History of Islamist Movements

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety. Islamism is an approach to politics based on an interpretation of Islamic teachings. It’s a broad term that refers to political parties, social movements, and armed groups with differing views on democracy, women, and the use of violence.

Noah Feldman is a professor at Harvard Law School and author of The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State. He places the rise of Islamism at the early 20th century, when the Ottoman Empire surrendered to European powers at the end of World War I.

"The defeat of the Ottoman Empire was a kind of epochal moment for Muslim history. For the first time, the caliphate, which had previously been able to claim a continuous history going back more than a millennium, was no longer in existence. This caused many people in different parts of the Muslim world to ask themselves what went wrong. One of the answers that some people sought was to say that the true values and beliefs of Islam had been abandoned."

In 1928, a schoolteacher in Egypt named Hasan al-Banna founded a movement called the Muslim Brotherhood. He told his followers that the Koran promises victory to those who embrace it and that Muslim societies had failed because they had been corrupted by Western culture. Banna called for a return to the pristine values of the Koran and traditions of the prophet Muhammad.

As secular Arab nationalism emerged as the ruling ideology in Egypt and Syria, Brotherhood activists declared that it was godless and therefore illegitimate. Only the teachings of Islam would enable Muslims to succeed as a civilization. Feldman says that making their case was not so easy at first.

"The Brotherhood had always been there. For a century they had been making their arguments but they didn’t gain deep popular support in the Arabic speaking countries until the failures of the Arab nationalist governments began to become evident. Governments were unjust to their citizens and were perceived increasingly as domestically illegitimate. Also, dictatorial governments didn’t deliver on their promise of defeating Israel."

The Arab armies of Egypt and Syria that fought Israel in 1967 had been backed by the Soviet Union. In this Cold War chess game, Arab leaders who opposed the Soviets turned to Islamist parties for support.

Afshin Molavi, a Middle East specialist at the New America Foundation, says many Arab world leaders leaned on the Islamists to counter communism.

"King Hussein of Jordan, for example, promoted Islamist groups as a counterweight to communist groups. Egyptian president Anwar Sadat did the same in his support of the Muslim Brotherhood to counter the power of leftist and Marxist groups in Egypt. Even the government of Israel tolerated and offered some tacit support for Islamist groups in their battle against the more leftist radical Palestinian secular groups. Beginning in the early 1960s, the government of Saudi Arabia, awash in petro-dollars, began funding Islamist groups all around the world."

Stephen Schwartz, director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism and author of The Two Faces of Islam, explains that the Saudi form of Islamism was a devastating turning point.

"Saudi Arabia has a state form of Islam which they call Salafism but which other Muslims call Wahhabism. It aims to purify Islam of any ideas or practices, foreign or otherwise, that the Saudi Wahhabs claim do not conform to Islam as it was practiced in seventh-century Arabia at the time of the prophet Muhammad. Saudi-backed Wahhabism is profoundly chauvinist and violent. While it may have been useful to the Saudi royal family in keeping control of their people – in keeping Soviet and other foreign influences out, and in keeping stability for the oil income – its effect on the Muslim community has been devastating."

Both Wahhabis and the Muslim Brotherhood received Saudi funds to build mosques, schools, clinics, social services, and a publishing and media apparatus. Some Islamists also wished to train for violent conflict and in the 1980s, a special opportunity arose for them to do so – the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Under the Reagan Administration, American weapons met Saudi funds and Pakistani training in Afghanistan as part of an effort to drive back the Soviets. Once the Soviets withdrew, the Arab fighters found enormous meaning in their defeat.
Over the same period of time in nearby Iran, an altogether different Islamist movement managed to take power through homegrown revolution – the Iranian revolution of 1979. According to Molavi, “The Ayatollah Khomeini had great designs for the entire Muslim world. They wanted to export their revolution. They wanted to see Islamist revolutions all across the region.”

Now two oil-rich countries, representing the two great sects of Islam, offered money and weapons to Islamist groups that shared their worldview: the Sunni kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Shi’ite Republic of Iran. Their support enabled the rise of armed Shi’ite movements like the Lebanese Hizbullah, and armed Sunni movements like the Palestinian Hamas – not to mention al-Qaeda.

But while some Islamists have used violent tactics and called for a religious dictatorship, others have spread their ideas nonviolently. Some have formed the view that Islamism is compatible with democracy, like Kamal Helbawi, a senior Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood cleric.

“Our aim should not be just controlling power. Our aim is reform. Our aim is bringing good to people. Our aim, to show a model to the people, you need clean politics and good politics, and this is the way. Islam cannot be imposed on people, and Islamic state cannot start with imposition, or with dictatorship. It cannot. It would not be an Islamic state. And you cannot implement Shari’ah unless people are convinced and happy that Shari’ah should be applied on them.”

When regimes collapsed last year in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, some Western observers hoped that a wave of liberalism would transform the Arab world. Instead, Islamists swept elections in Tunisia and Egypt and appear poised to dominate the future of Libya, Yemen, and perhaps Syria. Molavi knows that Islamists will have to deliver on their promises.

"In those post-Arab spring countries where Islamists have won the majority seats in parliament, they are now responsible. They no longer have the luxury of sniping from the outside. They now have to deliver the goods. They now have to deliver economic growth. They have to deliver jobs. They have to deliver on the economic dignity aspirations of their people.”

If these new Islamist governments don't deliver, Feldman says that their lifespan may be short.

"Whether they can do that in a creative and effective way will set the future for whether Islamism has a future as a political movement in the Arabic-speaking world or whether it doesn't. If they do well, they can expect that other countries will follow in their footsteps. If they falter, one can expect that eventually the bloom will be off the rose, and as a political movement, Islamism will gradually begin to fade.”