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A literature review on Islamic fundamentalism

The article investigates the existing knowledge of Islamic fundamentalism. A literature review on the phenomena of Islamic fundamentalism includes the debate over the term and three main theoretical frameworks (Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, conflict analysis and resolution, social movement theory) and problem areas within these concepts.

Key words: Islamic fundamentalism, a literature review, politicization of Islam, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, globalization, conflict analysis and resolution, discourse ethics, Islamic activism, social movement theory, salafism, Wiktorowicz).

Introduction

Islamic fundamentalism is a growing threat across the world. The spread of globalization and open borders have made countries vulnerable to religious radicals who are trying to get revenge for their failures in dealing with modernity. Started as a resistance against colonialism and Western cultural domination in the Middle East, nowadays Islamic fundamentalism is gradually taking an offensive form being able to destabilize any state and trying to establish an alternative global order. In this regard Islamic fundamentalism is perceived as an absolutist universalism. The politicization of Islam as a new global phenomenon had been recognized by scholars long before the end of the Cold War [1]. However, it has been put into the core of scholarly debate after the breakdown of Soviet Union because the West needed a new enemy to replace communism, and Islamic fundamentalism seemed to have all qualifications [2]. Barber's [3] "Jihad vs. McWorld", widely shared by journalists and commentators, is one of many other works proposed to view Islamic fundamentalism as the next major threat to Western civilization. Despite the fact that a lot of works have been published about Islamic fundamentalism over the last three decades, there exists no systematic overview of research on Islamic fundamentalism. The goals of this paper are to present a systematic review of Islamic fundamentalism research and provide suggestions for future research efforts. The investigation of the existing knowledge of Islamic fundamentalism includes the debate over the term and three main theoretical frameworks (Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, conflict analysis and resolution, social movement theory) and problem areas within these concepts.

The debate over the definition

Initially, the term fundamentalism coined in the USA in 1920s and was used in the Christian context to refer to certain Protestant churches and organizations opposed to "modernism" [4]. Only fifty years later, after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Islamic fundamentalism came into widespread usage by American mass media. The term spread rapidly, and by 1990s *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* defined it not

only as “the strict maintenance of traditional Protestant beliefs,” but also as “the strict maintenance of ancient or fundamental doctrines of any religion, especially Islam” [5]. However, there is considerable disagreement among scholars with regard to the use of the term Islamic fundamentalism. While some scholars oppose that the term is less explanatory, others argue that every Muslim believes in the fundamentals of Islam, so it has positive implication in the Islamic context [6, 7].

The difference between Islamic fundamentalism and Islamism is another problem area disputed by scholars. According to Martin Kramer “to all intents and purposes, Islamic fundamentalism and Islamism have become synonyms in contemporary American usage” [4]. Graham Fuller [8] and Olivier Roy [9] distinguish between Islamic fundamentalism and Islamism in describing fundamentalism as a strict return to early Islamic state while implications of Islamism ideology are thoroughly modern. John Esposito prefers to use Islamic revivalism and Islamic activism instead of Islamic fundamentalism for its association with “political activism, extremism, fanaticism, terrorism, and anti-Americanism” [7; 8]. Whereas a few scholars defended the term fundamentalism, “the use of this term is established and must be accepted” [6; 117]. As we see, different authors have different points of view regarding the usage of the term Islamic fundamentalism. However, what they do agree about is that Islamic fundamentalism or Islamism as a political phenomenon is an aggressive politicization of Islam for political ends.

Middle Eastern and Islamic studies on Islamic fundamentalism

The debate about Islamic fundamentalism has developed generally within Middle Eastern studies and Islamic studies in the U.S., and most scholarly work have coincided with current U.S. policy and its strategic interests in the Middle East. In the early years, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism was associated with such names as Khomeini, Quaddafi, Hizballah, and Muslim Brotherhood. The emergence of Islamic fundamentalism was explained as the crisis of Islam [10], and scholars like Ernest Gellner [11] did not make distinction between Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. Along similar lines, Barber calls all Islam as Jihad when it is Islam that “nurtures conditions favorable to parochialism, anti-modernism, exclusiveness and hostility to “others” — the characteristics that constitute what I have called Jihad” [3; 205].

Said argues that some scholars tend to explain the violent actions of Islamists by a long and abstract account of Islamic history until the Middle Ages rather than analyzing current debate between nationalists and followers of Islamic tendencies, or between different groups within Islamic tendency itself [12]. In his opinion, government’s incapability to provide basic human needs is the main cause of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in most Middle Eastern states. Said suggests that “Islamic fundamentalism begins as a protest and then takes on a life of its own” [12; 275].

