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### DESIGN

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PROF. RIYAZ PUNJABI

International Centre for Peace Studies

A-39, South Extension -I

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Tel: (91-11) 2469 8886

Telefax: (91-11) 2464 9996

Website: <http://www.icpsnet.org>

Email: [cpsndjps@gmail.com](mailto:cpsndjps@gmail.com);

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## OVERSEAS OFFICES

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## How Islamic are Islamist Revivalist Movements?

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**Muhammad Maroof Shah \***



Much used and abused statement that Islam doesn't separate sacred and profane, religious and political often hides more insidious, confounding of modern institution of State and traditional universe of Shariah/Islamic Governance.

Given widespread confounding of Islam with Islamism/Political Islam (al-Islam al-siyasi- terms now widely used by Muslim Ulema, historians and political theorists), few points to be noted for broad characterization of it, reviewing the debate and explaining why the latter fails to convince the best of traditional and modern scholarship. This characterization may be summed up pointwise as follows:

### **The Characterization**

A. Islamism is that modern(ist) development that assumes key role for Islamic State (as distinguished

from what Hallaq calls Islamic Governance) and imposing its interpretation of Islamic law on others though it may use democratic means to get power, rejects/suspects or severely limits the role of philosophy, art and mysticism, is wedded to religious exclusivism and privileges premodern modes of interpreting texts.

B. Islamism confounds faith with belief and belief with ideology and almost reduces metaphysics to religion, intellect to reason and esoterism to batinite antiliteralism.

It usually assumes, against judgment of major scholars and Christian self understanding, religion and politics are separated in Christian or other major traditions in a manner contravening Islam.

It assumes, unwarrantedly and inconsistently given its commitment to previous revelations, Islamic

*Muhammad Maroof Shah is a Scholar on Sufism based in Srinagar, Kashmir.*

approach is not a subset of Traditional Approach to politics and as such fails to see how Christian and Hellenic-Western philosophical approaches may be allies for God/Sacred conscious governance and not adversaries.

*It reduces Revelation to Islamic revelation only in practice and reduces that in turn to a narrow theologico-juristic religio-political framework that construes other religions as more or less corrupt idolatrous religio-cultural formations. [Emphasis added. Ed.]*

It, contrary to self understanding and millennial practices of countless Muslim masses/Ulema/saints and sages seeks to write off many traditional expressions of Islamic intellectuality and spirituality and accordingly subjects art to moralistic prejudice, suspects Sufism of alien origin, reduces philosophy to Western secularizing thought currents such as rationalism and empiricism and delegitimizes philosophy as essentially Greek or Western phenomenon and writing off exalted place for the sage/hakeem in understanding Islamic canon as it underemphasizes traditional reception of intellectual element in the notion of *hikmah*.

It usually misconstrues the Western as necessarily secularizing

and materialist and writes off the secular as anti-religious as distinguished from religiously neutral/temporal.

It makes a series of problematic hermeneutical maneuvers due to selective, atomistic and literalist approach and contested readings of mythologies, symbols, art traditions and religious, philosophical and political thought of major traditions and even core terms of Islam

C. Wael Hallaq, one of the significant voices in theorizing the problematique of Islamic State states in his path breaking work *The Impossible State* that "The 'Islamic state,' judged by any standard definition of what the modern state represents, is both an impossibility and a contradiction in terms. Modern forms of globalization and the position of the state in the ever increasing intensity of these forms are sufficient to render any brand of Islamic governance either impossible or, if possible, incapable of survival in the long run. All things considered, Islamic governance is unsustainable, given the conditions prevailing in the modern world." While himself pleading for the latent meanings of the modern Muslim call for the establishment of Islamic

governance (to be distinguished from essentially modern(ist) idea of Islamic State, he is compelled to dismiss “the modern experiment in the Muslim world as a massive political and legal failure from which no lessons can be positively learned as to how Muslims may govern themselves properly. Their states have not successfully met any serious challenge, while the ‘Shariah’ that they often constitutionally enshrine as ‘a’ or ‘the’ source of law has proven, as I suggested elsewhere, institutionally dead and politically abused.” “There can be no Islam without a moral-legal system that is anchored in a metaphysics there can be no such moral system without or outside divine sovereignty; and, at the same time, there can be no modern state without its own sovereignty and sovereign will, for no one, I think, can reasonably argue that the modern state can do without this essential form-property of sovereignty. If all these premises are true, as they ineluctably must be, then the modern state can no more be Islamic than Islam can come to possess a modern state.”

