

Islam between Religion, Politics and Terrorism

By **Xhavit Shala**

The terrorist attacks that struck London a few days ago have once again brought to the forefront of the issue of Islamic terrorism.¹ Pope Benedict called these attacks as anti-Christian. The assassination and suicide attacks in the name of Allah, the terrorist's goal to create a modern times caliphate through holy war and the tendency to transform radical Islam into an ideology and state policy in some Middle Easter countries is threatening to take hostage the Islamic religion itself.²

The western governments for some time now, but with increasing attention since the fall of communism, have identified radical Islam as one of the main threats to their national security. This has come about not only as a result of the development in the land of the black gold but also due to the quick demographic growth of Muslim populations in the west and the failure to integrate them into the native communities. In Holland alone, the Muslim population makes up around 20 per cent of the population of the country. It was these worries that played a not so little of a role in the Dutch "No" to the European constitution.³ The western vigilance towards Islam increased significantly after the 9/11 attack and in some cases this sentiment has taken an islamophobic dimension.

Islam, a religion in expansion

Islam was founded by Prophet Muhamed (578 - 632). He declared the brotherhood of all Muslim believers and rejected any distinction based on class, color or race. His prophetic teachings, surrounded by political, social and theological principles laid the foundations of the Islamic civilization and had great impact in world history.⁴ He granted autonomy on religious matters to Hebrews and Christians. In a period of about 100 years, from the Arab peninsula the Islamic religion spread to almost half of the known world, from the Caucasus in the north, to India in the east and to the border of France in Western Europe. The rule of the Islamic empire in such a large swathe of territory was achieved through war. The necessary infrastructure required to spread the faith to non Muslim believers was set up in the occupied territories. Islam, like the other main religions, is a religion of peace and tolerance. Today in the west the number of Muslims and the rate of conversions into Islam have grown considerably and they have transformed Islam into a religion in expansion.

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² The article was published in "Korrieri,, July 14, 2005. www.acnss.com and in Lajmet.com

³ BBC in Albanian, June 2, 2005.

⁴ Fazlur Rahman - Muhammad (prophet) - Microsoft ® Encarta ® Encyclopedia 2002.

Islam arrived in the Balkans and among Albanians, in particular, during the Ottoman Empire. The Islam of the Ottoman Empire, though void of the dynamism and vitality present in the Islamic empires⁵ that preceded it, was more tolerant and differed from the conservative Islamic movements that were engulfing Islam in the Arab countries.

The conversion of a large number of Albanians to Islam took place in a gradual manner. Islam spread to the current proportions as a result of the ottoman occupation, the coercive measures applied and willing acceptance by a part of the Albanian population of this faith.⁶ The conversion to Islam⁷ was facilitated by a series of factors: Islam was expanded thanks economic factors, the geographic position of the country, the low level of education among the population, and the attraction provided by Bektashism as more liberal variant of Islam, as well as the receding support Rome was able to provide the Albanian Catholics with.

Albanians, geographically located between the East and West, with a majority of the population which converted to Islam but with strong links with the western civilization, have journeyed from polytheism to Christianity, the to Islamic shariah, the secular state, the atheist communist state and finally find themselves today at peace between Christ and Muhammad.⁸ This painful history of religions in Albania has often brought Albanians face to face with the choice between love and hatred of both the East and the West. In more recent times, Albanian are seeking to gain the merited, and yet still missing, love of the west.

Islam and politics

From its earliest days, Islam was closely intertwined with politics. Prophet Muhamed created and led a strong state. He was not only the founder of Islam but also the head of the first Islamic state. Following the death of Muhamed, together with the further expansion of the empire began the devision into smaller caliphates.

(In comparison, the Catholic Church has always lived in a permanent relation of duality with political power while the Orthodox Church assumed some of the attributes of the Byzantine state and lived in complete symbiosis with it.⁹)

From 850-1300 the Islamic caliphates provided a great venue for the development of culture and sciences. While the Islamic state and community at this time was experiencing the golden age of intellectual life, fanaticism and inquisition ruled in the Christian countries. From then on, however, there began a gradual weakening of the

⁵ Mehdi Frashëri, "The Ancient History of Albania and the Albanians", page 44-45.

⁶ Xhavit Shala, «Albanians at the Crossroads», page 124,

⁷ Sami Frashëri, an Albanian renaissance figure and scholar, says that Islam aside from being spread through occupation expanded also through another route that is not often mentioned by historians, and that is through natural and gradual expansion. While this first route of expansion may have played a bigger role, the second route is almost equal with that in effect. "The Spread of Islam ", 3d edition, Skopje, 1993

⁸ Xhavit Shala, «Albanians at the Crossroads», page 9.

