

## **Does Poverty Cause Militant Islam?**

By Daniel Pipes

*What causes Muslims to turn to militant Islam? A survey finds that militant Islam (or Islamism) is not a response to poverty or impoverishment as widely argued. The factors that cause Islamism to decline or flourish appear to have more to do with issues of identity than with economics. On the level of individuals, conventional wisdom points to Islamism attracting the poor, the alienated, and the marginal – but research finds precisely the opposite to be true. To the extent that economic factors explain who becomes Islamist, they tend to be fairly well off. Islamists who make the ultimate sacrifice and give up their lives also fit this pattern of financial ease and advanced education. A disproportionate number of terrorists and suicide bombers have higher education, often in engineering and the sciences.*

### What causes Muslims to turn to militant Islam?

The events of September 11 greatly intensified this debate. Some analysts noted the poverty of Afghanistan and concluded that herein lay the problem. Jessica Stern of Harvard University wrote that the United States “can no longer afford to allow states to fail.” It had better devote a much higher priority to health, education and economic development, “or new Osamas will continue to arise.”<sup>1</sup> Susan Sachs of *The New York Times* writes, “Predictably, the disappointed youth of Egypt and Saudi Arabia turn to religion for comfort.”<sup>2</sup> Others more colourfully advocated bombarding Afghanistan with foodstuffs rather than explosives. Nor was this all talk; the Austrian chancellor, Wolfgang Schuessel, called on the European Union to fund a “Marshall Plan” to raise the “exploited, poor people” out of the misery, which he saw as the main source of their backing for militant Islam.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Washington Post*, 15 September 2001.

<sup>2</sup> *The New York Times*, 14 October 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Reuters, 14 October 2001.

Behind this analysis lies an assumption that socio-economic distress drives Muslims to extremism. The evidence, however, does not support this expectation. A survey finds that militant Islam (or Islamism) is not a response to poverty or impoverishment; Iraq has had the worst economic record over the past decade but it is not a hotbed of Islamism, while Turkey has made sizeable economic gains and has also witnessed a surge of Islamism. The factors that cause Islamism to decline or flourish appear to have more to do with issues of identity rather than with economics.

### **“All Other Problems Vanish”**

Conventional wisdom – that economic stress causes Islamism and economic growth is needed for it to subside – has a lot of well-placed adherents.

To begin with, some Islamists themselves accept this connection. In the words of a fiery sheikh from Cairo, “Islam is the religion of bad times.”<sup>4</sup> A Hamas leader in Gaza, Mahmud az-Zahar, says, “It is enough to see the poverty-stricken outskirts of Algiers or the refugee camps in Gaza to understand the factors that nurture the strength of the Islamic Resistance Movement.”<sup>5</sup> In this spirit, Islamist organisations offer a wide range of welfare benefits in an effort to attract followers.<sup>6</sup> They also promote what they call an “Islamic economy” as the “most gracious system of solidarity in a society. Under such a system, the honourable do not fall, the honest do not perish, the needy do not suffer, the handicapped do not despair, the sick do not die for lack of care, and people do not destroy one another.”<sup>7</sup>

Secular Muslims stress militant Islam’s resulting from poverty as an article of faith. Süleyman Demirel, the former Turkish president, says, “As long as there is poverty, inequality, injustice, and repressive political systems, fundamentalist tendencies will

---

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad `Abd al-Maqsud, *The New Yorker*, 12 April 1993.

<sup>5</sup> *L’Unita* (Rome), 28 December 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Hilal Khashan, “The Developmental Programs of Islamic Fundamentalist Groups in Lebanon as a Source of Popular Legitimation,” *Hamdard Islamicus*, 18 (1995): 51-71, demonstrates the success of these efforts.

