

CLARIFICATION OF THE TERMS OF “ISLAM”, “ISLAMISM” AND “ISLAMOPHOBIA”

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Since I have to talk about both Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia, let me greet you à la President Obama by saying *As Salam Alaykum!*

Defining the concepts is an appropriate method to start with. A wise approach chosen by the organizers to this issue! However, defining Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia, all three in 15 minutes is quite a task.

I will try to propose some definitions of these three concepts in a concise manner. And then, through the general discussion afterwards, there will be time for discussing your comments and questions, if any.

1. ISLAM

There is no definition of Islam that would be accepted by all Muslims. There are different views on Islam. Let me mention only three of them.

The first view:

What Muslims are agreed on is that Islam is an Abrahamic religion. It is monotheist (like Judaism) and universalistic (like Christianity) and it is the last true religion. Everybody can formally become a Muslim by a public confession that there is only one God (ALLAH), that Muhammad is His Prophet and that there is such a thing as the Day of Last Judgment (Doomsday). All other duties like daily prayer, fasting during the Ramadan, pilgrimage to Mecca, paying the alms – even Jihad – are secondary.

The second view:

Islam is composed of three elements: a BOOK, a 14 century-long HISTORY, and of almost 1.2 billion MUSLIMS.

The BOOK, Al-Qur'an, is the most important pillar of Islam. A kind of identity card of this religion.

Al-Qur'an calls itself the BOOK (al-Kitab). But, it did not have the form of a Book when the Prophet Muhammad passed away in 632. The Qur'an has been written by various secretaries on various pieces of skin, papyrus and so on. The compilation of the Qur'an was carried out under the Caliph Othman, almost 20 years after the death of Muhammad. The Caliph ordered only one version to be kept and all other versions to be burned.

The Qur'an is not really a coherent book able to provide Muslims with clear and unambiguous guidelines. If we add to the Qur'an other sources of the Islamic creed, such as sunna, the Hadith, Riwaya, fatwas and so on, we get more than one billion disoriented and confused people!

The HISTORY:

Besides the Qur'an, there is more than 14 centuries of history during which Muslims built caliphates, empires, sultanates and emirates. Muslims also created great civilizations, under the Abbasids and in Andalusia, in particular. Then, the process of a *longue-durée* stagnation began, long before the discovery of America, followed by colonialism and imperialism which Muslims became subjugated to.

MUSLIMS:

In the course of history, Muslims became divided into various sects: Sunni, Shi'a, Khariji and so on, as well as adherents to Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'I, Hanbali and other persuasions. In today's world, Muslims are extending from Bali to Mali with extraordinary varieties of ethnicities, cultures and traditions.

The third view:

Islam consists of three levels: 1. Beliefs: *I'tiqadât*, 2. Social relations: *Mu'amilât*, and 3. Order (government): *Siyasiyyât*.

As long as Islam is limited to the first level, meaning a religious belief as well as some religious practices like prayer, fasting during the Ramadan, paying the alms, and so on, there will, in principle, be no conflicts between Muslim believers and other believers and/or non-believers in Europe.

At the second level of social relations, it depends on what we put into ‘social relations’. If they are limited to the sphere of business and commercial contracts like an Islamic banking system or the *hawala* deals and so on, I cannot see any inconvenience to it as long as it does not perturb the social system of the society. But, if ‘social relations’ cover other domains like *matrimonial* affairs such as marriage, polygamy and so on, this will create real problems.

However, the real issue comes with the third level. Since the question of Shari‘a in its broad sense includes both diverse physical punishments as well as requirement for an Islamic rule of government. This is what Islamists in their various affiliations are pursuing to achieve.

2. ISLAMISM

While ‘Islam’ is too general, too elusive and too ambiguous as a phenomenon, ‘Islamism’ as an ideology represents a coherent, specific and identifiable construction. Often Islamism is conceived merely as terrorism. But, Islamism cannot be reduced to *terrorism* alone. Terrorism is only one expression of Islamism, among many others, such as political activities, progressive penetration into ambient societies, challenging existing norms and social habits by demanding to be recognized (halal foods, hijab, burka and neqab, separation of men and women in swimming pools, schools and so on).

DEFINITION OF ISLAMISM

I propose a definition as follows:

‘Islamism’ is a religious ideology with a totalitarian interpretation of Islam whose final aim is the conquest of the world by all means.

This definition is composed of four interrelated elements.

The First Element: Islamism is a Religious Ideology

Islamism differs on this point from other totalitarian ideologies as it takes its legitimacy from a *double* source: *ideology* and *religion*. Due to its double character, actions undertaken by Islamists are seen by them as religious duties. Where a Nazi feels responsible to his Führer, an Islamist is responsible to his Leader *and* before Allah.

The Second Element: The Totalitarian Interpretation of Islam

is based on the absolute indivisibility of the trinity *Dîn* [religion], *Dunya* [way of life] and *Dawla* [government]. the 3 D's. This indivisibility is supposed to be permanent and eternal. Its ultimate goal boils down to the fulfillment of this triad on a global scale.

