# Max Weber Lecture Series

**MWP- LS 2007/08**

The Spectre of Islamism: A Historian's Reading

Lucette Valensi

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE

MAX WEBER PROGRAMME

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Lecture Delivered May 9th 2007

MAX WEBER LECTURE  No. 2007/08

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LUCETTE VALENSI


École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris


**The spectre of Islamism**

I came upon an interesting distinction between puzzles and enigmas in a recent article in *the New Yorker*[1]. The article dealt with the scandal of the Enron Company, but the distinction the author made was relevant for our purpose: Puzzles, he wrote, refer to situations where you have to collect all the pieces in order to get a meaningful picture. Enigmas, however, correspond to a situation where you already have all the pieces, but still have to make sense out of them. In this case, everyone interested in Enron could have gathered all the necessary information in the media and on the web, and concluded easily that something was wrong with the company. Indeed, some students in a business school had done so several months before the scandal exploded, and they had reached the conclusion that it was wise to sell your shares if you had any. I think Islamism belongs to the enigma category. Islamist movements publish books and pamphlets. A rich literature is available on the internet. A wealth of information is being collected by

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[1] Malcolm Gladwell, "Open Secrets. Enron, Intelligence, and the Perils of too much Information", *The New Yorker*, Jan. 8th, 2007, pp. 44-53.

journalists. Scores of books are being published in Western languages. Therefore, information is not lacking, but Islamism remains an enigma.

Then who is to make it intelligible? Quite frankly, I would admit that the bird of history comes late in the day, or as Hegel wrote, "The owl of Minerva takes its flight when the shades of the night are gathering". This could mean two things: One, that historians intervene after journalists, political scientists, people in the intelligence services, and other individuals involved in scrutinizing Islamism for practical reasons. Historians not only come after others, they rely on them, and take the risk of providing a second-hand analysis that borders on plagiarism. This might be the case with this lecture, and so I want to underline my liberal use of material I did not gather myself and interpretations that were proposed by other specialists.[2] Second, Hegel's statement means that understanding Islamism rationally will happen after its collapse. This suggests then that it is too early to try. Indeed my conviction at the moment is that Islamism is not receding. Islamism is a modern utopia, not unlike communism in the middle of the 20th century when it was obvious that it had not and would not succeed in enforcing its program on our world, yet communist parties were able to attract large crowds and weigh heavily on the political game in many countries. In my view, Islamism will not succeed in the Islamic world as a whole, nor in the non-Muslim one, but it will continue to attract and mobilize enough people to cause a lot of disturbance in our lives. I would, therefore, encourage you to consider this lecture as a kind of review article, or a tentative statement of the field analysis rather than a definitive reflection on an ever-evolving issue; even less as a program that could help solve it.

Islamism is not a monolithic phenomenon. It presents many shades and turns that depend on local circumstances, the history of individual regions, generational differences, and the specific qualities of different leaders. *Salafiya*, fundamentalism, radical Islam, political Islam, militant Islam, Islamic extremism, Islamic revivalism - all these labels and notions come under the umbrella of "Islamism".[3] I do not intend to define and discuss them in this lecture. Not only because these words "have stuck" and are now familiar to a large public; not only because they were coined in Western languages and have been adopted and translated into Persian and Arabic; but more profoundly because I am convinced, like the Syrian philosopher Sadik al-Azm, of "the epistemological legitimacy, scientific integrity and critical applicability of such

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[2] For bibliographical references prior to 2004, see Gabriel Martinez-Gros and Lucette Valensi, *L'Islam en dissidence. Genèse d'un affrontement,* Paris, Seuil, 2004.

[3] For a discussion on the appropriateness of words such as fundamentalism, integrism, and other words transferred from the Western experience, see Sadik J. Al-Azm, "Islamic Fundamentalism Reconsidered: A Critical Outline of Problems, Ideas and Approaches", *South Asia Bulletin, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East,* part I, vol. XIII, n. 1-2, 1993, pp. 93-121; part II, vol. XIV, n.1, 1994, pp. 73-98. Dealing with "Pakistan's problems with *Islamic extremism*", former ambassador Husain Haqqani stated: "the disproportionate influence wielded by *fundamentalist groups* in Pakistan is the result of state sponsorship of such groups" and he warned that "an environment dominated by *Islamist* and militarist *ideologies* is the ideal breeding ground for radicals and *exportable radicalism*" (In Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of destiny,* New York-London, W. W. Norton and Co, 2007, p. 73.). Here you have, in a nutshell, a repertoire of overlapping notions – Islamic extremism, fundamentalist groups, Islamist ideology, and radicalism.

supposedly Western and Christian-derived concepts" (p. 3). I will therefore avoid unnecessary debates on definitions.

For the sake of clarity, and since I was trained as a historian, I will rather start with a narrative, with a few names and dates.


## I. The historian's narrative

Radical Islamism became a major force in the 1970s. Its attractiveness coincided with the erosion of previous ideologies that had been popular in Muslim societies since the middle of the 20$^{th}$ century. The most popular and most successful was nationalism during the period of struggle against colonial rule, a nationalism coloured with socialist revolutionary shades.

Nationalism was successful in attracting to its goals all components of society - men and women, the secular and the religious, rich and poor. It was successful in achieving its goal, namely, political independence from foreign powers. The last country to emerge from a long war of independence was Algeria, in 1962. In most of the new states that resulted from independence, the discourse of nationalism was imbued with socialist, revolutionary rhetoric. Beyond the official discourse – that led, among other signs, to the naming of the regime "popular and democratic", "socialist", and so on - there was also the reality of: 1. The abolition of most monarchic regimes and their replacement with so-called republican ones (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Iraq, etc). 2. The introduction of universal suffrage, with men and women enjoying the right to vote. 3. A state economy that promised economic development.