<sup>7</sup> Samih `atef El-Zein, *Islam and Human Ideology*, trans. by Elsayed M. H. Omran (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996), p. 268.

grow in the world.”<sup>8</sup> Turkey’s former Prime Minister Tansu Çiller finds that Islamists performed well in the 1994 elections because, “People reacted to the economy.”<sup>9</sup> The chief of Jordanian Army Intelligence holds that “Economic development may solve almost all of our problems [in the Middle East].” “Including Islamism”, he was asked? “Yes, the moment a person is in a good economic position, has a job, and can support his family, all other problems vanish.”<sup>10</sup>

Leftists in the Middle East concur, interpreting the Islamist resurgence as “a sign of pessimism. Because people are desperate, they are resorting to the supernatural.”<sup>11</sup> Social scientists sign on too; Hooshang Amirahmadi, an academic of Iranian origin, argues that “the roots of Islamic radicalism must be looked for outside the religion, in the real world of cultural despair, economic decline, political oppression, and spiritual turmoil in which most Muslims find themselves today.”<sup>12</sup>

Western politicians find the Islamism-from-poverty argument compelling. For former president Bill Clinton, “These forces of reaction feed on disillusionment, poverty and despair” and he advocates a socio-economic remedy: “spread prosperity and security to all.”<sup>13</sup> Edward Djerejian, once a top State Department figure, reports that “political Islamic movements are to an important degree rooted in worsening socio-economic conditions in individual countries.”<sup>14</sup> Martin Indyk, another former ranking diplomat, warns that those wishing to reduce the appeal of Islamism must first solve of the economic, social, and political problems that constitute its

---

<sup>8</sup> *Novoye Vremya*, 29 September 1992. Demirel was at that time prime minister.

<sup>9</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 April 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Tahsin Shardum, in *Yedi`ot Ahronot*, 25 November 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), p. 163.

<sup>12</sup> Hooshang Amirahmadi, "Terrorist Nation or Scapegoat?" *Middle East Insight*, September-October 1995, p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> "President Clinton Addresses Joint Session of Jordanian Parliament," *Federal News Service*, Oct. 26, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Africa of the Committee of Foreign Affairs*, U.S. House of Representatives, p. 97. Quoted in Fawaz A. Gerges, *America and Political Islam; Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 106.

breeding grounds.<sup>15</sup>

Islamism reflects “the economic, political, and cultural disappointment” of Muslims, according to Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel of Germany.<sup>16</sup> Former Interior Minister Charles Pasqua of France finds that this phenomenon “has coincided with despair on the part of a large section of the masses, and young people in particular.”<sup>17</sup> Prime Minister Eddie Fenech of Malta draws an even closer tie: “Fundamentalism grows at the same pace as economic problems.”<sup>18</sup> Israel’s Foreign Minister Shimon Perez flatly asserts that “Fundamentalism’s basis is poverty”<sup>19</sup> and it offers “a way of protesting against poverty, corruption, ignorance, and discrimination.”<sup>20</sup>

The academy, with its Marxist disposition and disdain for faith (“religion is not the cause of conflicts but provides a rallying point for conflicts that are basically economic or political”)<sup>21</sup> of course accepts this Islamism-from-poverty thesis with near-unanimity. Ervand Abrahamian holds that “the behaviour of Khomeini and the Islamic Republic has been determined less by scriptural principles than by immediate political, social and economic needs.”<sup>22</sup> Ziad Abu-Amr, author of a book on Islamism (and a member of the Palestine Legislative Council), ascribes a Palestinian turn toward religiosity to “the sombre climate of destruction-war, unemployment, and depression [which] cause people to seek solace, and they’re going to Allah.”<sup>23</sup>

Then there are businessmen, as ever receptacles of conventional wisdom. Here is a journalist’s sardonic report on the

---

<sup>15</sup> Comments at a American Enterprise Institute conference, 3 November 1993.

<sup>16</sup> *Der Spiegel*, 2 January 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Europe No. 1 Radio (Paris), 24 October 1994.

<sup>18</sup> *Il Sole-24 Ore* (Milan), 16 July 1995.

<sup>19</sup> *El Mundo* (Madrid), 30 November 1994.

<sup>20</sup> *Middle East Quarterly*, March 1995, p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Field, *Inside the Arab World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Martyr Strategy,” *The New Yorker* 9 July 2001.

2002 meeting of the World Economic Conference (often simply called “Davos” after its usual venue), finding that it as usual

focused on the issue of the moment: the presumed links between poverty, the United States and terrorism. The various luminaries present agreed, somewhat unoriginally, that poverty is a bad thing and the result will inevitably be an increase in terrorism. Hence, the Sept. 11 mass murderers were expressing a testimonial of rage against the rich West. Obviously, intoned one participant after another, we “must condemn violence” but we must also understand where “the hate” is coming from. “People who feel the world is tilted against them will spawn the kind of hatred that is very dangerous for all of us,” accordingly chimed Bill Gates.<sup>24</sup>

In some cases, businessmen even make investments with an eye to political amelioration. The Virgin Group’s chairman, Richard Branson, declared as he opened a large music store in Beirut: “The region will become stable if people invest in it, create jobs and rebuild the countries that need rebuilding, not ignore them,”<sup>25</sup>

### **“Somewhere Near the Stratosphere”**

But the record finds little correlation between economics and Islamism. Wealth and economic fail as predictors of where Islamism will be strong and where not.

