

# *Interreligious Insight*

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### *Review Article*

*Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam,*

Gilles Kepel, Trans. Anthony E. Robert.  
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Reviewer:

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This is an impressive, lucid, and well-researched book by a Professor at the Institute of Political Studies in Paris. The author attempts to trace the recent history of militant 'Islamist' movements across the world and to explain the rise of Islamic militancy as a modern political and sociological phenomenon. The first part of the book, entitled 'Expansion,' covers the period from 1966, when the radical Egyptian religious scholar Sayyid Qutb was hanged, to 1989, when Soviet troops retreated from Afghanistan and the Berlin wall collapsed. The second part, optimistically entitled 'Decline,' begins with the Gulf War in 1990 and ends with the cataclysm of September 11, 2001, which can only be described as the ultimate perversion of jihad.

My chief criticism is that this book may only confirm the widespread misguided impression that fanaticism is a peculiarly Islamic phenomenon. The author ought to have defined the concept of jihad in his introductory chapter, especially in view of the fact that he has chosen to use this provocative and much misunderstood word in the book's title. The striving denoted by the verb jahada is primarily spiritual or moral as in the admonition: "Strive hard against the deniers of the truth and the hypocrites" (9: 73). Other passages indicate that the Qur'ân itself is the instrument with which believers must strive against those who disbelieve (25: 52; 66: 9). All external forms of struggle are incomplete without the inner struggle or greater jihad against evil and the whims of the ego, and only self-defence, in the widest sense, including the defence of religious freedom, makes force permissible for Muslims (22: 39-40).

Kepel does not betray much sympathy for the right to resist oppression in countries such as Chechnya, Kashmir, and Palestine, nor does he fully explore the roots of terrorism – the anger and despair of people who are harassed and tortured and denied their political rights; he does not consider the arguments of religious scholars about the theory of a just war, nor does he discuss which tactics and targets are deemed legitimate within the context of the Qur'ân and the example of the Prophet Muhammad. Why does he say, for example, that the independence struggle in Chechnya was only 'something very like a

‘jihad’ (p. 233)? The political theories of Muslim extremists could have been more fully explained. Do they really use medieval terms, such as dar al-harb (the domain of war) and dar al-islâm (the domain of Islam)? The concept of the khilafa, much discussed by those calling for a revival of the Caliphate, is nowhere mentioned.

I am not qualified to judge the accuracy or otherwise of the facts and figures. But I feel that his opinions are rather too politically correct. For example, he is ready to believe that the Algerian government may have used agents provocateurs to create terrorist incidents in France in 1995 (p. 308), but he does not even allude to the atrocities committed by the Algerian military, documented in *An Inquiry into the Algerian Massacres*, by Youcef Bedjaoui and others (Geneva: Hoggar Books, 1999).

He is particularly good at seeing the patterns and parallels behind the emergence of radical Islamist movements in different parts of the world. His tone is dispassionate, his approach sociological. He points out that, as a result of rapid population growth between 1955 and 1970, by 1975 60 percent of the population in most Muslim countries was under the age of 24 (p. 66). Those who espoused Islam as a political ideology belonged to this post-independence generation of literate young city dwellers, who had little in common with their illiterate and predominantly rural parents. In Egypt the Muslim Brothers did not have a wide appeal until twenty years after President Nasser seized power in 1952. The Palestinian intifada, or uprising, in 1987 occurred twenty years after the occupation of Palestinian territory in 1967. Half the Palestinian population at that time was under fifteen years of age and only 20 percent of those with higher education could find employment (p. 152). A year later discontent expressed itself in the form of religious extremism in Algeria where social conditions were similar: —There was a mass of young urban educated poor who had known no other regime and who had low employment prospects (p. 159). The dispersion of veterans of the Afghan jihad after 1992 was another key event in the globalisation of Islamic extremism (p. 299). But the social origins of these mujahideen are not investigated. Perhaps the majority of them were young middle class Saudis or Yemenis who had received a higher education in engineering or Islamic studies, but could not easily find employment to match their expectations.

Kepel argues convincingly that the two social classes that are most susceptible to what he calls Islamism are the urban poor and the devout bourgeoisie. The Iranian revolution would not have occurred in 1979 had it not been for the reconciliation of these two groups in pursuit of power (p. 67). In Egypt, Algeria, and elsewhere, where the undermining of traditional Sufi Islam and the authority of the religious scholars, or ‘ulamâ, had contributed to the rise of militant Islam, the ruling elites succeeded in taking advantage of the fears of the middle class and dividing the two groups.

A useful distinction is made between Islamism and Wahhabism: the former ‘tolerates revolutionary social groups’ (p. 51), whereas the latter is exclusively conservative. The two movements merged when the Muslim Brothers were driven out of Egypt by President Nasser and took refuge in Saudi Arabia in the mid-1950s. Kepel makes some very perceptive remarks about the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the USA. Saudi

Arabia, he says, was able to use its petrol wealth to propagate Wahhabi Islam while still remaining a staunch ally of the USA and the West against the Soviet bloc. 'By making the Afghan jihad the central militant cause of the 1980s, the Saudi government shielded their American ally – which supported the holy war – against the wrath of Sunni activists, making sure that the Soviet Union would replace America as the principal scapegoat' (p. 137). He rightly says that when King Fahd appealed for US military assistance in Operation Desert Shield in 1990 he 'ruined the entire edifice the Al-Saud family had so patiently erected to dominate the Islamic world' (p. 205). Whether there was a genuine Iraqi threat is of course another matter.

But he fails to mention that it was in the interests of the Saudi rulers to keep the 'jihadist-salafists' in Afghanistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union not merely for fear of the trouble that these extremists would cause on their return home but also to prevent the building of an oil pipeline from Central Asia. His account of the recent bombing of Afghanistan is also one-sided because he does not explain how, as a result of UN sanctions, drought, and international isolation, the Taliban were forced to rely increasingly on financial help from 'Arab jihadist networks.' He does not mention the Russian and Indian role in equipping and training the Northern Alliance, and he has little or nothing to say about the brutal suppression of Islamic freedom fighters in China, Kashmir, and the Central Asian states. It may be some time before it will become possible to sift the facts and obtain a clearer picture.

Although this book provides a useful background to the modern history of militant Islam, it will not shed much new light on the events of the last year. The reader in search of answers will have to await Kepel's forthcoming book: *Bad Moon Rising: A Chronicle of the Middle East Today* (London: Saqi Books, 2003). The book *Jihad* has been beautifully translated, but unfortunately Arabic words are transcribed in the French manner and there is no bibliography.