Now it is true that the new republics were more and more often the result of coups rather than the outcome of free elections. The Middle East and North Africa have had the highest number of coups in the world for the past 50 years or so. It is also true that electoral rights went together with fabricated elections, single party regimes, an absence of freedom of opinion and association, and an absence of separation of powers. But a populist pact bound authoritarian leaders to their people. By maintaining a propagandist discourse of national pride and of resistance to imperialism and neo-imperialism, autocratic regimes were able to maintain some degree of unity. By developing national systems of defense, security, education, health, and national companies, the state provided jobs and security for large segments of the population. It provided political stability. Add to that the practice of subsidizing basic products such as bread, rice and sugar to relieve the poorer segments of their societies. As a result, one could say that such leaders as Nasser in Egypt, or Boumedienne in Algeria, remained popular to the end of their lives, and colonel Kadafy probably still is in his country.

When demographic growth made the populist pact too expensive to be continued; when social mobility slowed down because no further jobs were available in the civil service and the security forces; when corruption and lack of resources turned institutions into empty shells; when so-called elective republics turned into dynasties of despots; then disaffection came, and the younger generations, who had no experience of colonial rule, withdrew their allegiance to the nationalist mystique.

Nationalism and state-socialism – other aspects of which I won't discuss here, such as the failure of broader versions, like Arab nationalism, that pretended to unify Arab countries - were secularly oriented. Their decline took place at the same time as a second major development, the military defeats of Arab armies, first in 1967, then in

1973. The defeat of 1967 in particular was a moment of devastating disillusionment, a profound humiliation. It transformed the Palestinian issue from a local wound into a generalized cancer of the Arab-Muslim world. As for the war of 1973, it brought with it the oil crisis which drastically changed the political balance of power in the region. Oil-producing countries became more relevant than countries such as Egypt which historically had been symbolically important and had enjoyed regional leadership for several decades. Among oil producing countries, Saudi Arabia became a major player. And with it came the model of Wahabi ideology. As a new player in the political-ideological game, Saudi Arabia could challenge the national-secularist discourse through use of its resources to diffuse Wahabi ideas, by publishing books, and financing schools and other philanthropic operations.

Wahabism, however, was competing with other trends that had been developing for quite some time. The most important one was the Muslim Brothers' Association which was founded in 1928 by the Egyptian Hassan al-Banna (born in 1906, he was assassinated by the Egyptian authorities in 1949). His movement radically broke with previous Muslim clerics who had engaged in a comprehensive program of reform both of Islam as a civilization and of the Muslim *umma* (the entire world community of Muslims). Theirs was a peaceful and political as well as an educational project. Their relationship to the West was one of accommodation. The Muslim Brothers, instead, had more radical views and emerged from different segments of the population. They came from people educated within the modern system; they were religious without having been trained in the traditional fields of religious studies. At the beginning, their goals were the same as those of nationalist groups; as such, they took part in the struggle against the British, or were involved in the *jihad* for the liberation of Palestine. But their main goal was to turn Egypt into an Islamic state. In 1952, they supported enthusiastically the military coup in Egypt; a year later, when Nasser prohibited all political parties, the Muslim Brothers were exempted because they were an organization, not a party. In 1954, however, one of them attempted to assassinate Nasser, which gave him a pretext to suppress them. That was the moment when their views merged with those born in a quite distant place, the doctrine elaborated by Mawlana Mawdudi in India. Mawdudi (1903-1979) was the theoretician of what he considered as modern *jahiliya,* or barbarism, a concept he formulated by 1939. Two years later, he founded the Jamaat-i Islami, an organization that spread from India to East Asia. While Mawdudi wrote in Urdu and in English, his books were translated into Arabic in the 1950s and one of his disciples travelled to Egypt where he met with Sayyid Qutb, then the major theoretician and top leader of the Muslim Brothers.

Sayyid Qutb (born in 1906, executed in 1966), was a civil servant working in the Egyptian Ministry of Education, and a well-known literary critic when he went to the US at the age of 42 to avoid being arrested by the Egyptian king's police in 1948. His two-year stay in America seems to have played a major role in the radicalization of his views and in the elaboration of his doctrine, expressed in two books: *Social Justice in Islam* and *Maalim fi-l Tariq* (Signposts on the road) (1964), in which he assumed that Western societies were back into the *jahiliya* – the period of paganism that preceded the advent of Islam. Western industrial societies were barbarian, in his view, because of their materialism, their corrupt values, and their cult of the individual which placed people before and above God. It was the duty of Muslims to engage in *jihad* against the

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West. The goal would be to establish the kingdom of God based on Islamic religious law, the *shari'a*, on moral reform, and on the rejection of the Western values of modernity. In the same vein and the same year, 1964, Muhammad Qutb, a brother of Sayyid Qutb, published *Jahiliyya in the XXth century*, again a condemnation of Western modernity and its threat to Islam. Qutb's books were widely known among Egyptian youth and, beyond Egypt, in other Arab countries such as Syria and Lebanon. They also established a strategic goal: the enemy had to be destroyed. First came the enemy from within, that is the apostate regimes; second came Western powers. In other words, the anti-imperialist discourse of Nasser and other leaders of the time was reversed; priority was given to the fight against local regimes. Islam should not be subservient to Egyptian nationalism, or to Arab unity; it was Arab unity and nationalism that were to be put to the service of God.

