



North African Islamism after 9-11

Based on Crisis States Programme Working Paper no.34: Hugh Roberts, 'North African Islamism in the Blinding Light of 9-11'. This is intended to provide a summary of the principal findings, and an indication of the implications these may have for debates over policy.

The phenomenon of Islamist activism in North Africa, in both its non-violent as well as its violent variants, is the product of the complex history of the region. It is also symptomatic of a profound problem in the ideological and political life of their societies, a problem which should not be reduced to that of American (or Western) behaviour. However, the most prominent variant of this argument since '9-11' has been the thesis that 'the problem' is the particular ideological tradition from which *Al-Qa'eda* and Osama Bin Laden are derived, namely Wahhabism, the religious tradition which emerged and has come to dominance in Saudi Arabia. The main argument of this paper is that this view is mistaken, and that an entirely different way of understanding the nature of the problem of contemporary Islamism is mandated by the historical evidence, as well as being badly needed by Western policy makers. Three theses are presented which seek to explain what has happened in North African Islamism over the last century; what is happening in radical Islamism in Sunni North Africa; and what the logic of recent re-orientations in the region might be.

- **'9-11' was the product of a major and historic change**

A five-fold reorientation has recently occurred amongst the most activist elements of Islamic radicalism in the Middle East and North Africa:

- 1) Reorientation of *Al-Qa'eda* to anti-Americanism;
- 2) Contracting of an alliance between *Al-Qa'eda* and the most extreme wing of Egyptian Islamism (*Al-Gihad*);
- 3) Reorientation of *Al-Gihad* to anti-Americanism;
- 4) Adherence of *Al-Gihad* to activist wing of Wahhabism by adhering to *Al-Qa'eda*;
- 5) Alliance between Wahhabi activism and Egyptian extremism leading to a reorientation from guerrilla warfare to terrorism, with *Al-Qa'eda* adopting *Al-Gihad*'s tactics and techniques.

This alliance was only concluded in 1998.

- **The novel involvement of activists from the Maghrib in an alliance with Wahhabi anti-Americanism**

There is a tendency to presume that the involvement in *Al-Qa'eda* of North Africans is to be expected. However, the traditional Western enemy for Moroccans, Tunisians and Algerians has been France, not the US; the rhetoric of the most dynamic Islamist movement in the region was never anti-American; not a single American has been attacked in Algeria since 1992, despite the death of numerous foreigners; and the country in North Africa with the most grounds for anti-American sentiment, Libya, appears not to be furnishing significant numbers of recruits to *Al-Qa'eda*.

- **The growth of disorder in the religious field and the subversion of the traditional religious authorities**

A premise of contemporary Islamic radicalism is the disorder which has developed over the last century in North African Islam with the erosion of the old distinctions which structured and ordered the religious field. This has led to disorder, because it has undermined the authority of the special bodies of learned men who personified the distinctions in question, several of which were also embodied in distinct bodies of learning. Thus disorder in the religious field has impacted immediately on the educational field, since the latter was until recently embedded in the former. Contemporary Islam now lacks its own long-established principles of internal differentiation and the traditional vocabulary to express these. It has therefore become increasingly dependent upon classificatory systems derived either from the distant past or from the West. This has generated two principal problems:

- 1) These 'new' categorical distinctions do not amount to ordering principles that permit the regulation of the Islamic religious field;
- 2) This state of affairs makes profoundly problematical the development of law-bound government in the contemporary Sunni Muslim world.

- **Eclipse of nationalist variant of Islamism in Algeria accompanying political collapse**

Contrary to conventional analyses, Algerian Islamism from the 1930s onwards was not a pure product of the Wahhabi-influenced Salafiyya movement, but also contained a strong nationalist wing, which supported the project of political nationalism and enabled it to achieve hegemony over the Islamic reform movement from around 1956 onwards and again after independence during the Boumediène era. The latest round (1989-1995) in the conflict between Salafi and nationalist variants of Algerian Islamism saw the defeat of the nationalist current, however the political wasteland to which Algeria has now been reduced has been a function above all of the defeat of the nationalist tradition by Salafi tendencies within the Islamist movement and by a form of post-nationalist politics within the executive of the Algerian state which has privileged its relations with external partners and sponsors over its relations with the Algerian people, at the expense of Algeria's national sovereignty and national unity, and all prospect of progress towards law-bound government.

- **Importance of *jihad* in understanding contemporary Islamic politics**

Because it is a fundamental tenet of Sunni doctrine that Muslims should submit to and endure misgovernment by a bad Muslim ruler rather than rebel against it, only one aspect of this tradition has afforded any purchase for political oppositionism: the idea developed by Ibn Taymiyya that a ruler's Muslim credentials were spurious if he failed to uphold Islamic law and that good Muslims should see through the hypocritical profession of faith by such rulers and recognise their non-Muslim character, in virtue of which rebellion against them is not merely licit but imperative – *jihad*. This has tended to encourage a militant jihadist antagonism to 'bad' government, in place of the non-violent and constructive alternatives of the proselytising mission and reform. Since the 1970s, all forms of radical Islamism in North Africa have been preoccupied with the *jihad* against external enemies, or internal enemies conceived as external because impious.

- **Contemporary reorientation of *jihadi* Wahhabism not a real development of theory or doctrine**

Wahhabism has always had a *jihadi* (politico-military activist) wing. In recent years, such energies have simply been re-oriented to a new adversary, the former American ally now defined as enemy. While this has been politically problematic in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, it has not been doctrinally problematic. In Saudi Arabia it has been felt that the ruling family has allowed the holiest land in the Muslim world to become a *de facto* American protectorate, as well as themselves being guilty of moral decadence and hypocrisy, which has led to an increasing contestation of the legitimacy of the Sa'udi dynasty.

- **The problem is not home-grown, but an importation**

The brands of Islamism which produce terrorists in Egypt or Algeria are not home-grown, but importations resulting from local religious vacuums sucking in doctrines from elsewhere. Sunni Islam in North Africa has been eclipsed and overwhelmed by brands of militant Islamism originating elsewhere. In addition, US actions and policies since 1990 have provoked Wahhabi terrorism.

- **Necessity of a revival of liberal-constitutionalist nationalism in North Africa**

There is a need for a more tolerant Islam to develop, and spread, as a counter to the current occupation of the religious-political vacuum by *jihadi* Wahhabist-influenced elements. There is a need for the traditional religious leaders, the *'ulama*, to recover the role that they lost during the colonial period. In Algeria this requires the *'ulama* to play a leading role in developing thought about how the state can be developed into a state bound by law, which they need to do if the necessary synthesis of Islamic and non-Islamic sources of law is to be achieved.

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