



Islam – Islamism

Clarification for turbulent times

Thomas Volk

Key points

- The term Islamism refers to a political ideology, which seeks to enforce Islamic precepts and norms as generally applicable rules for people's conduct.
- Islamists strive for a state based on Islamic values and laws (sharia) and reject Western guiding principles, such as freedom of opinion, freedom of the press, artistic freedom and freedom of religion.
- There are numerous Islamist movements; Salafist variants represent the form of Islamism that is showing the greatest dynamic growth.
- Islamic scholars make a distinction between lesser and greater jihad. Jihad is considered to be fundamentally virtuous in Islam and a communal duty where it involves defence against attack.
- Besides a Western alliance dedicated to defending Western values, Islamic organisations and Islamic theology must increase their willingness to permit a historical-critical exegesis of the Quran and engage in a totally open debate of the contents of Islamic writing that legitimise violence.

CONTENT

2 | 57 per cent of Germans consider Islam threatening

3 | Does Islamism reflect a perverted understanding of Islam?

3 | Historic Roots of Islamism

5 | Ideological characteristics of Islamist groupings

7 | Appeal for a historical-critical exegesis of the Quran

A striking number of extremist organisations cite Islam to justify their actions.

Islamic associations and Islamic theology must do more to allow an open debate about Islamic contents that legitimise violence.

“No one is as murderously ‘Islamophobic’ as Islamists are.” These are the words used by the British journalist Nick Cohen several years ago to express the fact that it is Islamists in particular who do the greatest public damage to Islam, the second largest monotheistic religion with some 1.6 billion believers, through their actions, which they claim to be supposedly justified by Islam. In fact, there have been signs of a certain unease about “Islam” in Western societies for years – ever since the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States motivated by Islamist ideology and the attacks in Madrid in 2004 and in London in 2005 perpetrated by Islamists. It is important and essential to make a clear and thorough distinction between Islam and Islamism. In the same way as there is no one Islam, there is no single phenomenon of Islamism. Islam is a complex and multi-faceted religion and ideology, and any simplified description reflects the thinking of precisely those representatives with whom this text is concerned.

57 per cent of Germans consider Islam threatening

According to the “Sonderauswertung Islam”, a special study on Muslims in Germany, carried out as part of the Religion Monitor project of the Bertelsmann Stiftung and published at the beginning of January 2015, 57 per cent of the non-Muslim respondents in Germany consider Islam threatening or very threatening; back in 2012, the figure stood at only 53.¹ This scepticism is very likely to deepen with each further attack motivated by Islamist ideology and each new atrocity seemingly perpetrated in the name of Islam. The great majority of Muslims practise their religion peacefully and categorically reject any form of violence. Furthermore, Muslims themselves fall victim to the activities of militant Islamists in most countries. The latter do not shy away from also killing Muslims who do not share their fundamentalist convictions besides Christians, Jews and nonbelievers; one of the policemen murdered during the attack in Paris was a French citizen of Muslim faith.

The terrorist attack on the French satirist magazine Charlie Hebdo on 7 January 2015 and the associated attack on freedom of opinion, artistic freedom and freedom of the press in Europe have rekindled the recurring debate on how precisely to differentiate between Islam and Islamism and on the question as to which aspects innate to Islam are being used as justification for violent acts. This is hardly surprising given that the extremist movements such as the Shabaab militia in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, al-Qaeda and the most recent movement emanating from it, Islamic State (IS) in Syria and in Iraq, all cite “true Islam” in justification of their actions.

What is surprising is that large swathes of the left-wing mainstream have consistently refused to enter into an objective debate about the increasing activities of Islamist extremists over the years. The head of the International Policy Analysis unit at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Ernst Hillebrand, has this to say on the matter: “The bitter truth is that the European Left has played down Islamist violence for far too long. Blinded by the idea of a multiculturalism that relativises values, it has looked on passively as a climate of anti-Western hate has evolved at the fringes of immigrant societies in Western Europe.”² While Western states should be forging an alliance dedicated to defending Western values, Islamic theology and Islamic associations have a duty to eliminate the breeding ground for fundamentalist extremist tendencies.

