

# Bin Laden and Other Thoroughly Modern Muslims

Charles Kurzman

As the United States wages war on terrorism, media coverage has portrayed the radical Islamism exemplified by Osama bin Laden as medieval, reactionary, and eager to return the Islamic world to its seventh-century roots.

In one sense this is accurate: Islamists, like almost all Muslims, regard the early years of Islam as a golden era, and they aspire to model their behavior after the Prophet Muhammad and his early followers, much as Christians idealize the example of Jesus.

Islamists seek to regain the righteousness of the early years of Islam and implement the rule of *shari'a*, either by using the state to enforce it as the law of the land or by convincing Muslims to abide by these norms of their own accord. Litmus-test issues for Islamists, as for traditional Muslims, include modest dress for women – ranging from headscarves to full veils – abstention from alcohol and other intoxicants and public performance of prayers. However, Islamists have no wish to throw away electricity and other technological inventions. Most have graduated from modern schools, share modern values such as human equality and rule of law, and organize themselves along modern lines, using modern technologies and – some of them – the latest methods of warfare.

Indeed, radical Islamists have much in common with Islamic liberalism, another important movement in the Islamic world. Both Islamic liberals and radical Islamists seek to modernize society and politics, recasting tradition in modern molds. Both Islamist movements maintain that there are multiple ways of being modern, and that

Original publication details: Charles Kurzman, "Bin Laden and Other Thoroughly Modern Muslims," in *Contexts*, Fall–Winter 2002. pp. 13–14, 15–17, 18–19, 19–20. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

modernity is not limited to Western culture. Islamists may ally themselves on occasion with traditionalist Islamic movements, and they may share certain symbols of piety. Afghanistan, by contrast with Islamists such as bin Laden's Al Qaeda network, draw on less educated sectors of society, believe in mystical and personal authority and are skeptical of modern organizational forms. For this reason, traditionalist movements are finding it increasingly difficult to survive in a competitive religious environment and occupy only isolated pockets of Muslim society. Modern movements have taken over the rest.

### The Islamists' Roots in Secular Education

Start with bin Laden himself. Though he issued *fatwas* (religious judgments) as though he were a seminary-educated Islamic scholar, his training was in civil engineering. Similarly, many other Islamist leaders have university rather than seminary backgrounds: Hasan Turabi of the Sudan is a lawyer trained in Khartoum, London and Paris; Necmettin Erbakan of Turkey studied mechanical engineering in West Germany; Hasan al-Banna of Egypt, who founded the first mass Islamist group, the Muslim Brotherhood, in the 1920s, was a teacher educated and employed in secular schools.

These leaders railed against seminary-trained scholars, the *'ulama*, for being obscure and politically inactive. Bin Laden lambasted the *'ulama* of Saudi Arabia as playing "the most ominous of roles. Regardless of whether they did so intentionally or unintentionally, the harm that resulted from their efforts is no different from the role of the most ardent enemies of the nation." Even Islamist leaders with traditional seminary educations – such as Abu'l-'Ala Maudoodi of Pakistan, Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran, 'Abd al-Hamid Kishk of Egypt – frequently railed against their alma maters for similar reasons. Seminaries were considered so backward in Islamist eyes that for decades Maudoodi hid the fact that he had a seminary degree.

Not only the Islamist leaders but also the rank and file emerge disproportionately from secular universities. [...]

The growth of secular education has led expanding numbers of Muslims to approach religious questions without the skills – or blinders, depending on one's perspective – inculcated in the seminaries. College graduates have turned to the sacred texts and analyzed them in a sort of do-it-yourself theology, developing liberal interpretations in addition to radical ones. In Pakistan, for example, a study group of educated Muslim women met and produced a feminist interpretation, "For Ourselves: Women Reading the Koran" (1997). In North America, a gay convert to Islam produced a Web site called *Queer Jihad* that espoused tolerance for homosexuality. In Syria, a soil engineer named Muhammad Shahrour decided that traditional scholarship on the Koran was unscientific and that he had a better approach, one that happened to support liberal political positions. According to booksellers interviewed by anthropologist Dale Eickelman, Shahrour's tomes are best-sellers in the Arab world, even where they are banned.

