From its emergence, in the first half of the twentieth century, Islamism as a specifically modern conceptualization of Islam as a comprehensive moral, social, and political system based on revelation and the normative example of the prophet Muhammad and the first generations of Muslims, has been critiqued by Sunni Muslims who considered Islamism a deviation from, if not a perversion of, Islam. Many have gone so far as to state that Islamism in general, and jihadist Islamism in particular, had nothing to with Islam. While this statement serves the obvious function of defending Islam against its numerous critics (not only in ‘the West’), it conceals the many ways in which Islamists have drawn on the Islamic tradition to form and authenticate their understanding of correct Islamic thought and conduct. It is in fact difficult to clearly demarcate Islamism (as long as it does not exert violence against others, especially Muslims) from mainstream Sunni Islam: there is considerable common ground epistemologically, albeit significantly less so with regard to practice; neither are unified; and like other Muslims, individual Islamists and entire Islamist groups have revised their assumptions and modified their strategies over time.

From an early period, the Muslim community (Ar., umma) has been internally diversified along various lines. Some of them are manifested in ‘sectarian’ affiliation (such as Sunni, Shi‘i, or Alevi) with their specific visual, emotional, and memorial cultures. Others articulate specific understandings of legal thought and method (the so-called schools of law, Ar., madhahib, sing. madhhab), or of theology and piety (Sufi, Salafi), with Sufism cutting across theological, legal, and ‘sectarian’ affiliation. Yet others are tied to culture and region. While many Muslims view this plurality as a source of strength, and evidence of the universal appeal of Islam, others consider it a threat to the unity of the community. Islamists with their drive towards unity based on purity and authenticity stand for the latter position. They make an absolute claim to truth, denying, or at least devaluing, the validity of alternative articulations of Islam.

Islamism

Islamism can be defined as a project to transform state, law, culture, and society in light of a particular understanding of Islam that is both textual and focused on sharia as law and that takes the early period as the normative model of an all-encompassing Islamic order. This definition addresses the Islamist agenda rather than the strategies pursued to realize it. Both make for major differences within the Islamic or Islamist trend (Ar., al-tayyar al-islami). From the
beginning, Islamism has been contested, and contestation is reflected in terminology. The terms ‘integralism’, ‘integralism’, ‘fundamentalism’, and ‘neofundamentalism’, ‘Islamic revivalism’, and ‘political Islam’ have all been used by non-Islamist observers, especially outside the Islamic world as conventionally understood. ‘Fundamentalism’ in particular has been critiqued as inappropriate, being derived from (American) Protestant models and closely identified with literalism (Shepard, 1987; Ruthven, 2007). Irrespective, the Arabic equivalent usuliyyun, which in earlier times had denoted Muslim religious scholars focusing on the ‘fundamental’ sources, has been widely adopted by speakers of Arabic, including Islamists. Since the 1980s, ‘Islamism’ has gradually come to be accepted as the broadest term to describe a wide range of individuals, groups, and parties propagating an Islamist agenda (Seidensticker, 2016).

Various taxonomies have been devised to distinguish between different types of Islamists: moderate, pragmatic, or legalist as opposed to radical, militant, extremist, or revolutionary; state- as opposed to society-oriented; integrationist and isolationist; quietist and jihadist; Salafi and Ikhwan (referring to the Muslim Brotherhood); locally rooted and translocal, transnational, or even global; fighting the near enemy (local regimes) or the far one (typically ‘the West’ in general and the US in particular, largely ignoring Russia and China). Islamism is a dynamic phenomenon, and like other socio-political actors, Islamists respond to changing circumstances with the attendant opportunities and challenges. In the process, some have modified their programme and/or strategy over time. At the turn of the twenty-first century, a new phenomenon emerged of individuals ‘converting’ to jihadism largely through social media and the worldwide net without formally associating themselves with existing Islamist groups and networks. At the same time, scholars have discussed the emergence of what has been called post-Islamism (Bayat, 2007).

