The politics of Islamic identities

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Introduction

Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America.

(Changez)

The journey of Changez, the hero in Mohsin Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), offers a powerful account of identity dilemmas faced by many young Muslims today. With a qualification from Princeton University under his belt, Changez is the most prominent new employee at a New York firm. Yet the events of September 11, 2001 make him question all the allegiances which he had hitherto held onto so strongly: to America, the beacon of his educational and professional success, and to Pakistan, the country of his birth and upbringing as well as his religion and culture. Caught in a web he struggles to reconcile the competing forces of his identity; the entanglement of being a Muslim, Pakistani, and American begins to feel burdensome. Then one day during a business lunch, an interesting class of warrior is described to him. He learns that the janissaries of the Ottoman Empire were captured Christian boys trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army, at that time the greatest army in the world. Ferocious and utterly loyal, they fought to eradicate their own civilisations, so they had nothing else to turn to. It is at this moment, when at the crossroads of his identity, Changez realises himself to have become a ‘modern-day janissary’, in his words, ‘a servant of the American empire at a time when it [is] invading a country with a kinship to mine’ (p. 173).

It is a story, on the one hand, of a graduate like any other, seeking recognition and stability in an uncertain world. On the other hand, it is the memoir of a young Muslim who in the twenty-first century feels perplexed in trying to confront the baggage of multiple identity labels. This quietly told and cleverly constructed fable of infatuation and disenchantment with the United States, set on the treacherous fault lines of current East–West relations, is a refreshing narration into the topic of identity for many Muslims worldwide, particularly in the West. Are they Muslim first or British, American, or French? Where does their loyalty lie? Why does there even have to be a contradiction?
The purpose of this chapter is to review the politics of Islamic identities in Western Europe, North America, Australia, the Middle East, and Asia. It first provides a brief overview of the historical developments that have taken place with respect to Muslims, and how their changed situation implicates their current position. Second, it examines the claim of a growing transnational Islamic identity by reviewing the evidence on religiosity for Muslim identities, along with a discussion of multiple forms of identification. An inquiry is also made into how religious identities are formed, factoring in the complex social phenomena at play. Third, it studies ways in which Islam can intertwine with identity, making a distinction between ‘Islamic’ and ‘Islamist’ identities and the consequences this has for political mobilisation or violence. Potential reasons for Islamist violence are also considered. Finally, it investigates whether the narrative surrounding Islamic identities trespasses limits of proportionality and reasonability.

**Historical and intellectual development**

**The golden age: once upon a time**

To be a Muslim in a world like that of the Arab traveller Ibn Battuta, who spent years traversing a powerful and extensive Islamic world that covered the Middle East, Spain, parts of Africa, and large parts of Asia, while Europe was only beginning to emerge from its Dark Ages was very different from being a Muslim in the mid-20th century when a few European countries had gained political and economic control over most of the areas where Muslims lived.

(Abu-Lughod 2004: 6)

The above passage tells an important story. It touches upon the memory of outstanding achievements during Islam’s first six or so centuries, when Islam’s culture was the most advanced and it inspired its followers to build civilisations that were envied and admired by their rivals in the Middle Ages. Muslims sponsored the most advanced scientific and technical research, deployed victorious armies and enjoyed the best health, lived the longest, and had the highest rates of literacy. These fruits of success were evident from the beginning: in AD 622 Prophet Muhammad sought exile in Medina to escape oppression from Mecca, but returned eight years later as its ruler. As early as the year 715, Muslim conquerors had mobilised an empire that extended from Spain in the West to India in the East. To be a Muslim brought with it the honour of belonging to a winning civilisation.

However, with a turn of events the power and influence of Muslims gradually began to diminish and not very long ago the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1924 brought their united rule to an end. This decline spurred into a series of further troubling events for Muslims: the ongoing struggle of the Palestinians in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (1948–present) and the defeat of Muslims in the Six-Day Arab–Israeli War (1967). The reasons which brought about the decline of the Muslim world, economically and politically, are beyond the scope and purpose of this chapter and will not be addressed here. However, it is important to note that the changed situation of Muslims, especially brought about by colonisation and foreign dominance, is bound to have had some bearing on the conscience and identity of Muslims in modern times (Diner 2009).

From its golden age to where it stands now, arguably in its dark ages, the trauma of Islam in modern times results from this sharp and unmistakable contrast between medieval successes and more recent tribulations. Some seventy-five years ago, Arslan in his book *Our Decline and Its Causes* (1944) took up this question: ‘Why have muslims fallen behind, and why have others
forged ahead?’ His inquisition still holds today. If anything, this issue has amplified over time. A glance at majority Muslim countries shows us that many of them have not managed to catch up with the rate of developments taking place in Western and even non-Western countries, notably Far East Asia. As the Imam of a Mosque in Jerusalem put it not long ago, ‘Before, we were masters of the world and now we’re not even masters of our own mosques.’ Their past achievements still echo in their social, cultural, and physical landscapes in the contemporary Muslim world. However, in current times the Islamic spirit finds expression not so much in rebuilding the past grandeur of these civilisations through the economic and technological advancement of Muslim societies, but through movements of resistance against Western hegemony and of Islamic reassertion (Hassan 2008).

The trigger was pulled on 9/11 when two hijacked planes crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre. Almost immediately following the attacks, policy-makers and commentators declared a ‘clash of civilisations’, as hypothesised in Huntington’s 1993 Foreign Affairs article. But what did Huntington want to say? Conflicts between civilisations, posited Huntington, will increase due to an increased interaction, and the most pronounced conflict will be between the West and Islam. A divide was constructed between the modern, progressive, enlightened, and democratic societies of the West and the backward, archaic, uncivilised, and autocratic societies of the Middle East. Researchers, policy-makers, and journalists have devoted increasing attention to relations between the Muslim world and the West. Conflicts in the greater Middle East, such as the war in Afghanistan (2001–present) and Iraq (2003–present), as well as heated controversies within Western countries, such as the 2006 debate over the publication of cartoons portraying the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper, and debates in France and elsewhere over the wearing of veils by Muslim women have ignited fierce arguments over the role of Islam in Western societies, multiculturalism, and the assimilation of Muslim minorities.

Despite being the fastest-growing religion in the world, claims Aslan (2006), Islam remains shrouded in ignorance and fear, mostly in the West. The Gallup World Religion Survey in 2009 found Americans to be more than twice as likely to express prejudice against Muslims than against Christians, Jews, or Buddhists. About a third of Americans believe that there is essentially no thing as a moderate Muslim, that Islam equals violence, fundamentalism, and terrorism. In their study of Western attitudes towards Muslims in Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and the US – where integration and assimilation of Muslim minorities, as well as broader tensions between Western and Muslim nations, have been major issues in recent years, Wike and Grim (2010) find ‘threat perception’ – defined as the perceptions of threat that one’s political enemies pose – to be a major, and perhaps the single most important predictor of in-group attitudes towards out-groups; people who feel threatened by Muslims are more likely to associate negative characteristics with them.