On the level of individuals, conventional wisdom points to Islamism attracting the poor, the alienated, and the marginal – but research finds precisely the opposite to be true. To the extent that economic factors explain who becomes Islamist, they tend to be fairly well off.

Take Egypt as a test case. In a 1980 study, the Egyptian social scientist Saad Eddin Ibrahim interviewed Islamists in Egyptian jails and found that the typical member is “young (early twenties), of rural or small-town background, from the middle or lower middle class, with high achievement and motivation, upwardly mobile, with science or engineering education, and from a normally cohesive family.” In other words, Ibrahim concluded, these young men were “significantly above the average in their generation”; they are “ideal or model young Egyptians.”<sup>26</sup> In a

---

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Rose, “Poverty-terrorism link is mere groupthink,” *National Post*, 5 February 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Reuters, 3 July 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Saad Eddin Ibrahim, “Anatomy of Egypt’s Militant Islamic Groups,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, December 1980, p. 440.

subsequent study, he found that out of 34 members of the violent group *At-Takfir w'al-Hijra*, fully 21 had fathers in the civil service, nearly all of them middle-ranking.<sup>27</sup> More recently, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service found that the leadership of the militant Islamic group Al-Jihad “is largely university educated with middle-class backgrounds.”<sup>28</sup> These are not the children of poverty or despair.

Other researchers confirm these findings for Egypt. In a study on the country’s economic troubles, Galal Amin concludes by noting “how rare it is to find examples of religious fanaticism among either the higher or the very lowest social strata of the Egyptian population.”<sup>29</sup> When her assistant in Cairo turned Islamist, the journalist Geraldine Brooks tells of her surprise: “I’d assumed that the turn to Islam was the desperate choice of poor people searching for heavenly solace. But Sahar [the assistant] was neither desperate nor poor. She belonged somewhere near the stratosphere of Egypt’s meticulously tiered society.”<sup>30</sup> And note this account by the talented Hamza Hendawi: In Egypt,

a new breed of preachers in business suits and with cellular phones are attracting increasing numbers of the rich and powerful away from Western lifestyles and into religious conservatism. The modern imams hold their seminars over banquets in some of Cairo’s most luxurious homes and in Egypt’s seaside resorts to appeal to the wealthy’s sense of style and comfort.<sup>31</sup>

What is true of Egypt holds equally true elsewhere: Like fascism and Marxism-Leninism in their heydays, Islamism attracts highly competent, motivated, and ambitious individuals. Far from being the laggards of society, they are its leaders. Brooks, a much-travelled journalist, found Islamists to be “the most gifted” of the youth she encountered. Those “hearing the Islamic call included the students with the most options, not just the desperate cases. . . .

---

<sup>27</sup> Saad Eddin Ibrahim, “Egypt’s Islamic Militants,” in Nicholas Hopkins and Saad Eddin Ibrahim, eds., *Arab Society, Social Science Perspectives* (Cairo: American University of Beirut Press, 1987).

<sup>28</sup> *The National Post*, 28 August 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Amin, *Egypt’s Economic Predicament*, p. 136.

<sup>30</sup> Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>31</sup> Associated Press, 28 September 2001.

They were the elite's of the next decade: the people who would shape their nations' future."<sup>32</sup>

Islamists who make the ultimate sacrifice and give up their lives also fit this pattern of financial ease and advanced education. A disproportionate number of terrorists and suicide bombers have higher education, often in engineering and the sciences. This generalisation applies equally to the Palestinian suicide bombers attacking Israel and the followers of Usama bin Ladin who hijacked the four planes on September 11. In the first case, a researcher found by looking at their profiles that „Economic circumstances did not seem to be a decisive factor. While none of the 16 subjects could be described as well-off, some were certainly struggling less than others.“<sup>33</sup>