Barber’s view on Islam and Islamic fundamentalism is fundamentally mistaken although it is widely shared by journalists and commentators. Many scholars [9, 13], [2] argue that equating Islam with Islamic fundamentalism is intellectually imprudent and historically misguided. Olivier Roy purpose that Islamic fundamentalism (as he calls “Islamism”) is the contemporary movement that perceives Islam as a political ideology [9; IX]. Moreover, Tibi and Roy agree that Islamic fundamentalism is a new global phenomenon in world politics [2, 9]. It is widely considered that the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is closely linked to the spread of globalization. Islamic fundamentalism is seen as a consequence of globalization rather than the cause of current crisis of our world [2, 13]. Tibi points out that “we are witnessing simultaneity of structural globalization and national and international cultural fragmentation,” and “the net effects of these simultaneous processes underlie the rise of religious fundamentalisms worldwide” [2; 3].

Globalization has accelerated processes already at work at the economic, social, political, cultural, and therefore also religious, levels [14]. Traditional dominant structures were not prepared to meet rapid changes brought by modernization and then by globalization. Fear and defensiveness needed fixed reference points to be overcome, and only a religious sphere has met all expectations of disoriented people. In such conditions, despotic regimes use Islam to legitimize their rule, just as opposition movements solicit it to justify their struggle against so-called “un-Islamic” order. People see changes that modernity and globalization have presented as having been imposed by the West. As a result, “Islam plays the role of bulwark against western hegemony in general and American hegemony in particular” [14; 298]. This notion is sensibly used and accelerated by Islamic radicals to achieve their particular political goals.

The literature on Islamic fundamentalism suggest that the revolt against West begins as a revolt against the domestic nation-state [2, 15]. In the Middle East the nation-state was not a consequence of the internal processes, but was externally established. The revolt of Islamic fundamentalists against the nation-state results in a process of de-legitimization of domestic regimes. However, as scholars point out, the crisis of legit-

imacy in the Islamic World has not been caused by religious fundamentalism. There is another reason: the legitimacy crisis derives from the failure of the nation-state to discover origins in an alien civilization, and Islamic fundamentalism is simply seen as the political expression of this crisis. It should be stressed out that these developments are not restricted to Muslim countries; scholars have described nation-states in the Third World as “quasi states” [16]. However, Charfi argues that Islamic movements do not take into account that the modern nation-state is an organization which has imposed itself everywhere in the world [14; 306]. He does not acknowledge the fact that a majority of Third World countries, including Muslim countries, are collapsed nation-states which can no longer deliver political goods to their people.

Scholars emphasize the fact that The Middle East is the most unstable and as well as the geopolitically most important region in the Islamic World, and intensifying the instability of the region is considered to be the prevailing source for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. The despotic character of regimes which fundamentalists are beginning to replace is the powerful instrument by itself. Nonetheless, in de-legitimizing regimes fundamentalists are creating chaos and causing a further intensification of the ongoing global fragmentation [2]). As Horsman and Marshal suggest, “this fragmentation makes the task of making political systems work harder, not easier” [17]. Some scholars argue that Islamist movements are weak, but their ability to create disorder within their own countries sufficient in the long run to lead to a combined regional and global disorder makes them one of the most dangerous actors in contemporary world politics.

Conflict analysis and resolution

Another theoretical framework which can be applied to comprehend and analyse Islamic fundamentalism is conflict analysis and resolution. The field of conflict analysis and resolution brings a deeper understanding of the nature of religious fundamentalism by seeing it as a religious conflict. On the other hand, religious conflicts are a particular case of conflicts of identity [18]. The role of identity in conflict is vital, and it is crucial how individuals and groups see and understand themselves in conflict. Defining of who is “us” and who is “them” through identities mobilize individuals and groups and bring legitimacy for individual and collective aspirations. On the other hand, identities are formed and changed in processes of conflict. It is essential to understand how identities impact conflict and the ways they are created within struggles for the reason that it tells us about the emergence, escalation, and possible transformation of identity-based conflicts.