They also found security threats and cultural threats to have different effects on public views. Consistently, across all five countries, perceived threats related to security were strongly and directly related to attitudes towards Muslims, while cultural threats concerning integration and the compatibility of Islam with life in the West were indirectly related. Nevertheless, concerns about cultural threats fed concerns about security, which in turn lead to negative attitudes. In other words, ‘realistic’ or ‘existential’ threats are the most significant determinant of Western public opinion regarding Muslims, as opposed to ‘symbolic’ threats. Consequently, in the eyes of some this fear warrants the need for protection against Islamic rogues and radicals who threaten the security and values of liberal democracy and global capitalism. At the core of such arguments, suggests Schwedler (2001), is the notion that the spread of Islam as a religion entails a growing transnational Islamic identity that can mobilise the Islamic world against a number of ‘others’: the West, secularism, liberal democracy and modernity in general. However, before
discussing this claim of a growing transnational Islamic identity, we must review any such evi-
dence of religiosity among Muslims.

**Major claims and developments**

**Muslim identities in Western Europe**

Academics have noted the prominence of religion as a marker of identity among young Muslims in Europe. For young Muslims, while their experiences differ from that of the first generation in a number of ways, these differences need to be understood in terms of the different phases in the process of identity formation among this generation. During the height of Islamophobia of the 1980s in Britain, characterised by events such as the 1989 ‘Rushdie Affair’ which is identified in much of the literature as a key moment in the development of British Muslim identity-politics, young Muslims were under tremendous pressure to either reject Islam or to turn to Islam as a vehicle of socio-economic protest. Studies by Bochner (1982) and Hutnik (1985) indicated the importance of religion to the identity of young Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims in which Muslim identity was listed by 80 per cent of them as the strongest and most assertive identity item. While the climate changed in Britain during the 1990s, nonetheless, young Muslims were increasingly questioning the nature of Islam, in part as a reaction to inter-generational conflicts and in part as a consequence of heightened intra-Muslim youth interaction in educational institutions, youth forums, and cyber space. The 1994 Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities in Britain confirmed earlier findings as 83 per cent of Pakistani Muslims mentioned religion to be an important self-defining attribute.

The 2001 Citizenship Survey in Britain asked participants to list the top ten things that would say something important about themselves. Muslims chose religion to be a more important marker of identity than ethnicity. The 2006 Pew Global Attitudes Poll found 72 per cent of Muslims in Britain to believe that Muslims have a very strong (28 per cent) or fairly strong (44 per cent) sense of Islamic identity and 77 per cent felt this sense of identity was increasing. Eighty-six per cent of Muslims felt this was a positive development. The 2007 Citizenship Survey asked some highly relevant questions, one was: What is the most important aspect of your identity? With family being first pick by Muslims, religion was the second most important aspect of their identity, chosen by over 31 per cent. Family for non-Muslims was also the most important aspect of their identity, but religion ranked lower in their list (chosen by 12.8 per cent of Jews, 11.1 per cent Sikhs, 8.5 per cent Buddhists, 5.5 per cent Christians, and 4 per cent Hindus). Furthermore, among Muslims there were age differences in attachment to religion. Younger Muslims aged 16 to 24 years were more likely than their counterparts over the age of 25 to choose religion as their most important identity (41 per cent and 28 per cent respectively). A similar age variation was observed for the general population, although the proportions were much smaller.

In their research on Muslim women studying at British universities, Tyrer and Ahmad (2006) found that Muslim women respondents rejected notions of an essential, authentic primordial ethnic identity which they should adhere to and instead stressed the dynamic, contingent, and fluctuating nature of their identities. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) capture this antithesis between positions that highlight fundamental or abiding sameness and stances that expressly reject notions of basic sameness. The former can be called ‘strong’ or ‘hard’ conceptions of identity, the latter ‘weak’ or ‘soft’ conceptions. While the Muslim women in Tyrer and Ahmad’s study acknowledged their formal ethnicities, or the ethnic identity that was ‘expected of them’, they were also clear that parental or ancestral heritage did not determine who they
The politics of Islamic identities

were. Instead, they asserted their agency in defining their identities in their own terms and sub-
sequently displaced these in favour of a notion of ‘Muslim’ identities, which were highly subject-
ive and felt to be more inclusive of other aspects to their identities. Almost without exception,
respondents emphasised ‘being Muslim’ when discussing their identities in clear, coherent, and
confident terms, while also highlighting the subtle racialised expectations they faced from others
vis-à-vis their identities.

There is, however, mounting evidence to suggest that even if Muslims feel religion to be
important to their self-identification, they do not all think it conflicts with also feeling British. In
Ali’s (forthcoming) analysis of Muslim British identity in the 2007 Citizenship Survey, responses
to the question ‘How strongly do you belong to Britain?’ provide intriguing results (Table 19.1).
When the two positive categories (‘Fairly strongly’ and ‘Very strongly’) are combined, Muslims
rank higher than Christians and Jews in positive identification with British national identity, 88
per cent of Muslims are likely to belong to Britain, compared to 86 per cent of Christians and
81 per cent of Jews. Therefore, contrary to claims about Muslims being alienated from British
mainstream society, they are almost as likely as Christians to feel they belong to Britain.

Clearly, then the importance of religion to the identity of Muslims is more convoluted than
we may think; simply ticking the box ‘Muslim’ rather than ‘British’ does not suggest that the
respondent is more religious and less nationalistic or is undergoing an ‘identity crisis’. A govern-
ment report, ‘Attitudes, values and perceptions: Muslims and the general population in 2007–
08’, revealed that Muslims expressed strong feelings of belonging, both to their neighbourhoods
and to Britain as a whole, and more than nine in ten Muslims agreed that they personally felt a
part of British society. A Gallup Poll of the Muslim World in 2007 found that despite British
Muslims’ strong identification with their religion, a majority condemned terrorist attacks on
civilians and did not want to live in segregated communities.

Research on Muslim identities in other Western European countries offers interesting results.
Findings from Germany show that its settled immigrants from Turkey are substantially more
religious than native Germans and other groups of former guest-workers. Qualitative studies
suggest that within the Muslim immigrant group religion has a different meaning for the first
and second generation. Supposedly, Turkish women who grew up in Germany draw a sharp
line between religious and traditional norms and rules and consider the former as a source
of identity and emancipation rather than of oppression. ‘Neo-Muslimas’, as they have been
termed, tend to choose partners who follow the ‘true Islam’ signifying that religion has changed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 19.1 British identification by religion</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How strongly do you belong to Britain?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row percentages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religion at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Citizenship Survey 2007
its meaning for the second-generation Muslims (Diehl et al. 2009). Klinkhammer (2003) provides a thought-provoking account of this modern construction of Islamic life taking place in Germany. Her impression is painted when she sees a Muslim couple walking through the streets of a German town:

She was wearing a headscarf, not the traditional scarf, which does not completely cover the hair, but the long veil, which covers all but the face and goes down to the shoes. While the couple was walking hand in hand . . . they were sharing a can of coca cola. I must confess . . . I was very surprised at this sight because I associated Islamic clothes like the veil with a strict segregation of the sexes and . . . generally indicated a traditional and hierarchical relationship of the sexes. However, the fact that they were walking hand in hand seemed to me to be a public expression of a modern ethic of love, a nearness and solidarity of the sexes without ties to the traditional bonds of the family. And I associated the can of coca cola with Western consumer mentality and youth culture. The curiosity which this sight aroused in me, which I was now to see more and more often made me want to understand it better.