These texts of Mawdûdî, Muhammad and Sayyid Qutb form the doctrinal basis of political Islam. The politicization of Islam they advocated gave rise to the first organizations: underground organizations that trained their members for violent action, preparing political assassinations and coups rather than full-scale revolutions. Their confrontation with Colonel Nasser's regime was thus unavoidable. Qutb was arrested several times between 1954 and 1964, and after an attempt on Nasser's life in which his organization was involved, although not him, he was sentenced to death and hanged in 1966.

The complex developments which occurred in the following decades, from the 1970s to the 1980s, can be summarized in the following way:

1. There was a radicalization of the movement both ideologically and politically. The enemies from within were not only the political authoritarian leaders, they were also the learned elite, the *'ulama*, because of their betrayal of Islam and their docility towards the political-military establishment. Besides the Muslim Brothers, and against them, other, more extreme groups emerged, such as the *Takfir wa-Hijra*, which claimed that all the knowledge accumulated by the *'ulama* over past centuries had to be erased; it had perverted the true meaning of Islam, which had to be recovered as in the Quran and the *Sunna* (the tradition of the Prophet). Further fissions occurred, and when President Sadat was murdered in 1981, it was by militants of another group, *Jihad,* who had planned to follow Sadat's assassination with a full revolution.

2. Simultaneously, such ideas spread to other regions. New centres appeared in other parts of the Islamic world. Radical Islam became more differentiated. The centre of gravity of radical Islam moved away from Egypt and its neighbouring countries. Oil revenues allowed other places to become more decisively active. Saudi Arabia openly financed the publication and dissemination of fundamentalist ideas and missionary activity; it promoted the revival of radical thinkers from medieval times (such as Ibn Taymiyya, an author from the 14th century, who called for *jihad* and a return to the strictest enforcement of the teachings of the Quran). Saudi Arabia opened and funded religious schools in areas where the state had none. In 1978, the success of the Iranian revolution turned this country into a new centre for the diffusion of radical ideas. Although Shiite, and therefore considered as heretics by the extreme Sunnis, the Iranian revolution seemed to prove that an Islamic state could be established, and that the challenge against the West could be successful. Other countries took advantage of their economic prosperity to become the promoters of Islamic revival: such was the case with Malaysia, and with Pakistan under Zia ul-Haq.

3. A third development was the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet invasion and the communist regime. It not only attracted the support and sympathy of other Muslims everywhere, it provided a training ground both for indoctrination and military action. At this stage, the militarization of Islamism was taking place simultaneously with its internationalization.

4. Yet this new stage in the radicalization of Islam went together with a peaceful, non-violent and broader trend that affected the whole society in most Muslim countries. Fundamentalist ideas, with their call for moral reform and a return to the basic values of Islam, were widely welcome in urban settings. Socially, city-dwellers - men and women - found a new identity and dignity in adopting the so-called Islamic dress and a stricter adherence to religious practices in other domains of private and public life. Politically, people who were disappointed with the political establishment became attracted to fundamentalist groups. There is no question that, if free elections were to take place, fundamentalist parties would win (as was indeed the case in Algeria in the early 1990s, and more recently, in Turkey, then Egypt and finally Palestine). If such political opening were to take place, a more irenic view of political life, an acceptance of other parties, and a less revolutionary approach to the Islamization of the society and politics might prevail.

5. Following the collapse of the Soviet empire in the 1990s, radical Islamic ideas and groups spread into Central Asia. With the first Gulf war and the presence of American troops in the Arabian peninsula, resentment against the West gained strength in Muslim public opinion and *jihad* assumed a new form, that of the trans-national networks of al-Qa'ida. It seemed that Islamism (to use the words coined by two French scholars) had completely appropriated all forms of political and social protest in the Muslim world and beyond.

6. In spite of its apparent progress, however, some eminent political scientists had already announced, in the early years of the 1990s, the failure of political Islam. *Indeed,* political Islam had spread to ever new places and succeeded in some, but it failed to re-unite the Muslim *umma*. *Indeed* it could alarm Western states, but it was unable to reverse the balance of power between the West and the world of Islam. It could *indeed* use violence to murder a ruler or engage in a civil war (Algeria), but it never succeeded in overthrowing the ruling regimes. Nor did the Iranian revolution (and other regimes temporarily inspired by the ideals of radical Islam) succeed in establishing an Islamic utopia. *Indeed* it claimed to revive Islamic glory, but the reality was that it was becoming more and more organized within national frameworks, each country having its own brand of radical Islam, its own charismatic leaders, its own forms of organization and its local aims and goals.

Events of the past fifteen years - the wars in Bosnia and Chechnya, the events of September 11 in the US, the second Intifada in Palestine and the absence of any peace process in the Middle East, the current war in Iraq - all of these powerfully (if tragically) contradict the analysis of those political scientists who prematurely wrote the obituary of radical Islam. Resentment against the West in Muslim countries has not abated; on the contrary, it has clearly strengthened and become more rooted. Recourse to violent action is not only more frequent, but takes place within Muslim countries as well as outside of them. Forms of propaganda that were unheard of have become widespread: as, for example, TV programs and video-cassettes. Forms of action that

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were either unknown or explicitly disapproved of – such as what are called suicide-operations - have become a common practice. Al-Qa'ida, a trans-national, secret, armed organization has come to the front stage. The war in Afghanistan following September 11 resulted in the rendition of a number of militants back to their home countries where they then began operating within their own - or neighbouring – spaces, as is the case with Moroccan-born terrorists in Spain. Such developments contributed to what a student of al-Qa'ida, Dr M. Steinberg, calls the globalization of jihad. And finally, the re-Islamization of society is visible not only in the Middle East, North Africa and Turkey, but can also be observed among many Muslims living in the West.

