recent history of Iranian society and state. The key element, I would argue, is the mode of institutionalisation of religion in relation to the state. Whereas in the Ottoman world, including Egypt, religion was firmly attached to the state, in Qajar Iran religion, alongside other major social spheres, was autonomously instituted. The Qajar state (1796-1926) never managed to bring local and regional powers under its full control; it ruled primarily through the manipulation of alliances and loyalties, especially among the tribal factions, among whom the Qajar dynasty became primus inter pares. Religious magnates formed part of local power structures involving landlords, tribal chieftains, and sometimes wealthy merchants. These presided over intricate networks of tribal and urban factions, often including groups of armed retainers. Mujahids (clerics of high rank) were often wealthy landlords in their own right, as well as controlling revenues from religious endowments (waqfs). Every mujahid had a network of followers who deferred to him in matters of belief and the regulation of daily life, in fact it was (and still remains) the duty of every believer to enter into a relationship of this kind (taqlid, imitation) to a mujahid. This relationship entailed the payment of a religious tax, like the tithe in Europe, to the mujahid, who would in turn dispense this revenue as he saw fit for charitable and religious purposes. Religious schools and their students were maintained partly from this source. In effect, through the control and dispensation of the various revenues, the mujahids presided over considerable networks of patronage and following, including in some cases private armies composed of students and other dependents, who were sometimes employed in the collection of religious revenues from recalcitrant followers. It should be noted, however, that these mujahids did not constitute a centralised church with overall control of religious matters; they were related to one another by informal bonds of kinship and marriage, mutual recognition of rank, and acceptance of each other's certification of students.

The notable aspect of Islamic politics in Iran is that, until the 1960s and 70s, it was largely confined to the sphere of the clergy and the religious institutions. This is carried over to the Islamic revolution of 1979, which was led by a prominent cleric and later dominated by the clergy. Until Khomeini first came to prominence in the early 1960s, the character of Islamic politics was largely reactive, that is the clergy reacting against social and political developments which limited their powers and privileges. Whatever reformist religious and political thought there may have been among the clergy remained subordinate and obscure; Iranian religion did not produce anyone remotely like Muhammad Abdu. Modernist intellectuals found no common grounds or sources of inspiration in religion, which they associated with reactive and reactionary clergy. The political alliance between liberal-nationalist intellectuals and sectors of the clergy in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 was not based on ideological affinity, but on common objectives against the absolutism of the Qajar monarchy and the increasing dominance of its European backers.

The course and the pace of development of the modern state in Iran is quite distinct from the Egyptian example. European domination in nineteenth-century Iran was indirect, and while having important consequences for some sectors of trade and craft, did not extend far enough to create any major social dislocations or upheavals. The Qajar state remained rudimentary and decentralised with little in the way of a state bureaucracy or standing army. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and the struggles which followed it represent, perhaps, the preliminary steps in the formation of a modern state, but the establishment of centralised state powers and institutions only really took off after Reza Khan's (later Shah) takeover of government in 1924. He then proceeded to consolidate his power by eliminating one by one the alternative sources of power nourished under the Qajar state, starting with the tribes and the landed aristocracy. The religious sphere, too, lost many of its privileges and prerogatives, especially in the fields of law and education as well as sectors of religious endowments. For the most part, the clergy acquiesced to the new status quo, and many of them lent voice and influence to positions of social and political conservatism which favoured the government. However, the bases for their institutional autonomy were not entirely eliminated: they still had the mosques, the religious schools, the religious charities, and the sources of revenue from the
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contributions of the pious. All these maintained bases for autonomy, organisation and networks of patronage and influence. These were to be crucial factors in facilitating their leading role in the revolution.

The rule of the two Shahs of the Pahlavi dynasty maintained successfully repressive regimes which, for most of their rule, made organised political opposition difficult if not impossible. The exception was the period of the Second World War, when the British and the Russians deposed Reza Shah for fear of his sympathy for the Axis powers, and installed his young son on the throne in a regime more or less under their control. This was the period during which political organisation and activity flourished. The parties which came to prominence were the Tudeh (communist) party, and various nationalist and constitutionalist parties, allied after the war in the coalition called the National Front. It was the electoral success of this coalition which brought Dr Mossadeq to power as the prime minister who nationalised Iranian oil in the early 1950s and provoked the CIA-inspired coup d'état which restored the full powers of the Shah. After that, political repression proceeded apace, and during the 1960s and 70s any oppositional political organisation was ruthlessly crushed, and even clandestine, underground organisation was successfully undermined.