In the second case, as the Princeton historian Sean Wilentz humorously put it, judging by the biographies of the September 11 killers, terrorism is caused by “money, education and privilege.”<sup>34</sup> More seriously, a fellow-tribesman of many of those suicide hijackers anguished over the reasons for their murderous course and concluded it could have nothing to do with poverty. To the contrary, Tarrad bin Sa`id Al-`Umari noted the extraordinary good fortune of these young men, many of them coming from the Asir region of Saudi Arabia, which “had accomplished within three decades what the world took ten thousand years to accomplish” and concludes that “there is no failure that can be linked” to the events of September.<sup>35</sup> Another Saudi writer, `Ali Sa`d al-Musa then took up this theme, noting that the Asir region is absolutely the fastest-developing region of Saudi Arabia, he drew even more emphatic conclusions:

Most of the perpetrators were from families that had been favoured by fortune. In most cases, they weren't even middle class, but higher. If poverty was a cause of terrorism, we wouldn't hear about a single Saudi in this affair; the accusations would be directed at Somalia, Burundi, Chad, Bangladesh, and other countries classified as below the poverty line. ... If poverty and unemployment were the fuel of terrorism, [terrorism] would have engulfed other

---

<sup>32</sup> Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, p. 164.

<sup>33</sup> *The Jerusalem Report*, 8 October 2001, p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> *The Weekly Standard*, 29 October 2001.

<sup>35</sup> *Al-Watan* (Abha), 22 December 2001, cited in Middle East Media and Research Institute, 1 January 2002.

regions.<sup>36</sup>

More generally, Fat'hi ash-Shiqaqi, founding leader of the arch-murderous Islamic Jihad, once commented that "Some of the young people who have sacrificed themselves [in terrorist operations] came from well-off families and had successful university careers."<sup>37</sup> This makes sense, for suicide bombers who hurl themselves against foreign enemies, offer their lives not to protest financial deprivation but to change the world.

Those backing Islamist organisations also tend to be well off. They come much more from the richer city than the poorer countryside, a fact Khalid M. Amayreh, a Palestinian journalist, who "refutes the widely-held assumption that Islamist popularity thrives on economic misery."<sup>38</sup> And they come not just from the cities but from the upper ranks. At times, an astonishing one-quarter of the membership in Turkey's leading Islamist organisation, now called the Saadet Party, have been engineers. Indeed, the typical cadre in an Islamist party is an engineer in his 40s born in a city to parents who had moved from the countryside.<sup>39</sup> Amayreh finds that in the Jordanian parliamentary elections of 1994, the Muslim Brethren did as well in middle-class districts as in poor ones. He generalises from this that "a substantial majority of Islamists and their supporters come from the middle and upper socio-economic strata."<sup>40</sup>

Martin Kramer, editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*, goes further and sees Islamism as

the vehicle of counter-elites, people who, by virtue of education and/or income, are potential members of the elite, but who for some reason or another get excluded. Their education may lack some crucial prestige-conferring element; the sources of their wealth may be a bit tainted. Or they may just come from the wrong background. So while they are educated and wealthy, they have a grievance: their

---

<sup>36</sup> *Al-Watan* (Abha), 24 December 2001, cited in Middle East Media and Research Institute, 1 January 2002.

<sup>37</sup> *Die Tageszeitung* (Berlin), 25 July 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Amayreh, "Reality behind the Image."

<sup>39</sup> Olivier Roy, *L'Echec de l'Islam politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 50, 72.

<sup>40</sup> Khalid M. Amayreh, "Reality behind the Image," *The Jerusalem Post*, 24 February 1995.

ambition is blocked, they cannot translate their socio-economic assets into political clout. Islamism is particularly useful to these people, in part because by its careful manipulation, it is possible to recruit a following among the poor, who make valuable foot soldiers.