This will require a totally open debate on the relevance of contents in Islamic sources that legitimise violence. After all, what is at stake here is no more and no less than the view a religion has of the role it plays within the secular constitutional state.

The video clip of the attackers fleeing the scene in Paris shows one of the terrorists shouting "We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad". We need to engage with the statements in Islamic sources and examine them for clues to explain the extent to which fundamentalist extremists justify their acts and the jihad against Western civilisation with the religion of Islam.

Does Islamism reflect a perverted understanding of Islam?

To gain an understanding of the complexity of Islam requires a pluralistic approach and consideration of the historical context; this thought immediately brings a first component of Islamism to mind: fanaticism. As (the predominantly Sunni) Islam does not have an institution comparable to the Christian Churches that would be accepted as its legitimised voice, each individual believer forges their own image of Islam within the community of Muslims (Arab. *umma*). There is no intermediate authority between the individual (Sunni) Muslim and God, which is why each individual believer can and must draw their own conclusions from the Islamic sources of the Quran and the *Sunnah* (the entirety of the *hadith*, the reports of sayings, actions and deeds of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad).

This lack of a theological authority representing Muslims – the well-respected Al-Azhar University in Cairo has been attempting for decades to fulfil this function for Sunni Muslims with their theological expert opinions – is important for the debate about potential radical interpretations of Islamic sources as it imposes the heavy burden of the prerogative of interpretation on each believer.

While Islam generally advocates a holistic approach and can therefore be seen not only as a monotheistic religion but also as an ideology and a concept of law and is generally understood by Muslims to be predestined to be the all-encompassing and ultimate religion of all people, the following definition represents a fundamental description of the phenomenon of Islamism: "Islamism begins where religious Islamic precepts and norms are interpreted as binding rules for political action. Islamism is a political ideology, which claims to be universally valid and legitimises the use of violence on occasion in order to realise goals defined as 'Islamic'."³

Islamic precepts and norms themselves are so diverse that even decades of study of Islamic writings by experts cannot necessarily produce conclusive certainties. Besides the Quran and the huge collection of the *hadith* (the *Sunnah*), they comprise innumerable commentaries and records of handed-down knowledge by further scholars from the different eras of the 1400 years the religion has been in existence. This volume makes it impossible for the average Muslim to obtain a balanced picture of the diversity of the contents of Islamic writings.

Historic Roots of Islamism

The political ideology of Islamism is extremely heterogeneous in terms of organisation and a relatively young phenomenon, which has always had a close connection with Europe. The *Salafiyya* movement, for instance, was co-founded in Paris in the

As there is no authoritative body to interpret Islamic writings, each Muslim bears great responsibility.

Islamism is a political ideology, which cites Islamic norms and precepts to justify its actions.

There have been Islamist movements since the beginning of the 20th century.

late 19th century. From the beginning, it stood against European colonialism and for pan-Islamism. The reformist thinkers al-Afghani and Muhamad Abduh developed the intellectual foundation of 20th century Islamism around 1900. They reacted against the impending segmentation of the countries of the Levant under the European colonial powers by deliberately turning back to the values of original Islam from the 7th century. Islamist movements were therefore by no means focused on violence in their outlook. They advocated the idea of an Islamic state on the basis of Islamic values and laws.

The abolition of the Caliphate by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1924, which had previously acted as the central authoritative body for all Sunni Muslims worldwide, as well as the territorial reorganisation of the Islamic-Arab world after World War I ultimately produced a deep feeling of humiliation and a sense of betrayal of the Islamic world by the Western community of states during the 1920s and 1930s, which are in part still lingering today. The unilateral proclamation of the Caliphate by the founder of Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) is an attempt to re-establish the Caliphate on the "sacred ground of honour" in Syria and Iraq.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was one of the first Islamist organisations.