In addition, governments have waded into the religious field throughout the Islamic world. In each country, the state has established its own official religious authorities, which may be pitted against every other state's religious authorities. Many states produce their own schoolbooks to teach Islamic values in the public schools. In Turkish textbooks, these values include secular government; in Saudi textbooks, these values include monarchy; in Palestine National Authority textbooks, according to a review by political scientist Nathan J. Brown, these values include the defense of the Palestinian homeland (though they do not, as often charged, include the destruction of Israel).

The result is a tremendous diversity of Islamic opinion and a corresponding diversity of Islamic authority. There is no universally recognized arbiter to resolve Islamic debates. For most of Islamic history, at least a symbolic arbiter existed: the caliph (*khalifa*), that is, the successor to the Prophet. Caliphs could never impose interpretive uniformity on all Muslims, although some were more inclined than others to try. But since the Turkish Republic abolished the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, even this symbol of authority is gone. Any college graduate in a cave can claim to speak for Islam.

### Modern Goals, Modern Methods

Just as the social roots of Islamism are modern, so too are many of its goals. Do not be misled by the language of hostility toward the West. Islamist political platforms share significant planks with Western modernity. Islamists envision overturning tradition in politics, social relations and religious practices. They are hostile to monarchies, such as the Saudi dynasty in Arabia; they favor egalitarian meritocracy, as opposed to inherited social hierarchies; they wish to abolish long-standing religious practices such as the honoring of relics and tombs.

Bin Laden, for example, combined traditional grievances such as injustice, corruption, oppression, and self-defense with contemporary demands such as economic development, human rights and national self-determination. "People are fully occupied with day-to-day survival; everybody talks about the deterioration of the economy, inflation, ever-increasing debts and jails full of prisoners," bin Laden wrote in 1996. "They complain that the value of the [Saudi] *riyal* is greatly and continuously deteriorating against most of the major currencies."

These mundane concerns do not mean that Islamist states look just like Western states, but they are not entirely different, either. The Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, has tried to forge its own path since it replaced the Pahlavi monarchy in 1979. Yet within its first year it copied global norms by writing a new constitution, ratifying it through a referendum with full adult suffrage, holding parliamentary and presidential elections, establishing a cabinet system, and occupying itself with myriad other tasks that the modern world expects of a state, from infrastructure expansion to narcotics interdiction. The 1986 Iranian census conducted by the Islamic Republic was scarcely different from the 1976 census conducted by the monarchy. Similarly in Pakistan and the Sudan, where Islamic laws were introduced in the 1980s, there were changes, but there were also massive continuities. The modern state remained.

Library  
Ummulgeer, OK 74447

Contrast  
Islamists dis  
Omar litera  
Qandahar—  
themselves  
The Taliba  
example —  
administra  
Wester  
same cate  
is a mode  
gender. V  
Iran mo  
Taliban  
force in  
govern  
Iranian  
icies on  
The  
[...]  
Not  
mirro  
altho  
"lesse  
Rega  
glob  
part  
ture  
Al C  
I  
Qa  
aut  
jus  
Se  
M  
to  
w

Contrast this continuity with the traditionalist Taliban. While most well-educated Islamists disdain relics as verging on idol worship, Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar literally wrapped himself in the cloak of the Prophet – a cherished relic in Qandahar – one April day in 1996. While successful Islamist movements have emulated themselves in the offices of their predecessors, Omar remained in his home province. The Taliban government reproduced a few of the usual ministries – foreign affairs, for example – but did not bother with most. The Taliban preferred informal and personal administration to the rule-bound bureaucracies favored by modern states.

Western bias tends to lump Khomeini's Iran and the Taliban's Afghanistan in the same category, and indeed both claimed to be building an Islamic state. However, one is a modern state and the other was not. Perhaps the most vivid distinction involved gender. While the Taliban barred girls from attending school, the Islamic Republic of Iran more than doubled girls' education from pre-revolutionary levels. While the Taliban barred women from working at most jobs, Iranian women entered the labor force in unprecedented numbers, as television anchors, parliamentary deputies, government typists and sales clerks – even while dressed in headscarves and long coats. Iranian leaders were as outspoken as Western feminists in condemning Taliban policies on gender and other subjects and felt the Taliban were giving Islam a bad name.

The Taliban reintroduced tradition; Khomeini and other Islamists reinvented it. [...]