Here Klinkhammer highlights a theoretical point of interest about the approach usually taken towards second-generation Muslim religiosity. This above sight challenged her not only because of its anti-dogmatic message, but also because of the aspect of modernity within it. In the literature about Islam and modernity, no harmony between the two can be found. On the contrary, one finds discontinuity and disharmony. But clearly this does not always seem to be the case.

France has certainly witnessed increasing attention in the past few years over the role and rights of Muslims in French society, with heated debates surrounding the wearing of religious symbols in schools, the ‘headscarf affair’, and more recently the banning of the face-veil. Despite these turbulent issues, the majority of France’s Muslims have retained their loyalty to the state and the country of their citizenship, with a minority giving priority to certain religious interpretations (Leveau and Hunter 2002). Taking place are efforts to develop new interpretations of Islam and new syntheses of Islamic and French values that would enable the new generation to live as French and Muslim. And although the second and subsequent generation of French Muslims have maintained relations with their parents’ homelands, they are not, however, inclined to accept the cultural and political systems of the authorities of their countries of origin. Instead, they have been attempting to participate more actively in public debates. The Forum citoyens des cultures musulmanes launched by young Muslims is in many ways exemplary. Members come from a broad spectrum, including religious and secular backgrounds, but gather around shared French and Muslim identities. The 2007 Gallup Poll of the Muslim World showed that an overwhelming majority of Muslims in Germany and France said they were loyal to their country and saw no contradiction between being German or French and Muslim.

Research from Belgium shows that young Muslims born from immigrants of Muslim (Mediterranean) countries display a strong Belgian identity but a low insertion and concrete integration into Belgian culture (Saroglou and Mathijsen 2007). The authors, however, distinguish between these two realities. First, it is possible to declare myself a Belgian (‘I belong to this country, I am a Belgian citizen, I have rights because of that’) without translating this identity into an embracing of ‘classically or native Belgian’ elements of social life (‘I’m a Belgian citizen, but of a different culture’). Second, it is likely that acculturation (concrete attitudes and activities that manifest an insertion into the ‘Belgian way of life’ measured by elements such as: language spoken, friendships, hobbies, customs, values and willingness to transmit the Belgian culture to the next generation) is less easy to access and is achieved later in the time process for Muslim immigrants than the mere claiming of a Belgian identity. Because of a certain socio-economic
marginalisation of their community and because of a certain cultural and religious distance – be it real or perceived – between ‘Oriental’ Islam and ‘Western’ Christianity, young Muslims of Mediterranean origin may have more difficulty than other (in fact mostly Christian) immigrants in integrating into the Belgian way of life. Finally, it is not to be excluded that young Muslim immigrants of Arab and Turkish origin, compared with other young immigrants, accentuate their claim to be Belgians by reserving at the same time their right to live the reality of ‘being Belgian in their own way’.

The European Social Survey in 2008 asked its respondents the question ‘How religious are you?’ on a ten-point scale with 0 being ‘not at all religious’ and 10 being ‘very religious’. Findings in Table 19.2 make us rethink the common conception that all Muslims are religious, and the number of those that are religious is not significantly large. Across all the fifteen countries, the number of Muslims reporting to be ‘very religious’ on average is very modest (19 per cent). Looking closer at the countries, we observe that countries which have had a long-standing population of Muslims such as Bulgaria, Israel, and Russia have fewer Muslims choosing to be religious. Perhaps immersion and multiculturalism is thriving better in their communities, and their identity is not ‘called into question’. When their culture and religion is more accustomed with that of the mainstream, they do not feel threatened or defensive, making them less likely to assert these agencies. But in countries where Muslims are recent arrivals going back only a few decades, discrimination against them has been prominent, accentuating the need for them to resort to their religious identity, mostly by the second- and third-generation Muslims. The results confirm this by showing Greece, Belgium, UK, Spain, and Germany as having the highest number of religious Muslims, where the very characteristic under scrutiny – their religion – can become a pertinent aspect of the threatened minority’s self-identification or form a collective group identity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Not at all religious</th>
<th>1–3</th>
<th>4–6</th>
<th>7–9</th>
<th>Very religious</th>
<th>Base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>2,289</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3,546</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: European Social Survey 2008

* Row percentages for levels 1–9 are presented in three aggregated groups: 1–3, 4–6, and 7–9.
Furthermore the size of the Muslim population in each country has a bearing on the level of religiosity reported. Countries with the larger Muslim groups, most notably Bulgaria, Israel, and Russia report low religiosity. Perhaps belonging to communities of a large size, with some visibility and characteristics, makes them more insulated to discrimination from the host community. On the other end, countries with smaller Muslim populations report greater religiosity. This is most likely accentuated by a greater pressure to conform, leading them to dampen or reject mainstream national identification and take up the identity they feel most at threat. Therefore a pattern is observed between the history and size of the Muslim group in its host community and their expression of religiosity.

Muslim identities in North America and Australia

Academics working on Muslim American identities argue that an underlying goal of such work is ‘to unsettle the perception that there is only one Muslim identity and that it is essentially and always a religious one’ (Leonard 2005: 473). Leonard identifies African Americans, Arab Americans, and South Asian Americans as three major Muslim groups in the US, with a strong emphasis that there is no single ‘diasporic orientation’ (ibid.: 474). Such diversity, combined with a frequent assumption by non-Muslims that for Muslims their religious identity is the most salient, encourages young Muslims to examine their religious identity in relation to other aspects of their being. Leonard concludes: ‘“Muslim American” might be thought of as an emerging pan-ethnic label among young Muslims’ (ibid.: 476).

Studying young Arab Muslims in San Francisco, Naber (2005) provides a good example of such ‘pan-ethnic’ Islamic identity. The ‘racialisation’ of Islam in the US, she finds, has contributed to the emergence and adoption of the ‘Muslim first’ collective identity. Such identity can be strategically deployed by young Muslims to distance themselves from the undesirable ‘Arab’, ‘Arab Muslim’, or ‘Middle Eastern’ identity that is often associated with terrorism. At the same time, the ‘Muslim first, Arab second’ identity, which intimately intersects with race and gender, is also seen as empowering by young Muslim women in particular to negotiate with their families their choice of a partner across racial lines (ibid.: 479). Also an increase in the number of young Muslim women who choose to wear Hijab reveals new noticeable aspects of Muslim identity in the US, which is becoming salient.

Schmidt (2004: 33) offers an insightful account of a young Muslim woman attempting to reconcile her Islamic and American identities:

After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack, I attended a lecture . . . ‘Islam – the source of universal peace’. What stands clearest to me – is the imagery of the woman sitting in front of me. Not because she was dressed ‘traditionally’ wearing the hijab, thereby testifying that she was a practicing Muslim woman. Rather, I remember her because her hijab took the form of the American flag, the Stars and Stripes, emphasized by the shining blue garment that she wore under it. This woman sent the signal of being Muslim and American at the same time. Perhaps it could be argued that her statement of identification was a defensive act, fighting the processes of exclusion that increased in the wake of the terrorist attacks. But it could also be argued that her choice was the result of a conscious evaluation of identity, a token of an Islamic identity integrated and woven into the fabric of American life and public space.

For Schmidt, this woman’s simultaneous radiation of a religious and national identity was a striking combination of symbols linked to her appearance; ‘a linkage that seemed difficult to
separate’. The symbols were easily recognisable and their message was easy to interpret. Her attire skilfully united what would otherwise be ‘imagined cultural contradictions’. If, however, her hijab depicting the Stars and Stripes was removed, the integrity of her identity would disintegrate.