There is a large number of work in search of understanding human behavior in groups, both its positive potential for social change and its capacity for destruction. Ethnocentrism, attribution error, selective perception, the use of collective identities to justify discrimination, polarization, enemy imaging, and genocide are at the core of this analysis. Conflict theorists want to improve our understanding of intergroup conflicts by understanding group efforts to create, define, foster, and defend basic social identities and fulfil identity needs [19, 20]. However, it should be stressed that many conflicts are mixture of the sources rather than pure types. Although scholars argue identity-based conflict is not based on competition around economic and political power, they agree that interrelations between social identities and interests are complex. The development and mobilization of collective identity as well as the formation of political goals of autonomy, secession, and access to power and resources affect the dynamics of identity-based conflicts. As Rothman points out, “all identity conflicts contain interest conflicts; not all interest conflicts contain identity conflicts” [21]. Moreover, many unresolved or ignored interest conflicts can develop into identity-based conflicts, and comprise the various issues of identity, pride, group loyalty, and dignity. Identity-based conflict theories offer insights into the roots of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, but their importance cannot be overstated.

Some scholars try to understand Islamic fundamentalism by offering sustainable models for conflict resolution in the contemporary world. One of the models is Habermas’s discourse ethics. This model for conflict resolution resolves conflict through discursive processes of deliberation, where all groups involved will have opportunities to be heard and social norms that coordinate actions would form a consensus [22]. In Habermas’s view the cause of Islamic fundamentalism is economic misery brought by modernizing processes, so Islamic fundamentalism must be seen as a problem of distorted communication. As he points out, conflicts “arise from distortion in communication, from misunderstanding and incomprehension, from insincerity and deception” [23; 35]. All parties involved in the conflict (in this case Islamic fundamentalists and Bush administration) are only interested in the strategic success of their actions. It results in a complete collapse of communication, and this is a starting point of all violence. To bring clarity to communication Habermas offers the strengthening of communicative and legal relations on an international level, and the reinforcing of the UN is the key option. Despite the fact he understands the underlying cause and the nature of conflict, his suggestions are abstract. As Boon argues Habermas’s recommendations “neither discuss the complexities of

UN institutions nor provide details about how to achieve such reforms” [24; 160]. However, Islamic fundamentalists’ rejection of Western modernity, deliberation, human sovereignty and rationalist epistemology is the main challenge to Habermas’s discourse ethics to accommodate.

Social movement theory

9/11 attacks and the following effects of terrorist acts have inspired the surge of interest in Islamic activism within social activism studies. Although the scholarly discussion about Islamic activism has advanced more or less in isolation from social movement theory, the number of students of Islamic activism engaging with this body of theory is growing [25, 26]. As Olesen suggests, “a central concern in social movement research over the last 40 years has been to explain why some people choose to participate in activism while others — the majority — do not” [26; 7]. In terms of social movement theory Islamic fundamentalism can be defined as activism where violent interpretation of Islam and Islamic texts forms the ideological basis of an organization. In such organizations, Islam is instrumentalized for diagnosis and critique of society and to legitimize violence against “infidels”.

Wiktorowicz has offered a systematic framework of Islamic activism within social movement theory. As he points out, the definition of Islamic activism is purposefully broad, and “it accommodates the variety of contention that frequently emerges under the banner of “Islam”, including propagation movements, terrorist groups, collective action rooted in Islamic symbols and identities, explicitly political movements that seek to establish Islamic state, and inward-looking groups that promote Islamic spirituality through collective efforts” [25; 2]. Wiktorowicz criticizes Islamic activism research for its descriptive analysis of ideology, structure, and goals of various Islamic actors or histories of specific movements, and he also points out that disciplinary fragmentation has not developed models and frameworks which give a systematic understanding of Islamic activism. To move forward he proposes social movement theory “as a unifying framework and agenda that can provide effective modes of enquiry to further the boundaries of research on Islamic activism” [25; 4]. In his view while the majority of studies on Islamic activism consider that mobilization is provoked by a particular set of grievances, social movement theory suggests other factors such as resource availability, framing resonance, and shifts in opportunity structures being linked to mobilization processes. However, these considerations does not make social movement theory more important in comparison to other studies, so this body of theory on Islamic activism has to be accepted as one of many other theoretical frameworks.

Wiktorowicz also offers insights into the nature of radical Islam. He argues that “Al Qaeda and the radical Islamists that constitute the new “global jihadi movement” are not theological outliers”, and “they are part of broader community of Islamists known as Salafis” (commonly called “Wahhabis”) [27]. The term “salaf” is used to identify those who follow the example of the companions (salaf) of the Prophet Mohammed. Salafis call strictly follow the Qur’an, Sunna (path of the Prophet Mohammed), and the consensus of the companions. While there is a general agreement among Salafi factions on this understanding of Islam, the debate arises over the use of violence. Wiktorowicz argues that “the development of jihadi thought is characterized by erosion of critical constraints used to limit warfare and violence in classical Islam” [27; 75]. He points out that this erosion can be shown through the development of jihadi arguments linked to the issues such as apostasy, conducting jihad at home, global jihad, killing civilians, and suicide bombings.