This chapter is not about Islamism and post-Islamism, but about Islamist references to the Islamic tradition as well as Sunni Muslim responses to (Sunni) Islamism, focusing on a number of issues: religious authority and the caliphate; textualism, that is reference to the foundational texts of the Qur’an and Sunna, as well as to the early Islamic period and the ‘pious ancestors’; the conceptualization of Islam as an all-encompassing order structured by sharia; relations with non-Muslims, and ‘excommunication’ (takfir) of self-identifying Muslims; jihad and ‘moderation’ (wasatiyya). Given the enormous scope and variety of responses, Sunni authors living in Muslim-majority contexts and employing what they consider Islamic arguments will be privileged over secular voices, especially those living in the West.

Religious authority

Compared to other religious traditions, such as Catholic Christianity and important strands of Buddhism, Sunni Islam has been characterized by weak institutionalization, rather similar to Judaism (Gaborieau and Zeghal, 2004; Krämer and Schmidtke, 2006). The common assertion that under the conditions of modernity, religious authority has been ‘fragmented,’ allowing among other things for the emergence of Islamist claimants to religious authority, is ill-founded, for within Sunni Islam, religious authority had never been unified and uncontested. If up to the twentieth century, the caliphate as an institution was widely seen as indispensable for ‘upholding Islam’, the qualifications of its holders were frequently disputed, and by the tenth century, a number of competing Sunni caliphates had arisen in various parts of the Islamic world. When the caliphate was abolished by the Turkish National Assembly in 1924, it had already seen a number of major transformations, including the destruction of the Abbasid caliphate, by the Mongols, in 1258. From the late eighteenth century onwards, the caliph was occasionally described as the spiritual head of the global Umma, evoking the
medieval Latin Christian doctrine of the two swords: a spiritual one held by the church, and a temporal one wielded by lay rulers.

The Abbasid caliphs laid claim to genealogical charisma (as defined by Max Weber) through their descent from the house of the prophet Muhammad, and they were perceived by their followers as the head of the entire Muslim community, not just the Sunni one. They were able to use their aura of religious legitimacy to confer legitimacy on other rulers, who were in theory subject to them. The caliph’s function was to ‘uphold Islam’, to expand its boundaries, to secure peace and prosperity at home, and to ward off heresy and disbelief; some transmitted prophetic hadiths, others issued creeds carrying their names. Religious function, however, is not the same as religious authority. High-flying titles, including khilafat Allah, ‘God’s deputy’, and ‘the shadow of God on earth’, notwithstanding, caliphal claims to religious authority were disputed. In the so-called mihna (‘tribulation’, inquisition) of the 830s and 840s, the caliphs failed to impose a specific doctrine on the scholars of theology and law (‘ulama’), despite the latter’s lack of corporate institutionalization and the independent material resources tied to it. The mihna as a lieu de mémoire continues to be evoked by opponents of the powers-that-be, including Islamists. But it did not result in a decisive victory of one side over the other. In their majority, the ‘ulama’ continued to affirm the caliph’s role as guardian of the faith and the Muslim community (Lapidus, 1975; Zaman, 1997, esp. pp. 101–118, 201–213; Crone, 2004).

The rulers of Iranian and Turkic origin from the Seldjuks to the Ottomans, who ruled over large stretches of the Islamic ecumene, did not meet most of the criteria Sunni Muslim scholars had set for the caliphate, but they were Sunni Muslims, and they wielded the power (shawka) to maintain social order and correct religion as they understood it. Eleventh-century Sunni scholars and bureaucrats went as far as to assert that what ultimately counted was order and justice, not the Muslim identity of the ruler, reflecting the power of a monarchical tradition, which at least outside Morocco and the Arab Gulf monarchies, present-day Islamists condemn as un-Islamic (Dakhlia, 1998, Al-Azmeh, 2001; Moin, 2014).