The Third Element: Conquest of the World

To Islamists, the existing world is both wrong and repressive. It is wrong because the existing world does not correspond to Islamic principles. Islam as a political power is no longer predominant as it used to be in the past. The world is also considered repressive because non-Muslims occupy what Islamists regard as Muslim territory or because Muslims live under severe repression by their own (anti-Islamic) governments.

To Islamists, the restoration of the Caliphate is the first step towards the 'Islamisation' of the world.

The Fourth Element: By all Means

The Islamists' ways of reaching the above-mentioned goal is quite broad-spectred, expanding from propagation, peaceful indoctrination and political struggle to violent methods such as assassination, hostage-taking, terrorist and suicide actions, and even massacres of the civilian population. However, the use of violence is not systematic. All Islamists do not use violence all the time, but they use it sometimes.

ISLAMISM IS A DIVIDED MOVEMENT

Islamism is a monist entity, but is far from being a monolithic movement. Despite the global aspirations of their ideologues, Islamists have no centre; there is no overall pan-Islamic, radical leadership.

Besides sectarian divisions (Sunni, Shi‘a, Wahhabi and so on), Islamists are also divided into two categories: ‘national Islamists’ and ‘global Islamists’. Both groups share the same ideology; but the scope of their goal is not the same.

To sum up, it is no exaggeration to say that despite some important differences and even reciprocal animosity among Sunni, Shi‘a, and Wahhabi Islamists, there is more that unites them than separates them.

3. ISLAMOPHOBIA

Islamophobia is a highly ambiguous and ambivalent phenomenon. In Europe, some scholars, politicians and intellectuals identify Islamophobia as a new type of racism. There are also some people who deny the existence of Islamophobia.

Looking at the discrimination against Muslim immigrants in western countries, we can state, without going into further detail, that discrimination against Muslims is a fact. However, two questions present themselves: Does discrimination exclusively take place against Muslim immigrants or are other immigrants (and non-immigrants, for example women, homosexuals, disadvantaged individuals) also discriminated against? And has discrimination against Muslims become accentuated after September 11th, 2001, or is discrimination a constant, regardless of time and place?

This argumentation may be continued by including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. There is no doubt that the two wars have evoked hatred and anger among Muslims. However, you can argue against this by calling attention to the chronology and the chain of events. The wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq came as a reaction to September 11th – not as its cause. The same goes for the thesis of ‘Islamophobia’ which has been strengthened after the Cartoon Crisis. Has the West become hostile to Islam, and if so, why? Some have even drawn a parallel between Islamophobia and anti-Semitism (read: anti-Jewish). However, what happened to the Jews in Germany under Hitler can in no way be compared to what is taking place with Muslims in Europe today! And in addition to that, how should it be understood that the very West that is following an Islamophobic policy, enters into a costly war headed by NATO to save Muslims from a massacre committed by Christian Europeans in former Yugoslavia? Or why is it that the superpower USA elects a president who has ‘Hussein’ as his middle name and is the son of a Muslim father and who even gives his first interview as president to a Muslim TV station, Al-Arabiyya?

Is it not a fact that Muslims in the West enjoy all the freedoms that democratic, pluralist regimes give their citizens, and that Muslims, in spite of the ‘discrimination’, enjoy the same right and access to education, health care and much more as non-Muslim citizens? Rights that are more or less non-existent in Muslim countries; at least for the corresponding category of Muslim immigrants.

IN CONCLUSION:

1. *Islam* represents an elusive phenomenon with multiple faces and a number of concurrent and even hostile ramifications. Therefore, it does not seem very productive or even possible to combat Islam: a vague and ambivalent concept. Perhaps, it will be more fruitful to hold particular groups of Muslims responsible for their acts. And above all, why do we in Europe refer to an agglomerate of different people from different countries with different languages and different traditions and history as “*Muslims*”. We don’t refer to Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese in Europe as Buddhists, nor do we refer to Indians as Hindus. Europe is not founded on religious particularity. Why then, this anomaly and this exception for a highly diversified group of people like Muslims? Why not recognize this diversity and consider them as citizens equal to all other citizens, no more, no less? And if we want to indicate their origin, we may refer to them as Algerians, Moroccans, Pakistani, and Egyptians and so on.
2. *Islamism*, on the contrary, is a concrete and well-defined concept. Islamism even and perhaps because of its various manifestations, is not able to conquer the world. But, it is a danger to the peace and stability of a great part of the world. Let me again say that terrorism is the only visible layer of Islamism. In Europe, Islamism is manifesting itself through challenging the democratic values and norms, trying to gradually replace them by its own standards.
3. On *Islamophobia*: So far, no scientific evidence has been found on the existence or the absence of Islamophobia in Europe. This means that we need to proceed to empirical researches on this issue.

This is the task that our Centre (The Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation/CIR) at Aarhus University will assume by launching a research project in some European countries.

This will hopefully contribute to a clarification of the situation of Muslims in Europe.