He cites the so-called Anatolian Tigers, businessmen who have had a critical role in backing Turkey's Islamist party, as an example of this counter-elite in its purest form.<sup>41</sup>

### **“Not a Product of Poverty”**

The same pattern exists on the level of societies:

- *Wealth does not inoculate against Islamism.* Kuwaitis enjoy a Western-style income (and owe their state's very existence to the West) but Islamists generally win the largest bloc of seats in parliament (at present, 20 out of 50). The West Bank is more prosperous than Gaza, yet Islamist groups usually enjoy more popularity in the former than the latter. Islamism flourishes in Western Europe and North America, where Muslims have an economic level higher than the national averages. And of those Muslims, as Khalid Durán points out, Islamists have the generally higher incomes: “In the United States, the difference between Islamists and common Muslims is largely one between haves and have-nots. Muslims have the numbers; Islamists have the dollars.”<sup>42</sup>

- *A flourishing economy does not inoculate against radical Islam.* Today's Islamist movements took off in the 1970s, precisely as oil-exporting states enjoyed extraordinary growth rates. Mu‘ammar al-Qadhafi developed his eccentric version of proto-Islamism then; fanatical groups in Saudi Arabia violently seized the Great Mosque of Mecca; and Ayatollah Khomeini took power in Iran (though, admittedly, growth had slacked off several years before he overthrew the shah). In the 1980s, several countries that excelled economically experienced a Islamist boom. Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco all did well economically in the 1990s – as did their Islamist movements. Turks under Turgut Özal enjoyed nearly a decade of particularly impressive economic growth even as they joined Islamist parties in larger numbers.

- *Poverty does not generate Islamism.* There are many very poor Muslim states but few of them have become centres of

---

<sup>41</sup> Personal letter, 2 August 2001.

<sup>42</sup> Need details.

Islamism – not Bangladesh, not Yemen, and not Niger. As an American specialist rightly notes, “economic despair, the oft-cited source of political Islam’s power, is familiar to the Middle East”<sup>43</sup>; if Islamism is connected to poverty, why was it not a stronger force in years and centuries past, when the region was poorer than today?

- *A declining economy does not generate Islamism.* The 1997 crash in Indonesia and Malaysia did not spur a large turn toward Islamism. Iranian incomes have gone down by half or more since the Islamic Republic came to power in 1979: yet, far from increasing support for the regime’s Islamist ideology, impoverishment has caused a massive alienation from Islam. Iraqis have experienced an even more precipitous drop in living standards: Abbas Alnasrawi estimates that per capita income has gone down since 1980 by nearly 90 percent, returning it to where it was in the 1940s.<sup>44</sup> While the country has witnessed an increase in personal piety, Islamism has not surged, nor is it the leading expression of anti-regime sentiments.

Noting these patterns, at least a few observers have drawn the correct conclusion. The outspoken Algerian secularist, Saïd Sadi, flatly rejects the thesis that poverty spurs Islamism: “I do not adhere to this view that it is widespread unemployment and poverty which produce terrorism.”<sup>45</sup> Likewise, Amayreh finds that Islamism “is not a product or by-product of poverty.”<sup>46</sup>

### **“Providing a Decent Living”**

If poverty causes Islamism, economic growth is the solution. And indeed, in countries as varied as Egypt and Germany, officials argue for a focus on building prosperity and fostering job formation to combat Islamism. At the height of the crisis in Algeria, during the mid-1990s, when the government pled for Western economic aid, it implicitly threatened that without this, the Islamists would prevail. This interpretation has practical results: for example, the government in Tunisia has taken some steps toward a free market

---

<sup>43</sup> Edward G. Shirley, “Is Iran’s Present Algeria’s Future?” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1995, p. 40.

<sup>44</sup> Abbas Alnasrawi, *The Economy of Iraq: Oil, Wars, Destruction of Development and Prospects, 1950-2010* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 151.

<sup>45</sup> *Le Soir* (Brussels), 7 February 1995.

<sup>46</sup> Khalid M. Amayreh, “Reality behind the Image,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 24 February 1995.

but has not privatised, fearful that the swollen ranks of the unemployed would provide fodder for Islamist groups. The same goes for Iran, where Europe and Japan mould policies premised on the notion that their economic ties to the Islamic Republic tame it and discourage military adventurism.