⁹ Georges Castellan, "A History of the Balkans", page 37.

Islamic empire. The closing of the bright age of political, economic and religious development was ushered in by a series of factors, including conflicts within the caliphates, the Mongol attacks the east and the Christian crusades from the West. The invaders from the east, though having embraced the religion of the defeated, embraced its most fanatical variant, and rejected the civilization and the philosophy of progress.¹⁰

The Ottoman Empire stands as the last one in the series of Islamic Empires. The Sultan while being the ruler was also the caliph, the head of the Islamic faith. As the Arab caliphs attacked Europe from the west and ran over Spain and went as far as the border with France, the Turkish sultans advanced towards Europe from the Balkans in a war that lasted for about one hundred years (1362-1451). Despite the values as fighters that they demonstrated, the Turks proved incapable of pushing further the civilization of the Arabs. At a time when the western civilization began blossoming, the ottomans did not embrace the change and continued to keep politics and religion together and slipped further into fanaticism. That is why they remained behind and grew weaker and weaker dragging with them the people under their rule, including the Albanians.

With the developments in Europe during the renaissance the relation between the state and religion changed significantly and lead to the creation of a new concept of the role of faith in politics and¹¹ and a remodeling of relations between the state and the church. With the separation of politics from religion and of the church from the state, the Christian Europe legitimized religious tolerance and entered in its path toward modernization. The shake up in the power of the Church was heralded by the rise of reformation with Martin Luther 1517.¹² With the spread of reformation the dynamics of religious life in the west changed significantly.

The fundamental changes that Europe underwent in its path towards modern development, such as the birth of the nations, the use of vernacular, the development of national cultures, the separation of church and state and the creation of a secular society, were denied to the Albanians during the rule of the ottoman caliphate. This created serious doubts as regards the western civilizing identity of the Albanians.

With the law on Religious Communities of 1923, while centuries behind Europe, the Albanian regulated the relations between the state and religion in accordance with the European model. The establishment of such principles, such as the secularity of the state, the freedom of religion and the right to change it, the equal treatment of religious communities, provided a positive contribution to the strengthening of religious tolerance among our people and the alignment of Albanian alongside the other civilized European nations.

¹⁰ Mehdi Frashëri – The Ancient History of Albania and the Albanians. Page 44.

¹¹ Benoît Mercier, Andre Duhamel, “Democracy, foundations, its history and application”, Tirana 2003, page 74.

¹² Georges Castellan, “A History of the Balkans”, page 104.

Fanaticism, Extremism and fundamentalism in religious communities

Throughout the 20th century, extremist groups have emerged in all religious communities and tried to present a new view about the role of religion in politics and the state.

People affiliated with extremist movements regard their religion as the only true one and all others as false. The representatives of religious extremism find inspiration in a mistaken interpretation of passages from the scriptures. This group includes fanatics, extremists, fundamentalists and religious terrorists. It is important to note that affiliation with fundamentalist group does not mean that they embrace or condone the use violence. However, in many cases these movements are the main cause that stands behind civil wars, crimes against humanity and genocide. This has happened during the middle ages with the crusades and continues to be present in our days as the case of the war in Bosnia clearly demonstrates. In our days these movements represent a serious threat to the security of various states, regions and to global security. The case of Afghanistan, which served as a haven for Bin Laden and his network¹³ from where many terrorist attacks were planed is a convincing illustration of this.

Fundamentalism as an organized and conservative movement has first appeared among Christian circles¹⁴ and was called Christian fundamentalism. It surfaced as movement by the end of the 19th century early 20th century among the U.S. Protestants. The Fundamentalist was first introduced in 1909 with the publication and distribution of 12 books titled the “fundamentals”. It should be noted at this point however, that the Christian fundamentalists never sought to make changes in the relation between the church, politics and the state. On the contrary, they preached a strict separation of the state and churches, an emphasis that was in keeping with the tradition established by the first pilgrims who settled in the U.S.. It should also be understood that in this context the term “fundamentalism” bears no connection with the connotation that the term assumed with the appearance of terrorism by the end of the 20th century. These believers embraced and identified themselves with this term as a way of identifying the opposition of their movement to the liberalization of the Christian faith. In their essence, this movement opposed the effort to perceive Christianity as something that undergoes changes in accordance with social perceptions.