Identity research in Australia indicates that young Muslims, more so than in the 1980s, are proudly asserting their Islamic identity through religious practices, partly as a consequence of participating in Islamic youth groups, and partly from the enthusiasm with which they have decided to stake their claim to full and uncompromised acceptance in multicultural Australia. Young Muslims, who are also publicly visible in their identification with Islam, said this in Marshallsay’s (2007) study:

Islamic identity is uppermost for me followed by Australian identity.

For me religious identity comes first, then my ethnic/cultural identity, followed by Australian identity.

I identify myself as an Australian citizen, although religion is also an important aspect of my identity.

Marshallsay also brings out a group of Muslims who are often missing from the discussion of Islamic identity, and these are the ones for whom religion is only one layer of their multiple identities. While not denying their Islamic heritage, they are still in the process of searching for the ‘essence of religion’. One young woman feels that she has no right to call herself a Muslim as she does not practise the requirements of the faith except for attendance at the mosque on the occasion of the two Eid festivals. However, she does not reject Islam as she says:

‘I’m secular in my outlook, and for me, my religious identification is more in terms of being a Hari Raya Muslim. I go to the mosque with my mum for these congregational prayers. At the moment, I’m still searching for what it means to be a Muslim. But I also do all the other things that young Australians do like partying etc’.

For this young woman, the cultural aspects of the religion are aspects that she follows as part of family traditions. In other aspects, she sees herself as no different from her peers from non-Muslim backgrounds. Some of the secular-oriented young men were more ardent in not having religion dictate their sense of identity. One young man believes in being a ‘citizen of the world’:

I don’t care for all this labelling, whether in religious or any other way, ethnic or cultural. We are all human beings.

Another two young men place greater priority on their ethnic identity:

Religion is not a priority for me. Definitely my national/ethnic identity first. Religion is not that important for me. Being an Australian means more to me.

Thus, for some young Muslims Islam transcends other aspects of identity, whereas for others it is possible to identify with the cultural heritage of one’s parents, as well as with the context in which one lives. On the whole, however, for young Muslims in Australia, Australian identity is important and they see this in conjunction with their own religious and ethnic or cultural identity.
Muslim identities in the Middle East and Asia

Some scholars view the Middle East as having been entrenched in powerful ‘old and deep-rooted identities’ until recently, when the West brought new ideologies that caused the region’s peoples to conceptualise themselves differently (Lewis 1998). For Lewis, the identity of individuals in the Middle East is not formed by nationality, citizenship, or descent, but instead by religion. It is the membership of a religious community which forms the foundation of their identity. As we shall see, the ‘determinants’ of identity are considerably more complex than Lewis suggests.

For Abu-Lughod (2004) contemporary US media images, fuelled by the self-presentations of some vocal groups in the Middle East, encourage us to think of people in the Middle East primarily in terms of their identities as Muslims. But this she thinks is misleading, as not only is the Middle East composed of people following the three major world religions that originated there, but people in the region, like people everywhere, define themselves in multiple ways, often depending on the context. For people living in the predominantly Muslim Middle East, just as in the multicultural but predominantly Christian US, one’s religious identity is only one aspect of who one is; it does not define whether or not you do actually worship, or do so regularly or fervently. Although many things go into forming any individual’s personal identity, in the Middle East it is helpful to think about the intersections of five major factors: (1) religion, (2) nationalism, (3) ethnicity, (4) mode of livelihood, and (5) gender and family.

Of course, however, this plurality in identity is not to deny the importance of religion for many Muslims across Muslim majority countries. In fact, large percentages of Muslims say that they think of themselves first as a Muslim, rather than as a citizen of their particular country. A 17-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey (2005) found that large majorities in Pakistan (79 per cent), Morocco (70 per cent) and Jordan (63 per cent) say they self-identify first as Muslims, rather than as Pakistanis, Moroccans, or Jordanians. In Turkey, even with its more secular traditions, 43 per cent of Muslims identify primarily with their religion rather than their nationality. Indonesians are closely split with 39 per cent self-identifying as Muslims first, 35 per cent as Indonesians and 26 per cent saying both equally. In Lebanon, however, just 30 per cent of Muslims say they view themselves primarily in terms of their faith, rather than as Lebanese. A British Council report, ‘Pakistan: the next generation’ (2009), also found that about three-quarters of the Pakistani youth define themselves as being Muslims first and then Pakistanis. The report also helpfully identified factors behind this religiosity. It found the despair among the young generation to be rooted in the condition of their lives. Only a fifth of those interviewed had permanent full-time jobs, half said they did not have sufficient skills to enter the workplace, and one in four could not read or write. While most do not trust their government, they attach their loyalty to religion.

A recent study shows that Turkish youth understand identity as a social construct. In the context of Turkey, explains Selcuk Sirin in his interview, ‘Turkish youth have multiple identities’, political parties or political groups only describe their own identity in opposition to others, making it very difficult to find people who have multiple identities. However, his research showed that young people in Turkey are not buying into this split idea of ‘left vs. right’ or ‘Islamists vs. Secularists’, instead they have multiple identities. They combine patterns of political identity such as religious identification, the degree to which one feels part of the Turkish nation and the feeling of belonging to what we call the ‘secular movement’ or ‘Ataturkism’. In all three areas, he measured the participants’ degree of identification, not by asking them ‘either-or’ questions, such as, ‘Do you have a Muslim identity or are you a Kemalist?’, because that is the kind of question that has created the current situation in Turkey: ‘Are you this or that?’
reality, people say, ‘I like Ataturk and I also feel like a Muslim’. Young people in particular do not see identity as an ‘either-or’ question.

A ‘new Islam’

Faced with dilemmas of identity, young Muslims have been found to respond in different ways. Some turn away from Islam as an unwanted and irrelevant vestige of the past that emphasises their ‘otherness’. This leads them to embrace secularism, eliminate Islam from their lives, and integrate and even ‘assimilate’ culturally to become ‘German, Dutch, French, or British’. Despite these efforts they still face racial and ethnic obstacles, and nor can they escape their ‘Muslim background’ because for many Westerners, when it comes to Islam, ethnicity and religion reinforce each other. Many Muslims resort to reaffirming their Muslimness, but practising Islam as a minority religion confronts them with the question of the relevance of traditional Islam, which their parents practice, to the new social setting. Given this, some choose to construct their own modern version of Islam and in doing so go as far as stripping away varying cultural traditions that first-generation migrants have held to be Islamic. This approach can often be misguided and does not always work well with the older Muslims. Kureishi in his short story, *My Son the Fanatic* (1994), depicts this process from the perspective of a father whose son has ‘returned’ to Islam. Exploring the nature of the intergenerational gap in the Muslim community, Lewis (2007) shows how normal tensions are exaggerated as children are educated in a language and culture different from that of their parents. He thinks patriarchal ‘clan politics’ and a breakdown in communication between young Muslims and traditional Muslim leaders dispossess Islamic youth, leading a small but significant minority to turn to radical groups for somewhere to belong and something to believe in.