This emphasis on jobs and wealth creation transformed efforts to end the Arab-Israeli conflict during the Oslo era. Prior to 1993, Israelis had insisted that a resolution would require Arabs to recognise that the Jewish state is a permanent fact of life. Achieving that was thought to lie in winning acceptance of the Jewish state and finding mutually acceptable borders. Then, post-1993, came a major shift: increasing Arab prosperity became the goal, hoping that this would diminish the appeal of Islamism and other radical ideologies. A jump-start for the economy was expected to give Palestinians a stake in the peace process, thereby reducing the appeal of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In this context, Serge Schmemmann of *The New York Times* wrote (without providing evidence) that Arafat “knows that eradicating militancy will ultimately depend more on providing a decent living than on using force.”<sup>47</sup>

The Israeli analyst Meron Benvenisti agreed: Islam’s “militant character derived from its being an expression of the deep frustration of the underprivileged. . . . Hamas’s rise was directly linked to the worsening economic situation and to the accumulated frustration and degradation of the ongoing occupation.”<sup>48</sup> As did Shimon Peres: “Islamic terror cannot be fought militarily but by eradicating the hunger which spawns it.”<sup>49</sup> Guided by this theory, the Western states and Israel contributed billions of dollars to the Palestinian Authority. Even more remarkably, the Israeli government fought back efforts by pro-Israel activists in the United States to make American aid to the PLO contingent on Arafat’s fulfilling his promises to Israel.

At this late date, one hardly needs to point out the falsehood of the Oslo assumptions. Wealth does not resolve hatreds; a prosperous enemy may simply be one more capable of making war. Westerners and Israelis assumed that Palestinians would make

---

<sup>47</sup> Serge Schmemmann, “The Enemy of My Enemy . . .,” *The New York Times*, 23 August 1995.

<sup>48</sup> Meron Benvenisti, *Intimate Enemies: Jews and Arabs in a Shared Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 145-46.

<sup>49</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, 21 September 1994.

economic growth their priority, whereas this was a minor concern of theirs. Instead, what counted were questions of identity and power. So strong is the belief in Islamism-from-poverty that Oslo's failure has not managed to discredit the faith in prosperity. Thus, in August 2001, a senior Israeli officer endorsed the building of a power station in northern Gaza on the grounds that it would supply jobs, "and every [Palestinian] working is one less pair of hands for Hamas."<sup>50</sup>

If poverty is not the driving force behind Islamism, several policy implications follow. First, prosperity cannot be looked to as the solution to militant Islam and foreign aid cannot serve as the outside world's main tool to combat it. Second, Westernisation also does not provide a solution. To the contrary, many outstanding Islamist leaders are not just familiar with Western ways but are expert in them. In particular, a disproportionate number of them have advanced degrees in technology and the sciences.<sup>51</sup> It sometimes seems that Westernisation is a route to hating the West. Third, economic growth does not inevitably lead to improved relations with Muslim states. In some cases (for example, Algeria), it might help; in others (Saudi Arabia), it might hurt.

### **An Opposite Argument**

Could it be, quite contrarily, that Islamism results from wealth rather than poverty? Possibly. First, there is the universal phenomenon that people become more engaged ideologically and active politically only when they have reached a fairly high standard of living. Revolutions take place, it has often been noted, only when a substantial middle class exists. Birthe Hansen, an associate professor at the University of Copenhagen, hints at this when she writes that "the spread of free market capitalism and liberal democracy ... is probably an important factor behind the rise of political Islam."<sup>52</sup>

Secondly, there is a specifically Islamic phenomenon of the faith having been associated with worldly success. Through history, from the Prophet Muhammad's time to the Ottoman Empire a millennium later, Muslims usually had more wealth and more power than other peoples, and were more literate and healthy. With time,

---

<sup>50</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, 20 August 2001.

<sup>51</sup> On this phenomenon, see this author's study, "The Western Mind of Radical Islam," *First Things*, December 1995, pp. 18-23.

<sup>52</sup> Birthe Hansen, *Unipolarity and the Middle East* (New York: St. Martin's, 2001), p. 92.

Islamic faith came to be associated with worldly well being. This connection appears still to hold. For example, as noted in the formulation known as Issawi's law ("Where there are Muslims, there is oil; the converse is not true"), the 1970s oil boom mainly benefited Muslims; it is probably no coincidence that the current wave of Islamism began then. Seeing themselves as "pioneers of a movement that is an alternative to Western civilisation,"<sup>53</sup> Islamists need a strong economic base. As Galal A. Amin, an economist at the American University in Cairo, writes, "There may be a strong relationship between the growth of incomes that have the nature of economic rent and the growth of religious fanaticism."<sup>54</sup>

Conversely, poor Muslims tend to be more impressed by alternative affiliations. Over the centuries, for example, apostasy from the religion have mostly occurred when things go badly. That was the case when Tartars fell under Russian rule or when Sunni Lebanese lost power to the Maronites. It was also the case in 1995 in Iraqi Kurdistan, a region under double embargo and suffering from civil war:

Trying to live their lives in the midst of fire and gunpowder, Kurdish villagers have reached the point where they are prepared to give up anything to save themselves from hunger and death. From their perspective, changing their religion to get a visa to the West is becoming an increasingly more important option.<sup>55</sup>

There are, in short, ample reasons for thinking that Islamism is more an outlook connected to success than failure.