Olesen [26] also considers that social movement theory can contribute to the analysis of radical Islamic activism. His main focus is on radicalization processes which are typically referred to as homegrown, and individuals born and raised in the West are involved by “homegrown radicalization”. He proposes four types of explanations of recruitment and radicalization: 1) individual and socio-psychological explanations (identity pressure and transformation at the individual and group level); 2) organization and network explanations (the importance of personal networks in recruitment and the role played by existing institutions and organizations (e.g. mosques and prisons) in recruitment processes); 3) structural and political environment explanation (how radical activism is shaped through its interaction with authorities and by the public debate climate); and 4) media and communication explanations (the use of symbols in radical activist communication and importance of communication technologies (the Internet) and a new and more complex global media infrastructure) [26; 29]. His four types of explanations for recruitment and radicalization in Islamic activism provide a coherent theoretical toolbox for future studies, and implications of social movement research for the study of recruitment and radicalization in Islamic activism are strong.

The contemporary scholarly debate on Islamic fundamentalism has shifted from its political dimension to cultural one, and it is due to changes that has developed within Islamic radical movements. It is associated with the spread of salafism which is not a translation of original Muslim cultures and traditions but a recon-

structuring of new identities by violent interpretation of Islam [28–31]. Roy suggests that “the neo-fundamentalist view reduces Islam to a literalist and normative reading of the Koran,” and “it rejects cultural dimensions of religion and replaces them with a code of Islamic conduct to suit any situation, from Afghan deserts to US school campuses” [29]. For example, in the case of the Taliban, their first target was not the West, but traditional Afghan culture. Consequently, scholars consider salafism as a tool for displacing traditional cultures, and the spread of salafism is perceived as a “Saudi-ization” [32]. There is an ongoing conflict between Radical Islamic movements seeking to create “authentic” Islamic way of life and local Muslims who try to keep their “traditional” Islamic way of life.

Conclusion

The aim of this literature review was to explore the existing knowledge of Islamic fundamentalism. The phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism has generated a big debate within scholars from various fields of study over the last three decades. Different types of theoretical frameworks have been applied to comprehend and analyze the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism across the world. The Iranian Revolution of 1979, the breakdown of Soviet Union, and 9/11 attacks were major events which have raised a big interest in radical Islamic movements within Islamic scholarship, public officials, commentators, and journalists. As an overview of existing literature on Islamic fundamentalism has illustrated, the nature of radical Islamism is multifaceted, and there exists no consensus even over the term of Islamic fundamentalism, although the use of this term has been established.

The motivation for this literature review has been to offer a general analysis of research on Islamic fundamentalism, and major works and conceptual frameworks were examined as well as problem areas were illustrated. As this paper suggested, Middle Eastern (or area studies) and Islamic studies, conflict analysis and resolution, and social movement theory are models that have been applied by the majority of researchers to understand the nature of Islamic fundamentalism and conflicts linked to radical Islamic movements. Whereas each theory pretends to offer unifying explanation for understanding Islamic fundamentalism, the combined use of these frameworks should form the base of future studies.

The literature review also proposed that the initial source for the rise of Islamic radical movements was the struggle against colonialism and Western cultural supremacy, and the despotic character of regimes (or collapsed states) and the spread of globalization have accelerated radicalization processes. Moreover, most publications are focused on Middle East, and it gives a false image of unified Islamic fundamentalism. However, Islamic fundamentalism is very different in different places. Finally, the new forms of Islamic fundamentalism or salafism are challenging traditional cultures, and there is a need for the conceptual research on these new forms of radical Islamic movements.

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С.Ахметқұл

Исламдық фундаментализм туралы әдебиетті шолу

Мақалада исламдық фундаментализмге қатысты бар білім қарастырылды. Исламдық фундаментализм феномені туралы әдебиетке шолу термин төңірегіндегі пікірталасты, басты үш теориялық тұжырымдамаларды (Таяу Шығыс және исламды зерттеу, шиеленістерді сараптау мен шешу, әлеуметтік қозғалыс теориясы), сондай-ақ олардың проблемалық салаларын қамтиды.

С.Ахметқұл

Обзор литературы об исламском фундаментализме

В статье исследуется существующее знание об исламском фундаментализме. Обзор литературы о феномене исламского фундаментализма включает дискуссию о термине, о трех основных теоретических подходах (изучение Ближнего Востока и ислама, анализ и разрешение конфликтов, теория социального движения) и их проблемных сферах.