This identity search can lead some young Muslims to join radical organisations, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Al-Muhajiroun in Britain, whose membership does not necessarily make one a ‘better’ Muslim, and can do more harm than good not just for community cohesion, but also for Muslim intergenerational dialogue. Protesting against the immorality and imperialism of the West, members of Hizb ut-Tahrir often frame themselves as ‘fish living out of water’ and advocate the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate, a return to, in their view, the ‘true Islam’. Ed Husain, an ex-radical, capitulates his personal journey in his book *The Islamist* (2007). From a theatre-loving schoolboy to an Islamic fundamentalist, his story begins in primary school in the 1980s, where he plays with ‘Jane, Lisa, Andrew, Mark, Alia, Zak’ and learns about Islam from his family and a spiritual guide he called ‘Grandpa’. His father, a devout Muslim opposed to Islamist views, ignores the advice of Ed’s teachers not to send his son to Stepney Green, an all-boy, all-Muslim secondary school, a decision he later regrets. Soon, Ed identifies himself not as British or Asian, only ‘Muslim’. Ed describes his journey towards fanaticism as gradual, first coming across Islamism in the school textbook *Islam: Beliefs and Teachings* (2006) by Ghulam Sarwar, which says: ‘Religion and politics are one and the same in Islam’. Enticed by its teachings and encouraged by a close friend, Brother Falik, Ed becomes drawn towards Islamism and the formation of the caliphate, a transnational Islamic state with a central foreign policy of jihad. Ed turns to Hizb ut-Tahrir where successful and articulate professionals reinforce his nascent views. Defying the teachings of his grandpa and parents, he spends two years involved with a Hizb cell. Friends who disappear to training camps later become key figures in al-Qaeda.

The evidence in preceding sections demonstrates that religious identity construction is indeed manifold and complex. But does the importance of religion for Muslim identities suggest that a transnational Islamic identity is uniting Muslims across vast distances in a common struggle? Surely, all religions possess a mobilising capacity in their shared norms and practices,
but is religious identity per se behind the political mobilisation of Islamic groups in very different social and political contexts?

**Understanding Islam and identity**

According to Schwedler (2001), for those who fear the mobilising potential of Islam, as they watch the number of Muslims increase daily, the concern is not ‘Islamic’ identity but ‘Islamist’ identity. ‘Islam’ is the religion, with ‘Muslims’ as its followers and the adjective ‘Islamic’ is suitable to describe anything that is of or related to Islam, as in ‘the Islamic faith’. ‘Islamism’, or political Islam, refers to a wide variety of often competing political movements that treat Islam as the central tenet of a political project. An ‘Islamist’ then is a Muslim who advocates a political agenda where the application of Shariah, or Islamic law, is central. All Islamists are Muslims, though all Muslims are not Islamists. In fact, only a tiny percentage of Muslims engage in political projects that can properly be called Islamist. Far more identify with ideologies that are distinctly nationalist, socialist, communist, or democratic. The Middle East alone is populated with hundreds of political groups and parties that identify themselves as social democrats, Muslim communists, liberal democrats, and Muslim and Islamist democrats, to name just a few. A voluminous literature illustrates not only that Islam and democracy are compatible, but also that they may be complementary (Esposito and Voll 1996; Kramer 1995; Soroush 2000).

In a major research project of more than six thousand Muslim respondents from Southeast, South, and Central Asia and the Middle East, Hassan (2008) reveals the heartening statistics that 87 per cent of Muslims, 86 per cent of Western Christians, and 83 per cent of all humanity support democratic ideals (ibid.: 255). Reza Aslan speaking on FORA.tv’s programme *Islamic Identity in the US* argues that Muslims around the world, particularly in the Middle East and the larger Arab world, are by no means isolated, they see the lives of American Muslims and they want it, they make it very clear that political participation, political freedom and democracy are issues they believe will work in their societies. Numerous polls have shown massive majorities who believe there is no fundamental clash between ideas of Islam and democracy. It is also important to recognise that a third of the Muslim world is already democratic; the largest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia, is a democracy; the second largest, Pakistan, is a democracy; India, the third largest, even though Muslims are a small minority in it, is a democracy; Bangladesh, Turkey, Malaysia, and Senegal are democracies. Thus let us retire this notion that Islam and democracy cannot work.

In the larger sense of why some extremist groups in certain countries are becoming successful in elections, one must look beyond the surface. Their success is truly mixed; for instance, in Indonesia’s 2009 election, the so-called Islamists were soundly defeated. And as in Pakistan’s 2008 election, the Islamist parties despite the fact that they banded together to create one almost super party did very poorly, not getting over 5 per cent of the vote. Islamist political parties in Jordan, Kuwait and Yemen have failed to mobilise supporters for their agendas in recent years and have performed poorly in parliament, despite their efforts to mobilise Islamic identity. Along with this, the states’ manipulation of electoral systems to limit Islamists’ gains is also a reason. In Turkey, the success of Islamists at the polls in 1995 had more to do with state manipulation – in an effort to exclude Kurds – of the electoral system than with the spread of Islamism. The Kurds then pooled their votes with Islamist candidates from the Welfare Party. Such instances of leftist-Islamist alliance illustrate that the political opportunities available to political groups often play a greater role in mobilisation than identities (Schwedler 1998–99).

However, in countries such as Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon, some groups despite having no avenue for political participation whatsoever for half a century have done exceedingly well.
when suddenly given an opportunity to participate in the political realm and to actually run for elections. Aslan says the fact that Hamas did well in the 2006 elections in Palestine should not be surprising for us, neither should the success of the Muslim Brotherhood which has been feeding and clothing poor people for half a century in Egypt, which has built schools and hospitals and has provided educational grants for Egyptians to go abroad and study. Who thought that when they were first allowed to run for office that they were not going to do well, questions Aslan, who thought this? This is nothing to do with what we would consider extremism; it has to do with the universal law for politics: ‘he who cleans the streets gets the votes, the end’.

Therefore it would be fair to stipulate that there is certainly a transnational Islamic or Muslim identity entailing the shared basic values and norms of the Islamic faith, however differently they are interpreted. But to the extent that Islam represents a single collective identity, when identity is characterised by so many complexities and diversities, is perhaps not so useful analytically (Schwedler 2001). This is not to say that Islamic identity is a meaningless category; it can mean much to those who see themselves as part of a broader Muslim community. But Islamic identity is also the product of many different historical, political and social processes. To understand particular instances of Islamic identity, one must therefore look at discrete political, social and economic contexts through which particular Islamic identities have been forged.

**Main criticisms**

*‘Deep down inside’*

Some scholars are of the view that despite the emerging literature on identities, there is still a fixation on conceptualising identity in narrow terms. Maalouf (2000b), a Lebanese author living in France, feels there is very often an obsession with singling out one aspect of an individual’s identity, placing it over others in importance. But for him, there is no one aspect of his identity which is more important than the others, and nor does he possess multiple identities. Instead, he ardently professes that he only has a single identity which is made up of many aspects, coming together in harmony to form a single entity. He expresses his frustration at constantly having to reassure people of his ‘real identity’:

How many times, since I left Lebanon in 1976 to live in France, have people asked me, with the best intentions in the world, whether I felt ‘more French’ or ‘more Lebanese’? And I always give the same answer: ‘Both!’ I saw that not in the interests of fairness or balance, but because any other answer would be a lie. What makes me myself rather than anyone else is the very fact that I am poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions. It is precisely this that defines my identity. Would I exist more authentically if I cut off a part of myself?