In Islam, the fundamentalist or extremist movement otherwise called “Islamic awakening” or “radical Islam”, is a movement that aims to reform the faith, the society and politics in the Muslim world. The most distinguishing in their doctrine is the

¹³ Those who arrived in Afghanistan were to receive military training in camps ... The merger of the Islamic terrorist groups into the organization headed by Bin Laden was to resolve their very important problem of funding that was to be provided by him. With all these groups coming under the control of Bin Laden the organization would now become much more effective and could extend its activity to any country, Ahmet Ibrahim Al Nagar told Egyptian investigators. Al Nagar was arrested in June 25, 1998 in the El Hagri Institute in Elbasan and was extradited to Egypt. - «Albania», December 2, 2001, page 5.

¹⁴ Markus Braybrooke – President of the World Congress of Religions – Religion and Civilization in the new Millennium, page 34.

intertwining the values of traditional Islam based on the shariah, with the programs for economic and social modernization.¹⁵

This political project that appears camouflaged under the religious mantle aim at building the society in complete imitation of the Islamic principles¹⁶ and is permeated by a deeply anti-western element in their political jargon.

The fundamentalist Islamic ideas were introduced in the form of selafi movement for the cleanings and awakening of Muslims, lead by Muhammad Rashid Rida, a Syrian writer, who lived in Egypt in the beginning of the 20th century. This idea was further modified by Hasan al-Banna, who founded in Egypt, in 1920, the “Muslim Brotherhood”. After WWII this organization spread to several Muslim countries and secured millions of followers, a development that seriously undermined the fragile secular regimes of the Islamic countries of the Middle East. “The Muslim Brotherhood”, which puts its theses on radical Islam on a political platform, is now looking to expand and achieve a politicization of Islam in the former communist Muslim countries, including the Balkans.¹⁷ The brotherhood has penetrated these regions thanks to a large network of Arab NGOs.¹⁸

Ahmet Ibrahim Al Nagar, deported from Albania on June 25, 1998 and one of the leaders of the Egyptian Jihad cell in Tirana,¹⁹ which was destroyed by the Albanian Secret Service in cooperation with the CIA,²⁰ has stated to the Egyptian prosecutors that the Muslim brotherhood and the selafi movement have extensive network of bases in Albania. The developments in the Muslim Community that followed and the attempt by

¹⁵ Malcolm Edward Yapp - Microsoft Encarta 2004.

¹⁶ Arbër Xhaferri – Religion, politics and the Albanians - Religion and Civilizations in the new Millennium, page 63.

¹⁷ The spread of these imported currents became an issue of concern in other Albanian inhabited areas outside the state borders of Albania “the spread of selafis in Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia, their introduction into mosques in the name of the pure religion of the long beards claiming that it came from the source are the best indicators of where this trend is leading,” Nexhat Ibrahim, a Kosovo theologian writes in his article titled “Who is manipulating the Muslim believers in Kosovo ” – «Dituria Islame» no.137, November 2001.

¹⁸ «Albania provided a great attraction for the Islamic activists and NGO’s who saw there an opportunity to revive the Islamic faith in the only country in Europe where the majority of the population was Muslim even though a non-practicing one- Dictionnaire Mondial de l’Islamisme – the chapter on Albania.

¹⁹ Ahmet Ibrahim Al Nagar – an activist of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, a.k.a Ebu Mahmut, was detained in the premises of El Hagri Institute in Elbasan on June 25, 1998 and was subsequently deported to Egypt. He was one of the closest associates of the selafis in Elbasan, Tirana and other districts of Albania.

²⁰ The terrorist organization of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad had succeeded in installing in Albania one of its most important committees. The members of this committee had taken important positions in several Islamic humanitarian organizations in our country. At that time, Ajman Zavahiri (the doctor) was the emir (leader) in the Jihad organization while his brother, Muhammad, was the head of the organization’s military wing. Muhammad Zavahiri was also serving as one of the principle managers of the Islamic Aid Organization in Tirana. The organization’s central office were in Jeddah, - Shavki Atija, a senior exponent of Islamic Jihad in Albania, who was detained in June 25 in Albania and deported to Egypt, says. – Gazeta «Albania», December 2, 2001, page 6.

the Selafis to take control of the Muslim community structures or to create structures that parallel those proved Al Nagari's statements true.

The Islamic movement was soon transformed into a political one that aimed aimed at taking power. In Iran the radical Islamists came into power by way of revolution in 1979. In other Muslim countries, they ran in elections and won. In 1992 the Islamic Salvation Front won the elections in Algeria, the victory was not recognized and what followed was a bitter civil war.