Allow me to stop here and recount an anecdote. I recently had lunch in a restaurant in Paris with four friends, all secular Muslims, all intellectuals. Some had wine with their meal, some ordered pork for their main course. We had the most animated exchange; yet the entire conversation was about Islam, from the life of the Prophet to recent debates on the reform of the law in accordance with the *shari'a* in this or that country. Radical Islam has not only appropriated the public space, it has intoxicated its most dedicated opponents. It has enticed every kind of analyst into the theological sphere – a space where, by definition, absolute truths cannot be discussed and social sciences should abdicate.

As social scientists, should we abdicate? Before answering, let us pause for a moment. So far, I have been more a historian than a social scientist; more Braudelian than Weberian. I have been a historian in the sense that I have mainly provided you with an outline of a narrative with a beginning, a middle, but, so far, with no visible end. I have followed a Braudelian method in the sense that I have been underlining the different *temporalities* and the different *sites* of the various developments that have led to our present situation: the 1920s for the first signs of a politicization of Islam and of the rupture between radical movements and reformist movements that were ready to accommodate with the West; the 1970s for the failure of nationalism and state socialism and the emergence of political Islam as the major political force; the 1990s for the militarization of the confrontation. I have also tried to show the merging of long term processes –such as the elaboration and diffusion of a radical ideology - and short-term circumstances, such as the defeat of 1967 and the success of the Iranian revolution. I should mention here that an expanded version of the narrative I have just presented is available in a book I published in 2004 with Gabriel Martinez-Gros, *L'Islam en dissidence. Genèse d'un affrontement* (2004). Since my narrative in that book included some remarks on the social aspects of radical Islam, let me briefly summarize them before adding an important corrective to what I wrote then.

First, the social dimension: We are dealing with movements that extend over several generations. From the very outset, their leaders did not originate in the religious establishment. They were neither traditional 'ulama (religious scholars) trained in Islamic institutions, nor leaders of mystical brotherhoods turned into radical thinkers and activists. Sayyid Qutb had a degree in literature from the University of Cairo and he lived abroad, in the US, for a while (1948-50). Neither was the Pakistani Islamist leader, Mawdudi, the product of a traditional religious training. The same holds true for Usama bin Laden and for Ayman al-Zawahiri (1951- ). Al-Zawahiri took over the leadership (as the amîr) of Egyptian radicals after Qutb's death, and would become one of the major figures of the Arab jihad in Afghanistan and the deputy to Bin Laden. He came from a family of medical doctors and was a practicing physician before becoming an Islamic militant. Similarly, Muhammad Atta, was an engineering student in Germany

before planning the September 11 attacks. Of course, there are notable exceptions, such as Khomeini in Iran and Abdullah Azzam, the Palestinian-born cleric and leader of jihad in Afghanistan (1941 - murdered in 1989). The latter do, however, share with the radicals raised in a "secularist" framework, the reality that they had travelled to other countries in the West or in other parts of the Islamic world; they all had some experience of, or exposure to, different cultures and different forms of political activity. So these are not movements led by religious professionals with local, traditional horizons.

Likewise, they attracted people from all sectors of society; mostly young men, mostly from urban settings, mostly educated to a certain degree within modern systems of education, mostly in technical and scientific fields. In Muslim countries, recent massive urbanization helped young people form new social ties independent of regional, local or family ties. Among descendants of immigrants in the West, one should add the dimension of exile, of segregation and racism, of a painful distance from the host society. Coming from different national backgrounds, these young men are in a process of rapid individuation, without always having the appropriate resources – intellectual or material - to adjust to an environment perceived as hostile. Although they might feel frustrated and angry, they are in no way the wretched of the earth. Ideologically and socially, Islamism offers these young men an imagined community of brothers. It offers the prospect of a world in which tensions and conflicts will be solved through involvement in (or dedication to) the formation of a new, reformed umma. While traditional ties have weakened, Islamism provides new forms of solidarity. A religious utopia, Islamism holds out the promise of revenge against the pagan non-Muslim enemy abroad, and victory over the indigenous apostates at home.

So much for a brief presentation of the basic social aspects of Islamic movements. I would now like to turn to correct a judgement about radical Islam that I made in my book that appeared some four years ago. I wrote then that the doctrine of the various movements was insubstantial, predictable and repetitive; that they put forward slogans rather than a sophisticated analysis of the world around them. I concluded that they did not innovate in matters of theology, reviving instead obscure authors from the Middle Ages. I would now revise this conclusion.  I should have paid more attention to important debates that were taking place in speeches, in writing, including via the internet, and lately, on TV programs.

## II. Jihad and martyrdom: practice and debates

Two themes in particular are at the centre of ongoing debates, those of *jihad* and martyrdom. Both have further implications, leading to a profound re-interpretation of some basic notions in Islam. Both translate into organization and action, and should therefore be taken most seriously.[4]

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[4] On jihad, Matti Steinberg, Princeton lectures, Oct. 2004. 1. "The Globalization of Jihad". 2. "Al-Qaida – The clash within Islamic Civilization – The Enemies from Within".