### **"The Elevator to Take Power"**

When seeking the causes of Islamism, it is probably more fruitful to look less to economics and more to other factors. While material reasons deeply appeal to a Western sensibility,<sup>56</sup> they offer little guidance in this case. In general, Westerners attribute too

---

<sup>53</sup> Oguzhan Asiltürk, secretary-general of the Refah Partisi in Turkey, *Turkish Daily News*, 23 November 1994.

<sup>54</sup> Galal A. Amin, *Egypt's Economic Predicament: A Study in the Interaction of External Pressure, Political Folly and Social Tension in Egypt, 1960-1990* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), p. 138.

<sup>55</sup> *Tempo*, 29 March 1995.

<sup>56</sup> As shown by the fact that a half century earlier, American analysts like Dean Rusk argued that communism owed its appeal to poverty. [Adam – you want to add to/change this?]

many of the Arab world's problems, observes David Wurmser of the American Enterprise Institute, "to specific material issues" such as land and wealth. This usually means a tendency "to belittle belief and strict adherence to principle as genuine and dismiss it as a cynical exploitation of the masses by politicians. As such, Western observers see material issues and leaders, not the spiritual state of the Arab world, as the heart of the problem."<sup>57</sup> Or, in Usama bin Ladin's ugly but not inaccurate formulation, "Because America worships money, it believes that people think that way too."<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, if one turns away from the commentators on Islamism and instead listens to the Islamists themselves, it quickly becomes apparent that they rarely talk about prosperity. As Ayatollah Khomeini memorably put it, "We did not create a revolution to lower the price of melon." If anything, they look at the consumer society of the West with distaste. Wajdi Ghunayim, an Egyptian Islamist, sees it as "the reign of décolleté and moda [fashion],"<sup>59</sup> whose common denominator is an appeal to the bestial instincts of human nature. Economic strength for Islamists represents not the good life but added strength to do battle against the West. Money serves to train cadres and buy weapons, not to buy a bigger house and late-model car. Wealth is a means, not an end.

Means toward what? Toward power. Islamists care less about material strength than by where they stand in the world. They talk incessantly about this. In a typical statement, 'Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, the leading Iranian hard-liner, predicts that "Ultimately Islam will become the supreme power."<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Mustafa Mashhur, an Egyptian Islamist, declares that the slogan "God is Great" will reverberate "until Islam spreads throughout the world."<sup>61</sup> Abdessalam Yassine, a Moroccan Islamist, asserts "We demand power";<sup>62</sup> and the man standing in his way, the late King

---

<sup>57</sup> David Wurmser, "The Rise and Fall of the Arab World," *Strategic Review*, Summer 1993, p. 43.

<sup>58</sup> Associated Press, 28 September 2001.

<sup>59</sup> Wajdi Ghunayim, *Suluk al-Khatib*; idem, *Hijab al-Mar'a al-Muslima*; Hasan Ayyub, *Fi-I Mar'a*; Yusuf al-Qardawi, *Khutba fi-I Mar'a*. Quoted in Emmanuel Sivan, "Eavesdropping on Radical Islam," *Middle East Quarterly*, March 1995, p. 17.

<sup>60</sup> *Keyhan Hava'i*, 7 March 1990.

<sup>61</sup> *Ash-Sha'b* (Cairo), 11 October 1994.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in François Burgat and William Dowell, *The Islamic Movement in North Africa* (Austin, Tex.: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas, 1993), p. 21.

Hasan, concluded that for Islamists, Islam is “the elevator to take power”<sup>63</sup>

By reducing the economic dimension to its proper proportions, and appreciating the religious, cultural, and political dimensions, we may actually begin to understand what causes Islamism.

Daniel Pipes is director of the Middle East Forum, columnist for *The Jerusalem Post*, and author of three books on Islam. He can be reached via [www.DanielPipes.org](http://www.DanielPipes.org) .

---

<sup>63</sup> *The New York Times*, 13 March 1995.