The disappointment felt by the Islamic world first manifested politically back in 1928 in the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*) by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt. This was the first Islamist movement of the modern era that had a stronger connotation with original Islam. While the ideology of Islamism proliferated throughout the Arab world over the following decades and the thinking of Sayyid Qutb replaced first the idea of Arab socialism and subsequently also that of pan-Arab nationalism, the Shiite revolution with the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 as well as the various episodes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fuelled a growing receptiveness to Islamist ideas in the region. After the Islamist-inspired terror attacks of 11 September 2001, the jihadist version of Islamism has become more prominent and has developed into an acute threat to Western societies as well.

Salafist movements show the most dynamic development of the different forms of Islamism

Salafist movements represent the main Islamist problem of our time.

One phenomenon of this century is Salafism as the form of Islamism that is showing the most dynamic growth. It poses totally new challenges to Western societies, particularly in connection with Islamists returning from the war zones of Syria and Iraq. According to the security agencies, approximately 10 per cent of the some 30,000 IS followers come from European countries, 500 to 600 from Germany alone. The assassin who killed four people in front of the Jewish Museum in Brussels on 24 May 2014 was an Islamist who had returned from Syria. Islamist cells and individual perpetrators, so-called home-grown jihadists, many of whom had not even been particularly religious before their radicalisation, pose incalculable security risks to European societies.

There is no single clearly characterised form of Salafism. There are numerous Salafist movements in highly diverse manifestations. The Islam expert Benjamin Jokisch is right when he states that "terms such as neo-Salafiyya, neo-traditional Salafism, modernist Salafism, conservative Salafism, political Salafism, global Salafism or militant Salafism"⁴ do not reflect the complexity of the phenomenon and that one should therefore be careful in attributing certain movements to Salafism or at least make an effort to differentiate.

Salafism describes a heterogeneous movement with numerous strains, but one common ideology.

An explanation of the meanings of the terms “*salaf*”, “*salafiyya*” and “Salafism”, which are frequently used as synonyms, will help to provide an understanding of the complexity and multi-faceted nature of Salafist manifestations.

The word “*salaf*” is used variously in the *hadith*, the corpus of the reports on the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. The term is also mentioned in the Quran. In the most important Islamic sources, Muhammad’s closest companions and those who followed him up to the third generation of narrators are referred to as the “the pious predecessors” (*as-salaf aṣ-ṣāliḥūn*). The common translation of *salaf* as “pioneer, predecessor” therefore makes most sense and underlines the significance of Muhammad’s close companions and their descendants in Islam.

The term “*salafiyya*” is subject to particular controversy in the specialist literature. Present-day Salafists themselves refer to this term, but it is also used to denote an Islamic reform movement around the turn to the 20th century.⁵ The term Salafism describes a heterogeneous movement, which does, however, follow a largely homogenous ideology.⁶

Ideological characteristics of Islamist groupings

Salafist strains hark back to the “golden era” of the 7th century and emphatically reject the free and democratic constitutional system.

In terms of ideology, Islamist movements put forward a claim to absolute exclusivity and the idea of a purely Islamic social order and system of government. The essential ideological characteristics, which also represent the overarching goals of Islamist groupings, can be summarised as follows: Islamists of Salafist orientation glorify early Islam as the “golden era” and promote strict adherence to the Prophet Muhammad’s way of life in the seventh century as reported in the *hadith*. The separation of state and Islam is rejected by most other Islamist movements, which thereby choose to interpret Islam in a controversial manner. In Islamic sources, religion and state (*din wa dawlah*) are two separate entities, but Islamists maintain that religion *is* the state. They reject manmade legislation and therefore the central principle of any democratic form of government, namely national sovereignty, and strive for strict divine sovereignty and the application of *sharia*. The rejection of and fight against plurality, individuality, freedom of the press and of opinion as well as of gender equality are further facets of Islamist movements.