The discourse on ***jihad*** is not only a matter of propaganda or an exercise in casuistry. It is rather an ideology that provides a basis for immediate action. It thus plays a strategic role.

1. Take the case of al-Qa'ida. In the discourse of al-Qa'ida, the first precept to be underlined is the absolute meaning attributed to the basic Islamic notion of the *shahada*, or profession of faith: There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet. The *shahada* implies the negation of any other loyalty. Absolute monotheism is fundamental in Islam. No other deity should be associated with God. Similarly, the condemnation of the worshipping of idols is a major theme in Islam. Thus, loyalty to other than God is contrary to the *shahada*, and becomes equivalent to infidelity – meaning the association of God with other deities. In the fundamentalist interpretation, such notions and ideas as nationalism, democracy, and socialism are equivalent to pagan idols, they are not part of Islam and should not only be condemned, but strongly opposed. Again, the idea of a constitution, understood as a common ground for people with different identities and ideas to co-exist in the same polity is, in their view, alien to Islam and simply another expression of idolatry. Only the *shari'a* (not a man-made statement but, instead, a sacred text inspired by God) is an acceptable constitution. Loyalty to a state or to a nation – as against loyalty to Islam and the *umma* – is therefore like reverting to the period of paganism, to the *jahiliya.*

2. Al-Qaida elaborates on the precept of the *shahada* with another notion, that of "Loyalty and Purity through Separation and Denunciation". This is a concept present in the Qur'an in connection with Abraham separating himself from idolaters. It was revived in the 18th century by Sheikh Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahab, the founder of the Wahabi movement that was adopted as a kind of state ideology by the family of Ibn Saud (who gave birth to Saudi Arabia). This doctrine requires that true Muslims actually separate themselves from existing states and from their Muslim rulers. Indeed, they should go even further and engage in *jihad* against them.

In fact, the theme of *jihad* was revived after the 1967 war and the defeat of all Arab armies that was a mortal blow to Arab secular nationalism. *Jihad* appeared as a better method of waging warfare than the nationalist one. Simultaneously, there was an exaggeration of the power of Israel; the conviction that there was a worldwide conspiracy against Islam led by Jews and Christians and aimed at annihilating Islam and murdering all Muslims. *Jihad* has thus become a battle for the very existence of Islam. By the same token, the states that support Western powers or are supported by them are part of the conspiracy and have to be fought against.

3. Such a vision results in a complete re-evaluation of the world of geo-politics. While the traditional distinction in Islam was between the House or Domain of Islam and the House or Domain of War (i.e. the non-Muslim world), Muslim states ruled by apostates now enter the latter category, that is the House of War, against which *jihad* is not only legitimate but obligatory. Therefore the enemy from within, the apostate leader, is equated with the enemy from without, that is the non-Muslim Infidel.

There have been some debates about this and, as a result, some further divisions among radical Islamists, as well as variations in time. The major theoreticians of modern-day Islamism gave priority to the enemy within. Failure to change the regime after Sadat's assassination, the general feeling that this would be detrimental to the interests of the Egyptian people, led al-Qaida to change its order of priorities. The distant enemy became the main target, the immediate enemy the secondary one. 'Ayman al-Zawahiri coined a metaphor to epitomize this strategy: the shadow of a stick

cannot be straightened as long as the stick is crooked. The stick is the American-Western hegemony; the shadow is the subservient Muslim regimes. Yet this shift does not exclude either *jihad* within Muslim countries or *jihad* against foreigners staying in Muslim countries or visiting Muslim countries. At the end of the day, all forms of *jihad* are justified.

4. Other aspects are being debated in response to recurring objections. For example, internal *jihad* will harm, even kill, innocent Muslims too: is it legitimate? Yes, since it is ultimately for the benefit of the entire *umma*.

Another objection: Internal *jihad* amounts to *fitna*, discord among the Muslims, which is strongly condemned in the *Sunni* tradition. To that objection, the answer is that *fitna* remains condemned, but *jihad* remains ordained. And those who engage in *jihad* are *mujahidin,* those who fight for the sake of God.

5. Such ideas, such debates, have to go together with organisation; they have to translate into confrontations, violent or otherwise. **Organisation**: as the concept of purity through separation suggests, those authentic Muslims who are totally committed to the restoration of a pure Islam are, by nature, separated from the rest of the society. They form a sect whose members have a universal mission. They give themselves special names, such as *Ahl al-sunna, Ansâr al-sunna, Ahl al-Jihâd, al-Ta'ifa al-Mansûra;* all labels that separate them from the rest of the Muslim society. Theirs is – if we accept Max Weber's ideal-types - a morality of absolute values, not of responsibility. They are convinced that their interpretation of Islam is the only valid one and, therefore, distance themselves from all other shades of Islamic fundamentalism. Similarly, they see Islam as a besieged fortress surrounded by enemies - that is the West and, more specifically, the Jews.