To those who ask the question, I patiently explain that I was born in Lebanon and lived there until I was 27; that Arabic is my mother tongue; that it was in Arabic translation that I first read Dumas and Dickens and Gulliver’s Travels; and that it was in my native village, the village of my ancestors, that I experienced the pleasures of childhood and heard some of the stories that were later to inspire my novels. How could I forget all that? How could I cast it aside? On the other hand, I have lived for 22 years on the soil of France; I drink her water and wine; every day my hands touch her ancient stones; I write my books in her language; never again will she be a foreign country to me.
So am I half French and half Lebanese? Of course not. Identity can’t be compartmentalised. You can’t divide it up into halves or thirds or any other separate segments. I haven’t got several identities; I’ve got just one, made up of many components combined together in a mixture that is unique to every individual. Sometimes, after I’ve been giving a detailed account of exactly why I lay claim to all my affiliations, someone comes and pats me on the shoulder and says ‘Of course, of course – but what do you really feel, deep down inside?’

(2000b: 1–2).

Such thinking, though it is widespread, exposes a view of humanity which Maalouf thinks is dangerous. The danger is twofold. First, a failure to recognise the complexity, the multi-dimensionality, of the ‘Other’ makes their dehumanisation easier. Second, imposing on the ‘Other’ a rigid, singular (and usually inferior) identity will provoke them, in anger and defiance, to pick up arms to ‘assert their identity’. This, he says, is how ordinary men are ‘transformed into butchers’. It presumes that ‘deep down inside’ everyone there is just one affiliation that really matters, a sort of ‘fundamental truth’ about each individual, an ‘essence’ determined once and for all at birth, never to change thereafter. As if all the rest, ‘a person’s whole journey through time as a free agent; the beliefs he acquires in the course of that journey; his own individual tastes, sensibilities and affinities; in short his life itself’, counts for nothing. And when prompted to ‘assert their identity’, individuals are meant to seek within themselves that same alleged fundamental allegiance, which is often religious, national, racial or ethnic, and having located it they are supposed to ‘flaunt it proudly in the face of others’ (ibid.: 3).

Further, Maalouf illustrates that those who claim a more heterogeneous identity are marginalised. For example, a young man born in France of Algerian parents carries within him two different loyalties or ‘belongings’, and he ought to be allowed to use both (as well as the many other ingredients which make up his personality). Within him, French, European, and other Western influences blend with Arab, Berber, African, Muslim and other influences. If he is encouraged to accept his identity in all its diversity and is allowed to live it fully, then it should embody a basket of enriching and fertile experiences. But it can be agonising if whenever he claims to be French, other people look on him as a traitor or disloyal, and if every time he insists his ties with Algeria and its history, culture and religion he is seen to be mistrustful, and perhaps even presented with outright hostility. Although common sense supports him being able to claim both allegiances, neither the law nor people’s attitudes allow him to accept his amalgamated identity peacefully (ibid.: 3). The common exercise of carving out a person’s identity into sections, thinks Maalouf, does not do justice to the true nature of identity, which is able to function in a multi-dimensional way.

**A reactive identity**

There is mounting literature on the impact that unfair treatment can have in constructing a person’s identity. Peek’s (2005) model illustrates this point, by identifying how religious identity can develop in response to a crisis. Within hours of the events and aftermath of 9/11, an unprecedented number of xenophobic incidents began to take place. Thousands of Muslims and Arabs endured discrimination, harassment, racial and religious profiling, and verbal and physical assault. Most of the Muslim students in Peek’s study, despite this reaction, persevered and publicly affirmed their religious identities, with many reporting that this difficult time actually strengthened their religious identity.

Noreen, born and raised in America but of Indian origin, describes how 9/11 affected her daily life:
For me, religion was always at the front part of my life. But now that Islam is on the forefront of everything, it seems there’s the need to use that as my defining characteristic, a greater need to do that, now more than ever.  

(Peek 2005: 231)

Peek reminds us that much of the discourse surrounding 9/11 involved dualities such as ‘good and evil’ and ‘us and them’. Natasha, a second-generation immigrant of Egyptian descent, talked about this duality:

It was big . . . I was like, if they’re not going to accept me as an American . . . if they’re going to tell me I don’t deserve to be here, when I am an American, if they’re going to try to make me feel that way, then, hey, I’m going to be a Muslim. No one’s going to ever tell me, ‘You can’t be a Muslim. You’re not a Muslim. Go back to some other planet where there isn’t Islam’. I felt like I had to choose then. I don’t think I felt like I had to choose before then. But . . . it was like, well, fine. If I have to choose, I choose to be Muslim.  

(ibid.: 234)

Just as the students were aware that they had been cast as the ‘Other’ immediately following 9/11, they also thought there was some expectation for them to choose between their American and Muslim identities (Peek 2005).

The cycle of discrimination, failed expectations, and non-assimilation has led many Muslim youth in Europe to reject European majority culture in favour of a minority identity that serves as a response to European rejection. In Germany, a Turkish street gang has appropriated the name Barbaren, a disparaging term long used to refer to foreigners, thereby co-opting and embracing the identity of otherness thrust upon them. Similarly, young French Muslim women have taken to wearing the hijab, or headscarf, in public places. Thus the impetus is less religiosity per se than the need for a mechanism to define the community in relation to increasingly hostile attacks and the pressure to abandon their own cultural practices and integrate into French society. Arguably, identity does not become an issue until it is threatened – for example, French speakers in an English-speaking society (Canada perhaps). Calming identity conflicts, writes Maalouf (2000a), ‘will mean making people, especially minorities, feel included’.

Scholars in Britain suggest that there has been something of a shift from racism directed at British African Caribbean youth to racism directed at Asian youth since the 1990s and a rapid growth in anti-Muslim prejudice in Britain. This was noted in the Runnymede Trust’s report, ‘Islamophobia: a challenge for us all’ (1997). The Parekh Report, ‘The future of multi-ethnic Britain’ (2000), commented that Muslims, because of their cultural difference, have become the principal target of racist resentment in recent times. Where a group suffers rejection by the majority, ‘reactive ethnicity’ or ‘oppositional culture’ may be the result (Fordham and Ogbu 1986) leading the group to dampen or reject mainstream national identification. Ali (forthcoming) found that while socio-economic outcomes are important determinants for Muslims’ attachment to Britain, perceptions of discrimination are significantly more important contributors; the unfair nature of discrimination is more problematic than socio-economic difficulties alone. While the so-called ‘melting pot’ may occur where majority and minority engage in mutual acculturation, the opposite may emerge where there is mutual rejection, leading to a distinctive culture (Heath et al. 2010).

The 2008 European Social Survey asked its respondents: ‘Would you describe yourself as being a member of a group that is discriminated against in this country?’ With the
average level of discrimination felt by Muslims across all countries being 12.2 per cent, we observe different levels for both large and small Muslim groups. Countries with large Muslim populations are found to have lower percentages of Muslims perceiving discrimination: 13.2 in Israel and 13.8 in Bulgaria. But a greater number of Muslims in countries with smaller Muslim populations seem to feel discriminated, as seen by the high levels in Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Germany and UK, all well above the average. Figure 19.1 shows this negative correlation between the size of the Muslim group and their perceptions of discrimination.