It is crucial to differentiate between jihadist (militant) and institutional (mostly peaceable) Islamism. While jihadist movements, such as al-Qaeda founded by Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s IS, explicitly call for violence to enforce their agenda, followers of institutional Islamism endeavour to Islamise society by peaceful means, through personal example or by political action. This differentiation is important and helpful. The Muslim Brotherhood founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928, Hamas in the Gaza Strip as well as the Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon show both jihadist and institutional characteristics and therefore play a dual role. Islamist movements mostly act transnationally and therefore also in European countries.

The overarching goal of Salafist forces is to establish an Islamic state structure based on the nostalgic model of the early Islamic community in Medina led by Muhammad. The only source of law and inspiration for life can therefore be *sharia*, a seemingly coherent body of writing consisting of the Quran and the *Sunnah*. “According to Salafist understanding, *sharia* can neither be modified nor overturned. It cannot be made subject to human considerations or questioned.”⁷

Furthermore, Salafist movements are intent on re-establishing the Caliphate that was abolished in 1924 and thereby also the most important spiritual authority for Sunni Muslims.

What is jihad, violence in the name of a religion?

The much-cited term of jihad, which is incorrectly translated as “Holy War”, illustrates the inherent problems in exemplary fashion. Words with the root *ǧ-h-d*, which jihad is derived from, appear a total of 35 times in the Quran in 28 different verses, mostly in the context of struggle or striving. “In the religious sense, the word *ǧihād* carries the following meaning: struggle against personal weaknesses and immoral temptations, striving for the good of Islam and of the *umma*.”⁸ In Islamic writing, a distinction is made between greater and lesser jihad. While the greater jihad demands spiritual personal efforts on the path towards God and includes such things as fasting and overcoming one’s desires, the lesser jihad does not exclude physical action, but according to the *hadith* should mainly serve as defence against attacks aimed at the community of Muslims. In this context it already becomes clear that the range of possible interpretations of when the Muslim *umma* is under attack, for example, can be extremely wide in a religion where there is no decision-making authority. As Islamic belief forbids representations of the face of God or even of the Prophet Muhammad, ultra-orthodox Muslims can consider such representations – let alone in the form of caricatures – an attack on the *umma* and therefore see them as a *casus belli*, which compels them to declare (lesser) jihad.

The term jihad appears 35 times in total in the Quran in 28 verses.

The view of Muslim scholars on the role of jihad

In an open letter dated 27 September 2014, 126 Muslim scholars from various countries of the Islamic world took position against the organisation “IS” in a joint statement, which includes a passage about the special theological aspects of jihad. This most recent explanation, which is supported by numerous Islamic scholars, includes telling typical explanations of why extremists keep citing Islamic precepts to justify their actions. According to Islamic views, there is still a duty to engage in communal – although not individual – jihad today, which is considered virtuous on principle. The statement homes in on the following point: “The reason behind jihad for Muslims is to fight those who fight them, not to fight anyone who does not fight them, nor to transgress against anyone who has not transgressed against them.”⁹

Islamic teaching describes jihad as fundamentally virtuous and differentiates between lesser and greater jihad.

In their letter, the scholars look at concrete suras of the Quran and add certain verses from the *hadith*. The legal scholars make it perfectly clear that jihad is a component of the religion, but add that proper conduct of jihad must be adhered to as well. The statement includes the following point: “Hence, there is no such thing as offensive, aggressive jihad just because people have different religions or opinions.” With respect to the most important rules of conduct of jihad, the authors stress “that only combatants may be killed; their families and non-combatants may not be killed intentionally.” What is essential here is that Islamists are still misusing the term as well as the concept of jihad – even though jihad is to refer mainly to the personal spiritual striving agreeable to God.

Although the statement by the Muslim legal scholars can be seen as a symbolically important declaration against the unilateral proclamation of the Caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the barbaric actions of “IS”, at least one passage in the statement is disturbing. It says: “In truth, it is clear that you and your fighters are fear-

less and are ready to sacrifice in your intent for jihad. No truthful person following events — friend or foe — can deny this. However, jihad without legitimate cause, legitimate goals, legitimate purpose, legitimate methodology and legitimate intention is not jihad at all, but rather, warmongering and criminality.”