Which leads to **confrontation**: obviously, the confrontation would be against non-Muslim states. Obviously again, it would be against more moderate forms of political Islam in Muslim countries. Obviously, it is also against forms of Islam traditionally considered as heretic: Shiites are the main target for radical Sunnis, wherever they are. But confrontation is also within the *Salafiya*. Since the 19th century, those who have aspired to reform Islam by reviving the ideals of early Islam called themselves *Salafiya*. Salafism started in the 19th century with Jamal ad-Dîn al-Afghânî and Muhammad 'Abduh. Al-Qa'ida spokesmen consider that these founders of the Salafi school have been too much influenced by Western ideas, replacing submission to Allah with rational interpretations of religious rules. Likewise, the Muslim Brothers of Egypt are not considered as proper *Salafiya* because they do not have *jihad* as their priority and they are ready to compromise with political forms that are not authentically Islamic (such as taking part in elections within the national framework, accepting established constitutions, having representatives in parliament where apostates have their say, etc.). (Similarly, think of the recent condemnation of the Palestinian Hamas by an al-Qa'ida spokesman because Hamas formed a coalition government with the PLO). In other words, supporters of other forms of *salafism* are viewed as sinners who have to join the only right path, that of al-Qa'ida. The theoreticians of the Muslim Brothers do, of course, issue long legal opinions – *fatwa*s – to show instead that al-Qa'ida's positions are not religiously valid. Here we will rely on Bourdieu rather than Max Weber in seeing competition at work, in the political arena, in the challenges between rival groups to occupy the strongest position.

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The second subject of heated debates turns on the **theme of martyrdom.**[5]

This is not a central theme in the Qur'an. There were only a small number of martyr figures in early Islam; one was Bilal, the Ethiopian slave, who was persecuted by his pagan master for his belief in Islam; the second, Hamza, an uncle of the prophet Muhammad, who was killed during the battle of Uhud (625) and his body mutilated, was transformed by Islamic tradition into the paradigmatic fighting martyr. Otherwise, the figure of the martyr was much less developed than in other monotheisms, especially when compared with Christianity. Classical religious literature does not either encourage or support seeking out martyrdom without a reasonable chance of survival. Even in the 19th and 20th centuries, during the nationalist struggles for independence from the French, the British, the Russians and the Dutch, the nationalist discourse was mostly secular. It is true that resistance to European expansion did take the form of *jihad* movements in Sub-Saharan Africa, and in Central Asia against the Russians. But in its modern forms, nationalism did not. Algeria is an exception, and in its Arabic version, the repertoire of *jihad* and *shahada* was exploited. Not in its French version.

Shiism presents a different picture with the cult of Hussein and the ritual of the *ta'ziya*. Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet, was slain with his entire family by the army of the Ummayads. The episode took place on the 10th of muharram, and is commemorated in Shiite Islam with the ritual of the *ta'ziya*. But the cult of Hussein as a martyr has a ritual form; it is commemorative, and it recreates the community during the ritual without proposing Hussein as a model for younger generations. Neither was it connected with *jihad*.

In doctrinal terms, the promotion of the martyr, the correlation between *jihad* and martyrdom, appeared in Sayyid Qutb's, *Ma'alim fi-l tariq*, *Signposts* – or *Milestones – along the way,* where martyrs achieve victory over this world. The final chapter of the book was about martyrdom as the price of *jihad*. Qutb's own death sentence turned him into a martyr who lost his life for the sake of his faith.

With al-Mawdudi, *jihad* was the subject of one of his earliest books. But his was an irenic view of the holy war, and martyrdom was not a major theme in his work.

It is Khomeini who played a major role in promoting martyrdom. While the martyrdom of Hussein was important in the Shiite tradition, it became part of the doctrine of radical Shiism with the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, and then was expanded in the struggle of the Lebanese Shiites against Israel.

In practical terms, during the decade between 1979 and 1988 with the war in Afghanistan against the Soviets, then in 1988-92 against the communist government, *jihad* became reality. *Jihad* was not only fought by the Afghans, it was supported by the Pakistani military regime of Zia ul-Haqq (and foreign, including CIA, agents), and organized as a pan-Muslim struggle. It gained support from Saudi Arabia, it saw the emergence of 'Abdallah 'Azzam, the Palestinian leader mentioned earlier (assassinated in 1989), then of Usama Bin Laden, a Saudi. From there, *jihad* expanded into other countries: Egypt; Algeria (since 1992), and Chechnya.

The Sunni connection between *jihad* and martyrdom was further reinforced in 1981 after the assassination of President Sadat by a leading thinker of the *Gama'at al-Islamiyya* in Egypt - the group responsible for the assassination. Muhammad 'Abd al-

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[5] On martyrdom, Khosrokhavar F., *Les Nouveaux martyrs d'Allah,* Paris, 2002. David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam,* Cambridge UP, 2007.

Salam Farag (later executed), whose text *al-Farida al-gha'iba, the Neglected Duty,* makes the *jihad* against apostate governments into an absolute religious obligation, connected *jihad* and martyrdom. Also, more attention was accorded to such issues as "martyrdom operations" and to the practical aspects of *jihad*. From 1987 on, during the first Intifada in Palestine, Hamas (formed in 1988) broke with the nationalist-secular discourse of the PLO and emphasized the *jihad*-martyrdom theme. Martyrology became part of their discourse for legitimation; by the 1990s, it became part of their most spectacular actions, martyrdom operations (followed with material support for the martyr's family).

Debates on martyrdom go hand in hand with those on *jihad*. There is a close relationship between the two; indeed, they cannot be separated. They both promise Paradise, reward in heaven. But what about the suicide aspect? Conventional Sunni literature on *jihad* did not approve of suicide attacks. In 1997, Nawwaf al-Takruri published in Syria *Al-'Amaliyyat al-istishhadiyya fil-mizan al fiqhi, Martyrdom Operations in the Legal Balance*, 3 eds. It is a doctrinal elaboration of the issue: *jihad* was the only way to liberate the lands and people of Islam, martyrdom was the means: 1. It causes terror among the enemy; 2. It causes a higher number of casualties among the enemies for the fewest number of casualties among the believers. 3. It causes happiness and fortitude among the Muslims, despair among their enemies. 4. The martyrs bring knowledge about Islam to non-Muslims. Etc.