Restoration of the (Ottoman) caliphate was a major issue in the 1920s, with the Indian-based Khilafat Movement especially strong in territories under British control (Minault, 1982; Özacan, 1997; Al-Rasheed, Kersten, and Shterin, eds., 2013). In Cairo, Rashid Rida (1865–1935), leading figure of the Sunni Arab reform movement progressively known as Salafiyya, editor of its mouthpiece al-Manar, and a major influence on emerging Sunni Islamism, advocated for an Arab caliphate. Hasan al-Banna and the Muslim Brothers supported this demand but did not make it a priority (Krämer, 2022), and neither do the majority of present-day Islamists. The foremost Islamist group propagating the establishment of an elective Arab caliphate is the Hizb al-Tahrir (Hizb-ut-Tahrir), founded in 1953 in Jerusalem by Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani (1909–1977) and today operating on a global basis, with a strong presence in Western countries (Taji-Farouki, 1996). The self-styled caliph of the Islamic State/Daesh, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (1971–2019), was not recognized as legitimate beyond his own group of followers and their allies (for the Islamic State ‘caliphate’, see ‘Abd al-Jabbar, 2017).

Following the mihna, the Sunni ‘ulama’ presented themselves as the ‘heirs of the prophets’, qualified to rule on religious and legal issues, on the basis of the authoritative textual sources. Yet they were never the sole speakers for Sunni Islam. By the twelfth century, Sufi shaykhs and dervishes, some of them revered as saints, had emerged as important players in the field. As a result, religious authority was dispersed well before the advent of modernity. Since the late nineteenth century, educated Muslim men and women, including ‘Islamic’ writers, Islamists, and their critics, have made a claim to religious authority and often been recognized as religious authorities by certain groups of people (Krämer and Schmidtke, 2006, esp. Introduction). The social media and the worldwide net have greatly increased the numbers of claimants to religious authority.
Islam as text

Reference to the normative sources of Islam, the Qur’an, which Muslims consider the unmediated word of God, and the Sunna of the prophet Muhammad (also known as Hadith, from the individual ‘reports’, Ar. sing. hadith, of which it consists), which most Muslims see as the explanation and application of God’s word, is basic to Sunni understandings of Islam (for the Qur’an, see McAuliffe, 2006; for the Sunna, see D. Brown, 1996; J. Brown, 2009). The same applies to reference to the exemplary practice of Muhammad in the two decades of his prophetic activity (610–632) and of the first generations of Muslims (Ar., al-salaf al-salih), men as well as women.

Differences between Islamist and non-Islamist expressions of textualism lie in detail and degree. Salafi Islamists in particular extend imitation of the prophet Muhammad and the salaf salih to aspects of everyday behaviour, down to eating, drinking, and clothing habits (see the contribution by Sheikh to this volume).

The focus on texts is not a modern invention. Yet in many pre-modern contexts, it was not the prevalent mode of living Islam. Muslim religious ideas, images, and practices have never been solely derived from the Qur’an, prophetic Hadith, and the normative tradition at large. Islam is certainly a discursive tradition (W.C. Smith, 1957; Asad, 1993, 2003), but discursive does not necessarily equal textual. In many settings, Islam was (and still is) mediated through people rather than texts, and the men and women involved did not always authenticate their behaviour or legitimize their claims to authority through reference to the Qur’an and prophetic Hadith. Many claimed a non-textual access to Truth, i.e., God. The emphasis on Islamic law (often subsumed under sharia) propagated by today’s Islamists as the only correct way of practising Islam does not adequately reflect how Islam was understood and lived for centuries by Muslims, Sunnis, as well as others (Ahmed, 2016, esp. pp. 80, 117–129). Saints and Sufis presented their paths to truth as valid and indeed superior, defying ‘legalist’ criticism of their teachings, rites, and conduct (de Jong and Radtke, 1999; Knysz, 2017, esp. pp. 4, 40, chapters 3 and 5; Chiabotti et al., 2017). The same holds true for Muslim philosophers (Stroumsa, 2020).