Khomeini and his immediate followers among the clergy seem, in retrospect, to have effected a break with the defensive then acquiescent stance of their predecessors. They first came to public attention in 1963, in episodes of religious opposition to a number of proposed government acts: land reform, opposed by some on the grounds of incompatibility with Islamic protection of private property; extension of voting rights for women; and certain legal privileges and exemptions for US personnel in Iran. Khomeini's pronouncements were most emphatic and clear on the last issue; his attitude to the first two is not so clear, though the balance of opinion seems to be that he was opposed to all the measures. At that point religious opposition seemed to run along the traditional pattern of reactive resistance. But Khomeini showed none of the reserve of his predecessors in his vocabulary of denunciation of authority, including the person of the Shah. This earned him imprisonment and then exile, ultimately to the Shi'i holy city of Najaf in Iraq, to a niche in the celebrated seminary there, a traditional refuge for Iranian clerics. It was at the Najaf seminary that he delivered the lectures on Islamic government which were to constitute his doctrine of velayat-e-faqih (the guardianship of the jurist), which represented such a radical departure in religious political thought in Iran, in that it preached an alternative form of government based on Islamic law as promulgated and interpreted by a just and competent faqih (see Chapter 1, pp. 16-20), no longer merely a defence of the religious sphere but a proposal for an alternative government within it. This doctrine was to be written into the Iranian revolutionary constitution for an Islamic republic: the Iranian clergy (or a section thereof) have finally entered the field in the ideological contest for the modern state. And their stance in this enterprise was 'fundamentalist', in that it evoked the supposedly original tenets and conditions of the Islam of the Prophet and of the Shi'i Imams.

I have argued (in Chapter 1) that Khomeini's doctrine of government, although constructed in the vocabulary of Shi'i discourses and authorities, and avoiding any reference to Western ideas or ideologies (except to denounce them in general), is nevertheless based on the assumptions of the modern state and nation, and in particular on the idea of modern forms of popular political action and mobilisation. His basic doctrine of velayat-e-faqih, assigning the duty of government of Muslims to the just faqih (jurist), represents a radical departure from the mainstream of Islamic political ideas, Sunni or Shi'i, which had generally recognised and accepted the assumption of rule by princes who possess adequate power to maintain order and unity in the Islamic community, providing they are Muslims and enforce and facilitate Islamic worship. For the prince to be a faqih was never a required qualification. In this regard it is significant that Khomeini incorporated one European concept into his political vocabulary at the time of revolutionary agitation, that of the 'republic'. Perhaps Khomeini's modernist innovation, otherwise implicit, is manifested in the term 'Islamic Republic', a form of government never before conceived of in an Islamic history dominated by dynasties whose rule was for the most part accepted by Sunni and Shi'i jurists. Relying as he may have done on modern ideological assumptions, Khomeini never had the chance before the revolution of participating in modern forms of political organisation. The political organisation on which he relied during his exile and in the conduct of the revolution was that of the traditional networks already mentioned. During Khomeini's exile, a group of senior clerics associated with him maintained the networks of support and patronage, and collected the religious dues on his behalf (see Bakhsh, 1985). Some were detected by the security services and suffered spells of persecution and
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imprisonment, but their organisation could not be eliminated, located as it was in the complex of mosques, bazaars and religious schools, which were never fully under the control of the regime. When the chance of open political action presented itself, the Islamic clergy was the only group that enjoyed organisation and resources which could be mobilised and directed in a concerted fashion. They also had leadership with great force and talent in the form of Khomeini. Alone of all the possible leaders he demanded the abdication of the Shah and the end of the monarchy in favour of an Islamic Republic, while all the secular leaders were making feeble demands for concessions on civil rights. He never hesitated or showed any inclination to compromise or prevaricate in spite of all the pressures. At the same time he gave vague indications of commitment to democracy and social justice, primarily through the radical vocabulary he adopted. His entourage in exile included many prominent Western-educated intellectuals like Bani Sadr and Yazdi, which strengthened the impression of a progressive openness to modern political objectives. These factors led many democratic and left forces to acquiesce in Khomeini’s overall leadership with more or less enthusiasm. Thus a fundamentalist revolution was achieved with the full support of secular democratic forces who were later to become its victims.