The development of radical political Islam in the Middle East did not come by accident. The factors that contributed to the birth, empowerment and coming into power of these movement are the following:

- **Political factors:** the failure of the western democratic models of governments in the Muslims countries. Following the removal of the colonial regimes, there were western style regimes that were established in many Arab countries. In most of these countries these regimes did not live up to their peoples hopes, suffered from high levels of corruption and led to a crises of confidence on this model of governance. These regimes became pray to increasing criticism which in turn provided great political capital to the fundamentalist Islamic movements.

- **Economic factors:** Poverty, unemployment, lack of a social safety net, a growing division between those who have and have not's, were elements that were all present in most of the Muslim countries after the 50's. The Fundamentalist Islamic Movement took advantage of this situation to expand its influence through the setting up of humanitarian services, provision of free education and publication of literature.

- **Social factors:** Western type modernization, which was pursued in some Muslim countries, lead to the breaking of some traditional Muslim mores. This development caused many people to blame the political regimes for allowing this to happen and led them to embracing other political alternatives. The fundamentalist Islamic movements took advantage of this sentiment in their propaganda.

- **Geopolitical factors:** The support provided by western countries to authoritarian states in the Middle East, such as Iranian regime of the Shah, and the western support provided to Israel had a considerable influence in undermining the Arab people's trust in the values of the western civilization and their form of political regime.

Leaders of fundamentalist movements blame the failures and the responsibility for the situation on the secularization of society and departure from the principles of Islam. Salvation can be found only by returning to the true Islam which according to them is a faith and lifestyle that merges politics and religion together.

In our days, a growing number of intellectuals in Islamic countries are making efforts to move their countries toward democracy, rule of law, secularity and freedom of speech. They have realized that without a developed democracy their countries are moving

backwards while others are advancing. Western countries, on their part, have understood that encouraging the emergence of democracies and implementation of political and economical reforms in Arab countries serves not only their security but the security of the entire world also.

Islam and Terrorism

Islamic Fundamentalism as a political movement aims to take power in Muslim countries and make use of the state instrument for achieving its goals. In many cases, amongst these political movements that seek to achieve power through peaceful means there exist also extremist organizations that seek to overthrow secular regimes by way of revolutions. According to these groups it is the obligation of all Muslims to fight secular regimes and establish an Islamic theocratic state. Most Islamic terrorist movements can be included in one of these groups. The commission of terrorist acts of suicide while being done in the name of Islam has got nothing to do with this faith. Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance and it has nothing in common with terrorism.

Many Islamic fundamentalist movements are often directly or indirectly linked with militant groups that represent their armed wings. Such groups are organized into an international network which in pursuit of their objective can target any country in the world. Most of the Middle Eastern terrorist organizations which also have branches in western countries claim to be acting in the name of Islam. When deemed by them necessary they do hesitate to take the lives of Muslim believers also. "The fight against the enemies of the Islamic faith, Al Zarkawi, the leader of Al-Qaeda for Iraq says, often makes the killing of other Muslims unavoidable for the sake of holy war."

Terrorism, of a religious or irreligious label, has become a serious threat for the global security in our days. Today's modern infrastructure of communication and movement has made the world much smaller and enabled the terrorist network to strike at any given place in the globe. The fight against terrorism can not be successful if limited only to efforts to "kill and eradicate". For the fight to be successful the factories that produce recruits for the ranks of these networks must also be dealt with and closed. Lack of freedom, poverty, minimal income and lack of hope for the future are all issues that need to be dealt with. In order for the western countries to be able to close down these "factories" they must work to encourage the development of democracy, and reduce poverty in the Middle East and other developing countries by way of encouraging effective economic reforms there.

The administration of President Bush appears to have grasped the reality of this challenge. In Cairo, on June 20, 2005, the U.S. Secretary of State, Rice, said: "For 60 years the U.S. has followed a policy of stability at the back of democracy here in the Middle East and achieved neither. Now we are undertaking a different course, we are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people."

While, generally speaking, people do not confuse the terrorists with Islam, the recent developments have lead to a growing islamophobia among people in Europe and the U.S.

and greater unclarity about Islam. The absence of a concerted effort by Muslim communities in Europe and beyond to clearly distance themselves from this murderous ideology and help defeat it will lead to growing fears and suspicion of Muslim communities by western societies. This would harm the interest of these Muslims in the western countries themselves.

The efforts to transform Islam into a radical ideology and state policy and the commission of terrorist acts in the name of religion represents an attempt to take Islam hostage. It is the duty of the Muslim community of believers to rise to the defense of their faith and save it from those who abuse it. It is incumbent upon them to develop the proper strategies and course of action to protect their faith and keep it from being taken hostage. The phenomenon of so-called Islamic fundamentalism will continue to represent the main challenge to global security during the XXI century.

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