Not just in ideology but also in practice, bin Laden and other radical Islamists mirror Western trends. They term their mobilization *jihad*, or sacred struggle, although many Muslims point out that the Prophet called struggle against others the "lesser jihad," with the internal struggle to lead a good life being the "greater jihad." Regardless of the ancient terminology, Al Qaeda and other Islamist groups operate globally like transnational corporations, with affiliates and subsidiaries, strategic partners, commodity chains, standardized training, off-shore financing and other features associated with contemporary global capital. Indeed, insiders often referred to Al Qaeda as the "company."

Documents discovered by *The New York Times* in Afghan training camps after Al Qaeda's departure show a bureaucratic organization with administrative lines of authority and an insistence on budgeting. Islamists use the latest high-tech skills, not just airplane piloting and transponder deactivation, as the world learned tragically on September 11, 2001, but also satellite phones, faxes, wired money orders and the like. Mullah Muhammad Omar was so suspicious of modern technology that he refused to be photographed; bin Laden, by contrast, distributed videotapes of himself to the world's media. [...]

## The Radical Minority

A minority of Muslims support Islamist organizations, and not just because they are illegal in many countries. There are only a handful of reputable surveys on the subject, but they show consistently that most Muslims oppose Islamists and their goals. Surveys in 1988 found that 46 and 20 percent of respondents in Kuwait and Egypt,

respectively, favored Islamist goals in religion and politics. A 1986 survey in the West Bank and Gaza found 26 percent calling for a state based on *shari'a*, and polls in the same regions showed support for Hamas and other Islamist groups dropping from 23 percent in 1994 to 13 to 18 percent in 1996-97. A 1999 survey in Turkey found 21 percent favoring implementation of *shari'a*, consistent with other surveys in the mid-1990s. In a Gallup poll of nine Muslim societies at the end of 2001, only 15 percent of respondents said they considered the September 11 attacks to be morally justifiable.

When free or partially free elections are held, Islamists rarely fare well. Islamist candidates and parties have won less than 10 percent of the vote in Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan and Tajikistan. They have won less than 25 percent of the vote in Egypt, Malaysia, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey and Yemen. Their best showings have been in Kuwait, where they won 40 percent of seats in 1999, and Jordan, where moderate Islamists won 43 percent of seats in 1989 before dropping to 20 percent in the next election. Virtually the only majority vote that Islamists have ever received was in Algeria in 1991, when the Islamic Salvation Front dominated the first stage of parliamentary elections, winning 81 percent of the seats; it was about to win the second stage of voting when the military annulled the elections and declared martial law.

In the few elections where Islamists fared relatively well, success followed from promises to abide by democratic norms. The Algerian Islamist leader 'Abbasi Madani, who earned a doctorate in education from the University of London, developed a Muslim Democrat position analogous to the Christian Democrat parties of Europe: culturally conservative but committed to democracy. "Pluralism is a guarantee of cultural wealth, and diversity is needed for development. We are Muslims, but we are not Islam itself," Madani said while campaigning. "We do not monopolize religion. Democracy as we understand it means pluralism, choice and freedom." These sentiments may have been insincere, but we will never know. A secular military regime barred Madani from office before he could develop a track record. [...]

Sadly, the US-led war on terrorism may inadvertently benefit the Islamists. This is the great debate among scholars of Islamic studies in the months since September 2001. Do the United States and its allies appear hypocritical in supporting autocrats in Muslim-majority countries while claiming to defend human rights and democracy? Will Muslims perceive the war on terrorism as evidence of Western hostility toward Islam? Will military action stoke Islamist radicalism or extinguish it?

In the short run, the war on terrorism has not generated the massive negative reaction among Muslims that some observers expected. Yet there is evidence to suggest that Islamism is gaining in popularity. Gallup polls of nine Muslim societies at the end of 2001 found that a majority considered the United States and the West to be hostile to Islam and Muslims. Since the beginning of 2002, Israel's military operations in Palestinian territories, with Western acquiescence, may have further radicalized Muslim attitudes.

Longer-term approaches to the war on terrorism also face ambivalence. The modernization of Muslim societies, promoted by the United States and its allies as a buffer against traditionalism, may wind up fueling Islamism. Modern schools produce Islamists as well as liberals; modern businesses fund Islamist as well as other causes; modern communications can broadcast Islamist as well as other messages. Western culture, we are learning, is not the only form that modernity may assume.