The survey also found that a significant number of Muslims in all these countries report ‘Religion’ to be cause of their discrimination. When asked the question ‘On what grounds is your group discriminated against?’, the percentage of those that chose ‘Religion’ to be the cause was 36.8 in Denmark, 33.9 in the UK, 29.5 in the Netherlands, 28 in Sweden, and 21.2 in Spain. As we noted in Table 19.2 Muslims in these countries also report high religiosity, supporting our hypothesis that when religion becomes the basis of apprehensive treatment, many Muslims become more, rather than less, religious as a result. Saroglou and Mathijsen (2007) also found that the high scores of religion among immigrants in Belgium reflected a deepening of association with Islam as a way of protesting against marginalisation or against Western values. These ‘reactive’ forms of identity formation may compensate for a lack of social approval and are most likely to emerge in hostile reception contexts marked by discrimination and a lack of upward mobility, which create the need for alternative sources of social status and identity. Since religion is an important foundation of ethnicity for many immigrant groups, this should also apply to religious acculturation processes. Thus a strong link can be made between religious discrimination and religious identity.

*Figure 19.1* Perceptions of discrimination by country

*Source: European Social Survey 2008*
Islamists in search of humanity

We love death the way you love life.

(Shehzad Tanweer)

These words uttered by Tanweer, one of the 7/7 London suicide bombers, have proved more incomprehensible in the West than perhaps any other statement made by contemporary militants. Indeed, they are so alien to the Western outlook that they have been cited as proof that the attackers were nihilists at best, if not cultish death-worshippers. However, Devji (2009) invites us to think more carefully about them. He thinks remarkably little public consideration has been given to the often-extended jihadist arguments. The ‘War on Terror’ has been conducted with a resolute determination to refuse a hearing to the ‘enemy’, whose motives Western governments have more or less made up for themselves. But perhaps the enemy has something to say. Our fixation on the sanctity of human life, Devji reminds us, is relatively new, and represents an impoverishment of our cultural roots. By placing so much emphasis on love of life, he suggests, today’s humanists have divorced their conception of humanity even further from Christianity than Islam. He uses the thinking of Mahatma Gandhi to make clear just how limited the Western conception of life has become.

The key to understanding the world-view of contemporary Islamist militants, in Devji’s view, is the global reach of Islam as ‘the natural religion of humanity’. While their optimal desire might be to convert the Western world to Islam, they would be happy if it returned to the principles of Christianity. Devji points out the centrality of charges of hypocrisy in Islamist critiques of Western – above all US-policy: ‘It is no exaggeration to say that hypocrisy represents an obsession for militant rhetoric’ (2009: 83). Men such as the London bombers do not fit the old stereotype of ‘professional terrorists’, they are ‘self-conscious amateurs’, and there is very little in the way of a ‘conversion narrative’ or a moment of decision to be found in their lives. Devji argues that new forms of militancy, such as the actions of al-Qaeda, are informed by the same desire for agency and equality that animates other humanitarian interventions, such as environmentalism and pacifism. To the militant, victimised Muslims are more than just symbols of ethnic and religious persecution – they represent humanity’s centuries-long struggle for legitimacy and agency. Acts of terror, therefore, are fuelled by the militant’s desire to become a historical actor on the global stage. Though they have yet to build concrete political institutions, militant movements have formed a kind of global society, and as Devji makes clear, this society pursues the same humanitarian objectives that drive more benevolent groups.

On a domestic level, factors such as the role of poverty and lack of democracy in Arab and Muslim nations can help to explain tendencies towards violence. Regional considerations such as the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) in Southeast Asia, and Hizb ut-Tahrir in Central Asia all work to accentuate the cause of militant Islamists. And on a global scale, external actors such as the US and Western Europe have inadvertently helped transnational Islamists through their invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (Alaolmolki 2009). For Ramakrishna (2009), the rationale behind JI’s terrorist acts in Indonesia is driven by their amplified existential anxiety over their identity. This condition develops when a person’s identity and culture interacts with geopolitical factors, local historical forces, and ideology to create the fear of group extinction. In the case of JI members, Darul Islamism is particularly central as this ideology not only provides a shared belief system and cohesion amongst its adherents, but also creates a sense of historic victimisation which in turn develops into an ‘us-versus-them’ vision of the world.

In his research, Hassan (2008) was struck, especially in the Middle East, by the all-pervasive sense of humiliation that arose from the inability of the Arab countries to equal the military
and economic superiority of Israel, and this sense of humiliation he thinks is a major underlying cause of Islamic militancy and terrorism. These feelings of humiliation are further reinforced by the economic power and absolute technological superiority of the West vis-à-vis Muslim countries and the privileged treatment accorded to Israel by the US in its foreign policy. The actions of Jihadi, notes Hassan, are not motivated simply by a ‘blind bloody-mindedness’ or by an ‘overwhelming desire to book a comfortable place in the hereafter’. For them, their jihad is religion in practice and is fundamentally a political action through which they are pursuing the establishment of a just society. Jihad, in the view of Hassan, is agreeable to resolution through negotiation with all parties being accepted and treated as equal citizens of a globalising world.

But for this to happen, first ‘jihad’ needs to be re-understood. Literally, jihad is given the fearful phrase ‘holy war’ but most Islamic scholars agree that jihad is nothing but struggle. In one sense, this struggle is intended to make the self good as a foremost virtue. In another sense, it is a struggle waged against injustice and oppression, and other bad practices in the environment. Of these two, Muslim scholars favour the first – it is the greater jihad, a life-long activity among Muslims. Declaring war on others in defence of Islam is accepted, but on certain conditions: only when the Ummah, or the global Muslim community, is on the verge of life and death, and when livelihood and survival is at stake. The Quran even warns the faithful about exceeding the limits, or else he is likewise guilty and risks penalty during the Day of Judgement. The Quran reads, ‘Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits, for God does not love transgressors’ (Chapter 2, Verse 190).

Ali (2003) rejects the notion that 9/11 was a historical event of singular significance, arguing instead that it was a ‘mere pinprick in the catalogue of atrocities humans have perpetrated against each other’ – including atrocities perpetrated by the US – and that it would have eventually been targeted. The real significance of 9/11, he argues, is that nineteen Muslim hijackers felt strongly enough about the US to commit suicide in order to make the political statement of striking a blow at it, and that the US must address the question of why. Sardar (2008) reminds us of the anti-colonial slogan British socialists used in his youth: ‘If you drop bombs on the heads of natives in their cities, the natives will drop bombs on yours.’ But whatever our creed, argues Gambetta (2006: 299), ‘most of us still want to succeed by living not by dying’, and to this effect signs of hope are existent even in the Islamic world. For instance, the Hezbollah, the inventor of modern suicide missions, has become more rooted in political life as an ordinary party and discouraging the role of violence-based terror.