Such ideas meet a weak opposition because of the popularity of the Palestinian struggle against Israel and the present opposition to the American presence in Iraq. Yet there have been objections: 1. Against the killing of other Muslims. Sheer numbers indicate that the victims are much more numerous among fellow-Muslims than among Infidels. 2. Because of the failure to achieve durable results. 3. It creates negative publicity for Islam.

Another development associated with the promotion of martyrdom and *jihad* has been the invention of a completely new literary genre with the publication of Martyrologies. It started with the Iran-Iraq war, continued with the Shiites of Lebanon who fought against Israel, and with Intifada militants or victims (9 volumes). Much more broadly, all the discussions by fundamentalist authors have completely renewed the political vocabulary in Arabic and other languages. Early nationalists had introduced scores of new words to promote the ideas of revival, awakening, regeneration, and to condemn backwardness. Fundamentalists were extremely careful not to use their lexicon and to revert instead to a specifically Islamic vocabulary: thus *jahiliya* replaces backwardness; revivalism – *al-ihya' al-Islâm î* – replaces awakening, and so on. This is another aspect of the innovative character of Islamism today.

### III. Return to the Weberian agenda

It is time to turn to Max Weber and ask ourselves if his approach, his questions, are still relevant in understanding a vast religious-political movement like Islamism.

The relevance of Max Weber's ideas to the study of Islamic societies was put to the test some four decades ago when some of the brightest historians of the Middle East

started distancing themselves from classical Orientalism.[6] Ira Lapidus was one of the earliest scholars who made use of Max Weber in his classical study on *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* in 1967. Other works were inspired by Max Weber, notably Maxime Rodinson's book on *Islam and Capitalism* (1966). Obviously, Islamism was not on the agenda of social scientists in the 1960s; nor was it on anybody's list of priorities in 1984 when a conference on *Max Weber and Islam* was held, although Islamism was already on the front page of newspapers. Contributions to this conference dealt with issues such as "Weber, Islamic Law, and the Rise of Capitalism", by P. Crone; "Secularisation, Weber and Islam" by Francis Robinson; "Weber and Islamic Sects" by Michael Cook; "The Institutionalization of Early Islamic Societies", by Ira Lapidus, etc.

My assumption is that concerning Islamism, we may keep Max Weber in mind in more than one way. A first direction is with Max Weber's method, which presents at least three aspects. One is the combination of sociology and history; the introduction of time, duration and change, as elements in the analysis of a social phenomenon. That is what we have tried to do in our rapid survey. Other scholars have done it for various case studies.[7] Another aspect of his method is the construction of ideal-types. Typologies are not very useful if they are seen only as what Clifford Geertz labelled "pigeonholes", separate boxes where complex phenomena are "kept frozen", so to speak. Their heuristic value begins when they develop into an agenda for research; when they orient empirical work by establishing connections (for example, once you have identified a charismatic individual, the next step is to ask yourself how charisma is going to be routinized, etc.; when you have characterized the "carriers of religion", you have to look for the corresponding social conditions and social practices). Weber's ideal-types make difficult the reification of Islam and Islamism; they prevent their reduction into a unique, incommensurable, and therefore opaque entity, calling instead for comparisons with other movements. Max Weber added to his socio-historical method a comparative dimension: again, let us try to see if comparison can shed some light on what interests us today. One of the major issues Max Weber tried to confront was the issue of modernity (why the West, when and how). I would like to take a few moments to address this issue in a comparative perspective à propos of Islamism today.

1. Historically, Islamic groups emerged as a reaction to abrupt changes introduced by modernization. Modernization was either imported from the West and imposed by colonial powers, or enforced by authoritarian governments. It has been experienced both as too fast and destructive. It had a disruptive impact on society, on traditional values and on common practices. At the same time, it opened some space for the individual to emerge as an autonomous entity, but with severe limitations: one is the tension, or better, the contradiction, between the desire to be loyal to the community, to remain part of it, and the push towards individual autonomy. The other is the difficulty for the individual to assert himself/herself in local circumstances – be it authoritarian, oppressive, or corrupt regimes in Islamic countries, or the situation of exile and segregation in

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[6] See Toby E. Huff and Wolfgang Schluchter eds., *Max Weber and Islam*, New Brunswick and London, Transaction Publishers, 1999.
[7] Bryan S. Turner ed., *Islam. Critical Concepts in Sociology,* vol. IV, London-NY, Routledge, 2003. See Sami Zubaida, "Trajectories of political Islam: Egypt, Iran and Turkey", pp. 288-306.

the Muslim diaspora in the West. Martyrdom, in this respect, seems to solve the contradiction between individuation and being part of a/the community. To strive to die as a martyr means to assert oneself, to realize oneself as an individual while joining a community: the community of other martyrs, already in Paradise, waiting to welcome the new ones. It means joining the community of the chosen ones. To die for the sake of Islam, for *jihad*, also contributes to the revival of the *umma*. Since the ancient *umma* has been shaken, destroyed and alienated by modernity, to give one's life for the sake of Islam contributes to the creation of a new, superior one. At the same time, martyrdom appears as a supreme form of the affirmation of the individual. A candidate for martyrdom gives meaning and direction to his life. He ceases to be a victim of modernization or oppression, he assumes full responsibility for his acts, he asserts himself heroically by killing the enemy without being afraid to die.