“I don’t think much to the statement that Islam and Islamism have nothing to do with each other”

There are definitely sections in Islamic sources – as there are also in other religions – that can be used to legitimise violence. Anybody claiming that the Quran contains no suras calling for violence whatsoever and that Islam is exclusively a religion of peace ignores the passages in the Islamic sources that can without doubt be misused to legitimise violence. Only those who see Islam’s holy book of revelations critically in its historical context can detach themselves from the suras that legitimise violence to some extent. Kholā Maryam Hübsch from the Muslim organisation *Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat* has this to say on the subject: “To bear fruit, any reform must start from the Quran.” The head of the Centre for Islamic Theology and Professor of Islamic Religious Education at the University of Münster, Mouhanad Khorchide, expresses his view on the matter clearly in an interview after the attacks in Paris (quoted extensively because of the informative nature of the content): “I don’t think much to the statement that Islam and Islamism have nothing to do with each other. I also don’t think much of apologetic statements, like those we heard once again after the attacks in Paris, about these attacks having nothing to do with Islam. Because after all, the extremists invoke no book other than the Quran. Within Islamic theology, there is a range of positions – from peaceful, humane to inhumane, violent stances. The real question is why some people refer to the humane aspects of the 1400-year-old history of Islamic ideas and others to the cruel ones. The other question is how we can strengthen the open-minded, humane positions. Maintaining that the violence we experience has nothing to do with Islam is an action prompted by a repression mechanism. It means that people try to avoid having to deal with parts of Islamic tradition that are long outdated. Islamic theology must face this debate.”¹⁰

The term Islam itself originates from the verb *aslama* (submit, subject), which is why – contrary to what is frequently stated – it is possible to translate Islam not as peace but as “submission to the will of God” and the term Muslim as “someone who submits himself or herself”.

Appeal for a historical-critical exegesis of the Quran

To remove the breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalism will require acceptance of a historical-critical interpretation of Islam. The professorships in Islamic Theology that have been established in Germany in recent times are playing an important role in helping to make a contemporary exegesis of the Quran a promising proposition. At the beginning of the 21st century, it must be deemed acceptable for the Quran to be read as a religious book of the 7th century, seen in its originating context and to be subjected to a critical interpretation in the present-day context. Insisting on a literal reading of the Quran generates new followers for perverted extremists, particularly if those people have a difficult past and are led by a feeling of being disadvantaged and by a sense of inferiority. Such extremists end up seeing the solution to all existing problems in nostalgically harking back to a seemingly ideal “Islamic order”, such as that prevailing at the times of the Prophet Muhammad.

Islamic texts do contain some statements that legitimise violence.

A historical-critical exegesis of the Quran and advances in the teaching on abrogation could remove the breeding ground for Islamists.

Another measure that could help to advance the debate on the distinction between Islam and Islamism is an expansion of the teaching on abrogation, which is already known in Sunni Quran scholarship. Amongst other things, the abrogation theory allows certain verses of the Quran to be relativized or replaced by subsequently revealed verses. If this were to be developed further, it could also lead to a clearer distinction between the partly diverging connotations of the revelatory Meccan and Medinan suras.¹¹

At the beginning of the 21 century, a hasty and appeasing response to attempts to critically examine Islamic text sources and the statements on struggles, warlike acts and killing they contain must give way to an openness towards criticism aimed at enlightenment. In an article written after the acts in Paris, the bestselling author Ayaan Hirsi Ali, originally from Somalia, stresses: "We have to acknowledge that today's Islamists are driven by a political ideology, an ideology embedded in the foundational texts of Islam. We can no longer pretend that it is possible to divorce actions from the ideals that inspire them."