D. The authenticity it claims for itself, however, is based on a reified understanding of Islam that omits important aspects of Islamic terms

and ways of reasoning. In other words, it is not willing to admit the heterogeneous and legitimate non-conformist elements that have their place in it. Even with the Quran and Hadith to which the Islamists claim to adhere, ‘these two not exhaust the nuances, subtleties and varieties of the religion as it was lived and realized even during the time of the Prophet.

It is impossible to claim that “a reified model of Islamic politics exists. Yet, despite the historical evidence that shows diverse positions on the subject of politics in Islam, the Islamists insist that what they are presenting is an ‘authentic’ vision of Islamic politics.

*Islamists fail to adequately theorize such issues as gender, identity, agency, democracy, tolerance, symptoms of nihilism such as widespread apostasy or unwilling suspension of belief, ecocide and key moral issues from mass farming to population explosion to war industry. Read any dispassionate and engaging analysis of these issues by theorists of first order and one feels the difference.*

### ***Politicized Islam***

William Chittick maintains that: Politicized Islam— so-called

“fundamentalism”—is largely led by doctors and engineers, who are ignorant of anything but a smattering of Islam’s first dimension (law, practice), and who see religion as something like a grid that can be imposed on society, an engineering problem to be solved.

Islamists’ most characteristic claim for politically inflected notion of God’s rule is based not on *nass* (people) but interpretation and inference (*qiyas*) that should, in principle, be open to revisiting.

There is little depth in engagement with intellectual challenges or intellectual deficit in Islamists as scholars from Nasr to Ovaïd Avamir have noted. This is especially true about post-Maududi (Abul Ala) period.

Broad Islamist popularity is based on their role out of power, as a fresh, principled, and untested element on a tired and corrupt political scene. *Many of the votes they attract come as protests against existing discredited parties rather than a vote of/ for Islamism per se. [Emphasis added. Ed.]*

Islamists are more or less opposed to/niggardly acknowledging a) the vital part of metaphysics of the most revered/influential names in the

history of Islamic tradition – Abdul Qadir Gilani, Ghazzali, Ibn Arabi, Mujadid Alif Thani, Shah Waliullah (and in Kashmir Shaykh Nuruddin and Syed Ali Hamdani) without being able to articulate better expressions of the same for contemporary audience shaped by philosophy and science b) key aspects of explication of cultural/mythopoetic resources of Islamic tradition in its greatest sons from Hafiz to Rumi to Khusrau to Ghalib (and in Kashmir to Sufi poets), c) many significant elements of understanding of Islamic tradition – especially its intellectuality and spirituality – as enshrined in first rate Ulema of major seminaries such as Deoband, Bareili and Azhar d) philosophers (Judeo-Christian-Islamic/Sino-Indic-Western) in general, e) first rate political thinkers of every tradition including Islamic who have contributed to traditional political thought f) major saints and sages of all traditions f) key formulations of self understanding of pre-Islamic revealed religions and g) great treasury of millennial intuitions and contributions that constitute collective heritage of mankind in sciences and arts.

History and great number of Muslim and non-Muslim analysts have so far passed negative judgment on its viability and given

negative report of its results and noted how human and fallible it has proved to be and emphasized need to evolve better, more nuanced, understanding of the movement of Spirit in history and align ourselves with it.