As a result of rising literacy combined with mass medialization, access to the Qur’an, Sunna, and the normative tradition at large have multiplied in an unprecedented manner, including for the majority of Muslims who do not read Arabic. For most of them, the Qur’an and Sunna constitute the irrefutable references for ‘constructing’ Islam. Alongside the mandatory devotional acts (Ar., ‘ibadat), they lend coherence and continuity to a global community of believers that has no unifying clerical structures and no communal offices and institutions, such as congregations, parishes, monasteries, and priests, to hold it together.

Islam as a system

One of the distinctive features of Islamism is its conception of Islam as an all-encompassing order, or system (Ar., nizam), based on sharia. A totalizing conception of Islam is not entirely alien to prevalent Sunni views of Islam as a faith or belief, a religion, and a way of life, in which the ethical and legal norms of Islam inform everyday behaviour and social rules. It is the weight given to politics, and the modern state, that can make for a difference, especially with those Islamists who see politics as an indispensable part of Islam requiring specific forms of political activism, association, and organization going well beyond the restoration of the caliphate.

While totalizing understandings of Islam are not a modern invention, they have been articulated with a special emphasis on law, or sharia, and set up as the antithesis of secularism by twentieth-century Islamic writers and Islamist activists, Sunni as well as Shi‘i. In the 1940s, the Indo-Pakistani journalist and activist Abul A’la Maududi (Abu l-A’la al-Mawdudi, 1903–1979)
spoke of Islam as a ‘seamless whole’ (Adams, 1983, p. 114; Hartung, 2013), insisting on the
wholeness of a pre-modern Islamic socio-moral order. According to Islamist presentations of
past and present, the irruption of colonial modernity and the imposition of the modern nation-
state cut up the original fabric to produce functional differentiation between religion, law, poli-
tics, culture, the economy, and the arts, replacing integrality, integrity, and connectedness with
incoherence, moral dissolution, and fragmentation. According to this view, secularization, by
reducing Islam to mere ‘religion’, entailed loss and destruction of authentic fullness and identity
rather than liberation from restrictions imposed by religion.
This view is echoed in an important segment of critical Western scholarship. It has been
supplemented by a debate, largely absent from Sunni and Islamist debates, whether the cur-
rent understanding of religion is a Western invention, whether pre-modern and by the same
token, pre-colonial Islam is to be considered a religion at all, and whether pre-modern Muslims
thought of Islam as a religion (Masuzawa, 2005). According to the advocates of the invention-
of-religion-thesis, the post-Enlightenment Western concept equates religion with interior,
individual, private belief as a “distinct mental state” rather than an order in which belief is inti-
mately linked to works, woven into the social fabric, and tied to power relations (Asad, 1993,
pp. 45–48). It is indeed true that prior to the late nineteenth century, Muslims did not conceive
of Islam as a clearly demarcated sub-system, constituted by, and limited to, faith and worship,
and detached from social life. However, this does not mean that prior to the advent of moder-
nity, Muslims did not, or could not, distinguish between religious and non-religious matters.
Claims to the contrary disregard a large body of literature written by Muslims for Muslims, in
genres ranging from legal texts and philosophical treatises through religious polemics to mirrors
for princes, courtly prose, and Sufi poetry (Krämer, 2021).
Scholarly enquiry into pre-modern Muslim notions of Islam has focused on the Arabic
din, which today is mostly translated as either ‘religion’ or an ‘Islamic way of life’ (Gardet, 1991; Glei
and Reichmuth, 2012). A number of Qur’anic references identify din (which in Hebrew, Ara-
maic, and Arabic is linguistically tied to debt, reckoning, retribution, reward, and punishment)
with the fulfilment of the obligations God imposed on his creatures. What emerges from the
relevant passages is a concept of din as piety (Ar., birr, taqwa, ihsan), which beyond the obser-
vance of specific acts and taboos requires a consistent pattern of conduct inspired by the fear
and love of God. An important strand of Sunni exegesis (for religious writings, see Reichmuth,
2016), which gained salience in the context of late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century (Sunni)
Islamic reform, linked din to piety in general and the ‘ibadat in particular: the ‘acts of worship’
through which the believers express their gratefulness and obedience to their creator. At their
core, Muslim religious scholars defined the so-called Five Pillars of Islam: the profession of faith
(shahada), the five daily ritual prayers (salat), alms giving (zakat), fasting during the month of
Ramadan (sawm), and, if physically and financially possible, the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj). All
were designed to be public acts that could be seen, heard, and numbered. By the same token,
they signalled communal loyalty and affiliation. Significantly, Sunni scholars also declared the
‘ibadat to be immutable and non-negotiable, forming part of what is fixed and stable in Islam
and distinguished from ‘social relations’ (Ar., mu’amalat), which were said to be contingent upon
time and place and, for this reason, more flexible and negotiable (Krämer, 1999, pp. 54–58).
Pre-modern Sunni Muslims therefore did not identify Islamic din with faith as a ‘distinct
mental state’. At the same time, they reflected on the distinction between al-din (suggesting a
concept of religion) and al-dunya (‘this world’) and their respective properties. Drawing notably
on the scholar and bureaucrat Abu l-Hasan al-Mawardi (d. 1048), they took the existence of
distinct but interrelated fields as a given without theorizing about this distinction. And while
they characterized al-dunya as the sphere of the mundane and ordinary, which was inferior to
the hereafter (Ar., al-akhira), they did not devalue it. Rather, they considered the religious (dini) and worldly (dunyawi) benefits deriving from specific acts and institutions to the individual and the community, including notably their safety and prosperity (Abbasi, 2020). The logic underpinning this approach intersected with legal reasoning, which discussed (and continues to discuss) the benefits (Ar., masalih, manafi) of specific acts and institutions for the welfare of the individual and, even more so, the community and society at large (Opwis, 2010). The Sunni tradition, therefore, contains both, the conception of Islam as a web of beliefs, devotional practices, and specified acts of worship, as well as pious conduct and obedience to God (ta’at Allah) more generally, and a distinction between religious and worldly concerns. The latter did not solidify into secular thought, but in many instances, it informed the political, administrative, and legal structures and policies of Muslim states and societies.