**An exaggerated narrative?**

There is evidence suggesting that perhaps the narratives surrounding Muslims are overrated or blown out of proportion. It seems reasonably clear, argue Wike and Grim (2010), that headlines from the last few years have influenced how non-Muslims in the West think about Islam and its followers. Here, Ali’s (2007) analysis of the way Islamists were represented in certain Western media outlets after 9/11 is useful. Investigating news and entertainment media, she shows how, at the hands of influential commentators, Islamic fundamentalism has become ‘a socially constructed concept’. Through various representational practices, as described in Hall’s book, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), media agents have played a significant role in giving ‘meaning’ to the culture of radical Islamists. The frequent association of terms such as ‘extremist’, ‘radical’, ‘Islamist’ (and very often of ‘Muslims’) to Islamic fundamentalists in her sample of newspaper articles transmits a negative discourse of a ‘disillusioned’ people seeking ‘revenge’ or ‘virgins in heaven’. Any attempt to put rationalisation in the heads of the ‘lost youthful Muslims’ was followed by a statement which discredited any such truth.
With some exceptions, Islamic fundamentalism was portrayed as an ideologist cult. Associating Islam to ‘terrorism’ gave it some personality which the reader could understand and relate to. Coined under new terms, this ‘threat’ or ‘cancerous tumour’ we are facing in the twenty-first century was shown to be intangible, something we cannot pinpoint and fight. Such depictions may lead one to question whether the Western media has lost its investigative approach. One might feel brave enough to even suggest that Islam has not only been hijacked by the terrorists but also by the mass media and policy-makers. Words such as ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ were used continuously to enlighten an audience of the ‘plural’ Western culture, highlighting the ‘difference’ between the West and radical Islamists. The differences in articulation across various media outlets demonstrated the fluidity in the language – signs and symbols – used to represent radical Islamists, thus reaffirming their socially constructed identity.

Some argue that Western-preferred explanations for Islamist violence are intended to curtail debate and critical thought, rather than offer true explanations and in doing so have been fixated in their denial of rationality in Islamism (Crooke 2009). The argument goes that Islamist armed resistance against the West did not emerge in a vacuum and its emergence was neither irrational nor motivated by divinely inspired whimsy, but is capable of a clear and reasoned historical explanation. Instead, at the heart of it the dispute is between two opposing views on what constitutes the ‘essence of man’. Underlying the conflict are differing religious insights – but this is not a straight confrontation between Christianity and Islam. The Anglo-Saxon tradition, which America embodies, emerged from the long-running struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism. Crooke observes that since the days of Oliver Cromwell, in the mid-seventeenth century, the mainly English-speaking world has come to regard its enemies as all those who hate liberty and God, and are immoral. These originally Protestant themes can now be observed in Western dialogue with Islam.

Conclusions and future developments

There has increasingly been the view that the true sense of threat in Western countries arises from radical Islamism, which is expanding dramatically and is portrayed as a new post-Cold War ‘threat’. Several events, most notably 9/11, have drawn attention to security threats posed by small groups of violent Islamic extremists. We should be wary, however, of making hasty conclusions.

We do find evidence suggesting the importance of religion to the identity of many Muslims living in non-Muslim majority countries and to some extent for those in Muslim majority countries as well. In contrast to their parents, who display strong diasporic ties to their ethnic affiliation and the country of origin, for a number of young Muslims in the West their religious identity is the most salient. They tend to play down their ethnic affiliation to a degree where religious identification takes precedence over ethnic or national ties. Some young Muslims claim that their vision of Islam is less culturally adulterated and closer to the ideal and essence of Islam. Furthermore, there isn’t a monolithic form and practice of Islam among Muslims, and even if religion is important to their self-identification, identity research suggests that shared identities usually mean different things to different people. There is agreement among academic scholars that the expression of religion by young Muslims is influenced by a myriad of complex social phenomena, be it the manoeuvring of their parents’ customs or traditions, the engineering of feminist agendas, or distancing themselves from adverse racial connotations.

Importantly, it was found that intolerance of cultural difference and demand for total assimilation can lead to the opposite reaction: a ‘reactive ethnicity’, or the adoption of Islam, partly as a form of rebellion against an inhospitable social environment. There is a point beyond which
discrimination and rejection by the majority society result not in Muslims’ denial of their reli-
gion, but rather in its reaffirmation. Rejected and unwanted, they turn to that which sets them
apart as a form of cultural self-assertion and a basis of identity. Thus Islam can become a form of
self-defence and a source of solidarity against a hostile dominant culture. While the vast majority
of young Muslims in the West stress the compatibility of Islam with Western culture, there do
exist some radical tendencies. However, research has continually shown that in most Muslim
communities only small minorities actually hold extremist views.

The vast majority of Muslim youth want what most youth want: to fit in, even if they wish to
retain religious traditions. They feel most strongly tied to the countries in which they live rather
than ancestral homelands and understand themselves to be stakeholders in Western societies.
Participation, cooperation, and dialogue are the operative terms in their mind. Most Muslim
youth do not stand out from their non-Muslim peers. Often, discussions about whether or not
Muslim youth ‘fit in’ and ‘identify as European or American’ focus on small minorities within
Muslim communities. For example, the controversy in France over whether headscarves should
be allowed in public centred around only an estimated 1,500 Muslim youth and adults who
wear headscarves, out of an approximate population of seven million Muslims in France. Young
Muslims are hence constructing both new identities and new frameworks for the practice of
Islamic politics in response to the conditions of life in contemporary society.

Alongside encouraging findings on constructive identity developments among Muslims,
there is also evidence to support the existence of Islamist violence. Domestic, regional,
and global factors can help to explain tendencies towards violence and can work to accentuate the
cause of militant Islamists. Scholars suggest that humiliation can be a major underlying cause of
Islamic militancy and terrorism. The key condition that makes it possible for some to humili-
ate others – which leads individuals to engage in violence – is a failure to understand the true
nature of identity. Identity is neither monolithic nor static; it is built up and changes throughout
a person’s lifetime. A failure to recognise the fluidity, multiplicity, and malleability of identity
is not only misguided but also dangerous. Furthermore, our obsession with security has seri-
ously unbalanced our sense of civic values and increased our vulnerability to terrorism so that,
in effect, terror increasingly determines our public agenda.

What can we conclude about the mobilising capacity of Islamic identity across diverse histor-
ical contexts? It would be fair to posit that because Islamic identities represent multifaceted nar-
rative fields, they hold no more innate mobilising capacity than any other identity. To speak of
an Islamic identity as a threat – in the same manner as speaking of Islamic civilisation as a threat
– not only suggests a level of coordination among Islamic communities that does not exist, but
also neglects diverse historical contexts, the mechanisms by which collective identities function
politically, and the political opportunities (including state intervention) that shape mobilisation.
The aim is not to deny the existence of Islamic identity but to focus on scrutinising the processes
and mechanisms that contribute to identity formation.

Finally, in ending this chapter a scene from the movie *My Name is Khan* (2010) comes to
mind. It is the story of an Indian Muslim immigrant, disabled by Asperger’s syndrome, in the US
who sets out on a mission to meet the president to say to him, ‘My name is Khan and I am not
a terrorist.’ Due to his special kind of autism, Rizwan Khan thinks in black and white, right or
wrong, and has little appreciation of social nuances. At one point, Rizwan enters into a mosque
to pray in a new and unfamiliar city, where he overhears a man fomenting dissent among fel-
low worshippers and calling for violence. He calls the man ‘Satan’ for encouraging hatred and
division rather than love and unity among the Muslim community, and throws a stone at him
bringing to mind the ritual stoning of the devil during Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.
In ritually confronting and opposing extremism, Rizwan establishes himself as an ideal repre-
sentation of true Islamic behaviour. His quiet merit and devotion to humanity eventually wins him supporters all over the country. Similarly for Ed, in the end it was exactly this suffocating school of thought among Muslims, as identified by Rizwan – Islamism’s disregard for Islam itself – which had moved him to reject fundamentalism, in his words, ‘true faith had not touched my heart in a decade’.

References