### **Western Perspective**

Having said this, let us note that most popular Western attempts to characterize Islamism are inevitably simplistic and selective, often verging on caricature and worse, they are analytically unhelpful. It is clearly incorrect, then, to think of political Islam as a fixed ideology to be accepted or rejected as a whole. It does not offer any predictable systematic or comprehensive set of programs, institutions, or style of leadership—except the regular, near obligatory call for “Islamic government” or an “Islamic state.” What these terms mean precisely is not known *since history has never seen a truly Islamic state to date*. Different parties interpret the concept differently. Islamism’s great mobilizing power and inspiration in helping shape politics in the Muslim world is undisputed – Fuller’s *The Future of Political Islam* lucidly sums up its positive contributions (although doesn’t forget the negative ones), continued relevance and reasons for appeal to many. “It has

helped fight many sectarian, moral, social and economic evils bothering Muslims and helped sustain faith of many. It has helped educate and sensitize millions on what it means to bear witness as a Muslim. Islamism has played a key role in the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle across the Muslim world. It powerfully inspires national liberation movements, particularly when Muslims are pitted against non-Muslim rule or when foreign powers threaten Islamic independence and Muslim well-being, whether politically, economically, or culturally. Islamist movements are likely to remain the foremost champions of oppressed Muslims around the world...for many reasons political Islam at the moment still remains the only realistic major alternative movement to most of today’s authoritarian regimes.” Islamism is indeed becoming self critical, diversified, nuanced, less judgmental of modernists/secularists and Sufism and major philosophers, less vocal about the institution of Caliphate, revisiting its construction of the West/ secular / culture / Caliphate / patriarchy and opening up to pluralist face of Islamic tradition. Islamism is slowly losing its sharp edges that made engagement with its other difficult. We now find many Islamisms, more nuanced Islamists,

more and more in humility acknowledging human side of its interpretations of the Divine text. Multifaceted contributions of Islamists to Islamic sciences have to be acknowledged. Significance of Islamists like Syed Moududi lies in showing deeply problematic nature of modern secular state from revelation centric viewpoint though the way out suggested has found many serious critiques from the moment of its articulation till date and those critiques have lately become more convincing. The future of Islamism is linked to the question of distinguishing what is human and thus contestable in one's interpretation of Islam (ism/ideology) from what is revealed/has to be received by deconstructing the realm of interpretation. We need to develop the moral-spiritual ideal/aspiration of Islamists encapsulated in Revelation-*hikmah* centric paradigm where politics is a science helping us on our way to *sa'aadah* (eudomonia) and incorporates catholicity and gnosis-centrism of Khomeini, philosophical rigour and poetic depths of Iqbal, ethical idealism of Moududi, insightful readings of art and culture as essentially religious/Islamic and Islam as the middle point between East and West in Alija Izatbegovitch's, passionately articulated moral critique of capitalist

modernity and Muslim world's betrayal of Islam's commitments to higher ideals such as justice in Ali Shariati and emphasis on the aesthetic or artistic in scripture in Syed Qutb. The task is to articulate in philosophical style enduring insights scattered in writers often classified as/with Islamists and retrieve and creatively reconstruct what Hallaq calls Islamic Governance. We need to revive Islamist's/any true Muslim's passion for Islam as demanding everything from us for the sake of non-self/Other/Truth/God. Paradoxically, large number of Islamists are now engaged in functionally privatizing and secularizing society beyond the purview of the state. Fuller notes that point made by George Joffe and Olivier Roy that "by promoting privatization of society, *Islamists are thereby engaged in de facto 'secularization' of society*. I refer to 'secularization' in its true sense: disassociation of religion and the state, rather than the rigid control or even negation of religious life by the state as radical secularists in the Middle East (especially Turkey) interpret it. As Islamists create civil institutions, whole new areas of private Muslim activity and Muslim areas of life become liberated from the control of the state."

**Conclusion**

We need to reclaim key Islamist figures as contributors to creative exploration of Islamic Tradition, especially their more philosophical and mystical side that better speaks to contemporary age, admit their errors of judgment and contestable

interpretations and note with Fuller that “Islam obviously precedes political Islam and Islam will abide, whatever the fortunes of political Islam will be. Islam may inspire Muslims to formulate visions of political Islam, but Islam is the essence and remains independent of all political interpretations. ■