Religions must assume a subordinate role within the secular constitutional state

The free and democratic constitutional system and Western values, such as freedom of opinion, press freedom, artistic freedom and freedom of expression, were won in hard-fought struggles over centuries in Europe and need to be defended continuously. While Western states should therefore forge an alliance to defend the values they hold dear, Islamic theology and Islamic association are called upon to remove the breeding ground for fundamentalist extremists. Freedom of expression and artistic freedom – which includes the right to "make fun" of religions using satire or caricatures – form part of the fundamental intellectual principles of our Western societies. German politicians should therefore also think about revoking the so-called blasphemy section 166 of the German Criminal Code (StGB) as a liberally inspired response to the cowardly attack by Islamist terrorists in France. Finally, one point that needs to be put across clearly is that rather than our Western values having to submit to a religion, religions must submit to the guiding principles of our civilisation – and that applies to Islam as well.

Rather than our Western values having to submit to a religion, religions must submit to our Western principles – including Islam.

1 | <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/islam-studie-muslime-integrieren-sich-deutsche-schotten-sich-ab-a-1011640.html> (accessed 8 Jan 2015).

2 | <http://www.ipg-journal.de/rubriken/soziale-demokratie/artikel/charlie-hebdo-und-das-linke-appeasment-733/> (accessed 10 Jan 2015).

3 | Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Landesbehörden für Verfassungsschutz (2012): *Salafistische Bestrebungen in Deutschland*. URL: <http://verfassungsschutz.de/embed/broschuere-2012-04-salafistische-bestrebungen.pdf> (accessed 13 Mar 2014).

4 | Ceylan, Rauf/Jokisch, Benjamin (ed.) (2014): *Salafismus in Deutschland. Entstehung, Radikalisierung und Prävention*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften. Page 17.

5 | Said, Behnam T./Fouad, Hazim (ed.): *Salafismus. Auf der Suche nach dem wahren Islam*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder GmbH. Page 82.

6 | Cf.: Volk, Thomas (2014): *Neo-Salafismus in Deutschland*. In: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *Analysen & Argumente*, No. 155. Generally, a distinction can be made between three groupings within Salafist movements, differentiating between purist, political and jihadist Salafists.

7 | Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Landesbehörden für Verfassungsschutz (2012): *Salafistische Bestrebungen in Deutschland*. Pages 6-7. URL: <http://www.verfassungsschutz.de/embed/broschuere-2012-04-salafistische-bestrebungen.pdf> (accessed 13 Mar 2014).

8 | Ourghi, Mariella (2011): *Der ġihād: Verteidigung von Errungenschaften oder Kampfansage an die Ungläubigen? Die Kampfansage zwischen Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti und Abd al-Malik al-Barak und ihre Hermeneutik*. P. 36-58, here p. 36. In: Seidensticker, Tilman (ed.): *Zeitgenössische islamische Positionen zu Koexistenz und Gewalt*.

- 9 | *These and all further quotes from the statement of the Muslim scholars dated 27 September 2014 can be accessed via the following link: <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/> (accessed 10 Jan 2015).*
- 10 | *http://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/mouhanad-khorchide-im-focus-online-interview-islamwissenschaftler-extremisten-berufen-sich-auf-kein-anderes-buch-als-den-Quran_id_4395381.html (accessed 11 Jan 2015).*
- 11 | *The Islamic Prophet Muhammad received initial revelations from 609/610 A.D. (reference point of the Islamic calendar) in Mecca. After leaving Mecca, Muhammad and his companions lived in Medina until his death in 632 A.D. The Quranic verses can be divided into Meccan and Medinan verses and are in part very different or contradictory.*

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Contact person:

Thomas Volk

Coordinator for Islam and the Dialogue between Religions

Department Politics and Consulting

Phone: +49(0)30/26996-3593

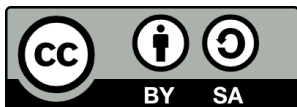
E-Mail: thomas.volk@kas.de

Postal address: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 10907 Berlin

Contact concerning publications:

publikationen@kas.de

www.kas.de



Translation:

RedKeyTranslations

Marie Liedtke

Podbielskistraße 290

30655 Hannover

The text of this publication is published under a Creative Commons license: "Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Germany" (CC by-SA 3.0 de), <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/deed.en>

Copyright cover picture:

By Jamie Kennedy

[CC BY 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>), via Wikimedia

Commons