2. Again, historically, radical Islam emerged as a reaction to the West[8], as a challenge to Westernization, as a way of purifying Islam against the contagion of Western practices (moral and sexual degeneration, the cult of money, materialism, Godlessness, etc.). Radical Islam is a rejection but, basically, radicals are deeply Westernized. While their self-definition refers to Islam, it is constructed in reactive terms, in contrast, contradiction, confrontation with/to the West. As Nobel Prize economist Amartya Sen puts it in his latest book, "contemporary Islamic fundamentalism is, in this sense, parasitic to the West" (op. cit., p. 101).

3. Sociologically, radical Islamic groups are modern in many ways. As already mentioned, their ideologues did not originate exclusively from the milieu of the traditional religious elite as was the case with Khomeini, but more frequently they were people raised in the modern system of education, trained in scientific or technical fields, and acquainted with the Western world. The same could be said about some of their militants, especially in the West.

4. Third, in their organization, they are trans-national. They rely either on the diasporas of young people raised in Western cities, or on networks formed on a voluntary basis within a national framework. They exhibit a high degree of individualism in as much as conjugal or family ties are negated or ignored in favour of a more comprehensive but abstract unit, the *umma*. Individual loyalty is transferred from one's immediate group to an imagined one.

5. Here we may insist on the comparative dimension. Because of their insistence on the founding texts of Islam; because of their revival of medieval authors; because of their condemnation of modernity, radical Islamists seem to favour a return to the Middle Ages. Their discourse and program are reactionary indeed, but they themselves are not medieval. At the same time, the infamous slogan of a "clash of civilizations" leads some people to think that it is in the essence of Islam to produce fanaticism, to resist progress, and this sort of thing. There is no more an essence of Islam than there is an essence of any other monotheism. None is monolithic and homogeneous, all are embedded in history and subject to change. Rather than comparing religious dogmas, let us remember that we are

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[8] See Amartya Sen, *op. cit.*

witnessing the politicization of religion and, therefore, are dealing with political movements. This means we may compare them to other political movements in relation to historical experiences of modernity. Think of a few societies in the West, Italy among others, where modernization was experienced as too fast and disruptive. Did it not pave the way for radical politics with fascism? Think of Germany after World War I. Is it not the case that the resentment of the military defeat played a role in the success of Nazism?

Islamist discourses remind us of totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century in as much as they aim at destroying any form of the present political order on the one hand, and that they pretend to comprehend and control every aspect of social life on the other. Their modus operandi reminds us of previous secular revolutionary movements: by their revolutionary *organizations,* with clandestine activities, separation of combatant units, trans-national networks; by their *forms of action*, with the use of violence, including terrorism. In this respect, however, I have to underline that while the desire for martyrdom calls for a comparison with millenarianist movements, suicide-bombing appears as a unique and modern form of struggle. Islamist discourses also inherited the nationalist discourse that they want to replace in the Middle East, as if they were adding Islamic tones to the old song of social justice, unity, authenticity, confronting imperialism and the West, and so on.

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I hope I have shown by now that Islamism is not monolithic. Like the communist movement in the 20th century, its has many shades, from the most violent, radical - al-Qa'ida type - to the most irenic and accommodating - Islamic parties in Turkey or Morocco. While their goal is the same – re-islamicizing Muslim societies, establishing the rule of Islam in Muslim countries, reversing the balance of force between the West and Islam – different organizations have divergent views about how to reach this goal. Islamism is also dynamic, and the same sub-group, the Muslim Brothers of Egypt for instance, might, with changing circumstances, shift from a radical project to a more moderate one. While being against modernity, it might enhance social change in many aspects; regressive changes if you consider the discourses and prescriptions regarding women, but also progressive when they promote women's education and their entry into modern professions as lawyers, doctors, and bankers – albeit for the service of other women and, therefore, to enforce their segregation. Its dynamism, or even its lability, appears also in its constant process of fission and proliferation such that when an organization shifts from violent to legal action (like the Muslim Brothers in Egypt), a new radical group emerges and takes over the radical approach. Alternatively, the same organization – say, for example, Hamas in Palestine – may have a political branch ready for the political process, while the military one keeps using terrorist methods.

The whole Islamic world, including the entire Muslim population in non-Muslim countries, should not be identified with Islamism, especially with its most radical expressions. Yet many factors intervene that make these movements popular among Muslim societies: the feeling of frustration vis-à-vis the West at never filling the gap between the privileged Western world and Islamic societies after more than fifty years of independence from colonialism; the resentment at the present imbalance of forces with no Islamic country counted among the leading countries; the unsolved issue of

Palestine. All of these factors – and others mentioned earlier – contribute to a kind of general acquiescence towards radical Islam, or at least to the idea that their motivations are legitimate, if their methods are extreme.

As a result, I think the title I gave to this lecture – the spectre of Islamism – was an understatement. Islamism is a real, not an imaginary ghost, both for Islamic societies and for ours. As a social scientist, I remain confident that we have the tools, and can create new ones, to understand what this is all about. As a citizen, I would recommend that we fight fundamentalist views vigorously. Meanwhile, I am tempted to conclude with a work of art by Gino Severini (1883-1966) which I saw recently at the Tate Modern Gallery in London. Its title is *Suburban train arriving in Paris, 1915*. The date is important, as well as the violence of the painting. The text next to it reads: "Like other futurists, he celebrated war, at least until the carnage became more evident".