

Political Islam: global and local manifestations and challenges

Anabel Inge reports on SOAS's five-day intensive course on Islamist movements worldwide

TRUE or false? 'Islamist worldviews are intent on radicalising Muslims'; political Islam in Britain is 'extremist and anti-Western in orientation'.

These are the kind of sweeping statements that regularly emanate from think-tank researchers with questionable academic credentials. And it is their ill-informed views that all too often contribute to 'shaping policy and public agenda on Muslims in Britain', according to Dr Sophie Gilliat-Ray, of Cardiff University, one of the speakers at the course 'Political Islam: global and local manifestations and challenges' (SOAS, March 23-27).

There should have been 17 speakers – but one was missing. Hezbollah affiliate Dr Ibrahim Mousawi, a political scientist who obtained his PhD from Birmingham University, was denied entry to Britain following persistent lobbying by the right-wing Centre for Social Cohesion.

The message that political Islam must not be oversimplified was a recurring theme. Dr Khaled Hroub, a leading expert on Hamas and Islamic movements, pointed out that Islamist groups cannot even be distinguished by a shared antagonism towards the West; after all, some Shia and Sunni groups opted to integrate themselves within the American-made system in Iraq after the 2003 invasion. In reality, he said, political Islam incorporates a wide array of movements – some violent, others non-violent; some revolutionary, others reformist; some non-secular, others secular – many of which are fractured by internal rivalries and divisions. According to another speaker, former CIA expert on political Islam Dr Emile Nakhleh, 95 to 98 per cent of Islamic activists do not believe that violence is the only solution – and it is this majority with which the US must engage, he said.

Dr Kamal Helbawy, a former spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood in the West, challenged participants to recognise the reformist and modernist elements within the Brotherhood, which is sometimes vilified as a dangerous ancestor of Al-Qaeda. He quoted the second *murshid* (general guide) Hassan al-Hudaybi's 15-point programme for election, published in the 1950s, which included policies such as 'free parliamentary elections', 'freedom of belief and worship' and 'freedom of peaceful demonstrations'. This prompted one participant to comment that the points looked as if they had been 'ripped straight from the US constitution' – to which Helbawy replied: 'They borrowed it from us!'

Professor Tariq Ramadan pointed out that Islamism is not static; it is evolving, and shaped by its context. 'I don't have a problem with reminding people that I'm the grandson of Hassan al-Banna (founder of the Muslim Brotherhood),'

he said. 'The problem is that people haven't read any of al-Banna and haven't understood the main ideas of the movement' – which, he added, had evolved over time in response to colonialism.

The importance of context was also emphasised by Dr Jeroen Gunning of Aberystwyth University, who said that Hamas – seen by the West as a terrorist organisation – cannot necessarily be dismissed as inherently violent and opposed to the peace process. According to Gunning, a more comprehensive picture would recognise that suicide bombings in Israel are often triggered by Israeli action, and follow a grim tit-for-tat logic. Moreover, Hamas is far from a homogeneous and harmonious unity – and by boycotting the group, he added, one simply undermines the pragmatic elements and strengthens the hardliners.

Participants who wished to gain an insight into the roots of Muslim radicalisation were not disappointed. Among the line-up of 'insiders' was Sheikh Abdullah Anas, who was in the inner circle of Abdullah Azzam, a central figure in the *mujahideen* who fought to liberate Afghanistan from the Soviets in the 1970s and 80s. Anas described how, as a young man in Algeria, he resolved to go to Afghanistan after coming across a *fatwa* in a Muslim Brotherhood magazine signed by a list of respected Islamic scholars that said it was the duty of every Muslim to liberate the country.

The course's broad aim was to promote the proper understanding of Islamism now that it is an increasingly important global political force. Crucially, it sought an answer to the question: what is the oxygen that enables Islamism to grow and spread?

Hroub offered an insight into the rallying potential of Islamic ideals. Unlike Marxism, for instance, which would require a certain level of literacy in order to gain wide support, Islam is already deeply rooted in the psyche of millions, he said. In the Gulf, said Dr Abdullah Baabood of Cambridge University, the battle for public opinion has resulted in both Islamists and rulers appropriating Islamic concepts to describe everything from haircuts to dress styles. 'For example,' he said, 'I was buying an aubergine (in Oman) the other day that was described as a *halal*, a Muslim, aubergine.'

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Dr Emile Nakhleh, a former CIA expert on political Islam
(above) Photo courtesy of Elisa Moscolin