The foregoing discussion raises the question of the extent to which Islamic revolution in Iran was based on popular support arising specifically from religious commitment. This is a very difficult issue to determine with any measure of confidence. The great majority of Iranians are Shi’i Muslims. Part of the legend and ritual of Shi’i involves celebrations of the martyrdom of the Imam Hussein and his family and followers in the battle of Kerbala in the seventh century. Some writers have attributed great significance to this motif as symbolising the struggle of righteousness against oppression and tyranny, a view shared with the modern radical Shi’is. The fact of the matter is that Shi’is throughout the world have been celebrating these rituals of mourning over the centuries without realising any necessary political implications, except on the occasions on which political interpretations are explicitly constructed in relation to contemporary struggles. This is precisely what happened in the agitations leading up to the revolution. At another level, many conservative religious figures, in and outside clerical circles, have maintained a distance from the revolution, and some have spoken up against Khomeini’s political interpretations of Shi’ism. Radical Shi’i thought outside the clergy, such as that of

the influential Ali Shari’ati (see Chapter 1 pp. 20-6), does not share Khomeini’s specification of Islamic government. As for the common people, the rural masses are not known for their orthodox piety or particular attachment to the clergy (often associated with landlords and authority). The old urban strata of merchants, craftsmen and the networks in which they are involved have had long-standing association with the clergy, related by kinship and business connections. These groups were clearly and significantly involved in the revolution, but not necessarily through religious commitment. It is difficult to ascertain the political commitments or religious faith of the recently urbanised inhabitants of the shanty towns around Teheran and the other major cities. We may guess that they were volatile and changeable, and certainly susceptible to agitation by any oppositional political group which could reach them, and the Islamic networks may have been the only avenue through which they could have been reached against the vigilance of SAVAK (acronym for the Shah’s all-powerful secret police). In any case, the degree of participation of these groups in revolutionary agitation is uncertain. The groups whose action was particularly important for the success of the revolution were the oil workers, the bank employees and the government workers, whose combined strike crippled the Shah’s regime. These groups are not particularly known for their religious commitment. Many of the bureaucratic workers are modern-educated, and though some may be personally religious, they would normally hold secular political objectives. Historically, the oil workers are known for their leftist inclinations, and constituted one of the most fruitful bases for communist organisation when it was possible. It would seem, therefore, that the significance of religious commitment for revolutionary support was a variable factor. It is certainly not a given disposition of a religious population to follow Islamic leaders and slogans. The leading role of religious ideas and personnel was politically and ideologically constructed in relation to a situation in which clerical forces were uniquely in possession of organisation and resources, while all other opposition groups were weak, unorganised and unprepared.

The revolution in Iran was made possible by the convergence of many economic and political contradictions (see Chapter 3, pp. 64-7). Like other revolutions it was not inevitable, but was produced by a favourable conjuncture of factors, one of the most important being Khomeini’s powerful and uncompromising leadership supported by networks of organisations revolving
around religious institutions and personnel. It was this conjuncture which made the revolution, and made it an Islamic revolution. I have tried to show that the importance of religion in the modern history of Iran was due to the fact that it remained the only major sphere not completely incorporated and controlled by the state, and as such retained the possibility of autonomous action and organisation. This is quite different from the popular explanation of the Islamic revolution in terms of the effect of some religious essence inherent in Iranian culture and most readily appealing to the hearts and minds of Iranians.

Conclusion

I have surveyed the currents of Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt and, to provide a contrast, in Iran in the contexts of their ideological and political relations to the modern state. I have argued that the differences between the movements and ideologies in the two countries are not reducible to the differences between Sunni and Shi'i Islam, although some aspects of this difference are significant, such as the Shi'i doctrine of the imamate, and the Shi'i cult of martyrs. But these distinctions cannot explain the varying characters of Islamic movements in the two countries and the political significance of these movements. I have tried to explain them in terms of the different histories of the different modes of institutionalisation of religion in relation to the state in the two countries. I have also argued that these Islamic discourses and politics are modern in so far as they involve the construction of the sacred history of Islam in forms which relate to models of the modern state. These themes and arguments will be pursued in relation to different contexts and situations in the chapters to follow.

Notes

1 For a discussion of Max Weber's characterisation of the modern state see Beetham, 1985.
2 For a wider discussion of the question of the modern state, see Chapter 6 below.
3 For an account of Abdu's thought see Hourani, 1962, pp. 130-60.
6 While committed to the ultimate implementation of the Quranic penal code, some Muslim Brothers (see al-Ghazzali, 1948) have held that these prescriptions would only be just under conditions of general social justice in a truly Islamic society.
8 See Enayat, 1982, pp. 69-83.
9 For a history of the Muslim Brotherhood see Mitchell, 1969.
10 The politics of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, is significantly influenced by the sectarian (Alawite) composition of the ruling Ba'ath faction in a predominantly Sunni country.
11 More detailed accounts of these groups and their activities can be found in Ibrahim (1980), al-Ansari (1984) and Kepel (1985).
12 A recent statement of this view is contained in Lewis, 1985.
13 For an account of the relation of the ulama to the Qajar state see Algar, 1980.
14 For an analytical history of modern Iran see Abrahamian, 1982.
16 For a wider discussion of the question of the participation in the revolution of different social groups, see Chapter 3.