The Islamist concept of Islam as an order, or system (Ar. nizam), draws on important strands of the Sunni tradition but gives them a decidedly modern twist: according to the Islamist reading, the ethical and legal rules and norms of Islam do not just guide and inform individual and communal life. They structure individual conduct, public order, and government policies through the comprehensive and exclusive ‘application’ of Islamic law. The concept can be traced back to Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949), founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, who spoke of Islam as a nizam encompassing religion and state, law and culture, the military and the economy. From the late 1930s onwards, he insisted on politics as an integral part of Islam, which among other things, empowered Muslims to resist colonialism. In the 1940s he openly called for an Islamization of the Egyptian state and society including the implementation of Islamic laws (Isma’il, 2010; Krämer, 2022, chapter 6). However, it was only several decades after his death that the ‘application of sharia’ developed into the hallmark of Islamists in Egypt and other countries, who portrayed the Islamic order as an antithesis to secularism, building on the tropes of wholeness and integrity versus dissolution at the moral, social, and political levels.

Sunni critiques of the Islamist call for an ‘application of sharia’ can be radical or subtly nuanced. There are those who fundamentally critique legalist understandings of Islam to seek the essence of Islam in personal piety, spiritual experience, and close attachment to the community of believers (Ahmed, 2016). They do not necessarily identify themselves as Sufis. Some would call themselves Muslim liberals, or progressive Muslims (examples include the Indonesian association Islam Liberal; see Kersten, 2011). Others problematize the identification of sharia with a given body of law elaborated by (male) Muslim jurists of the early and middle periods (jurists’ law, Ar., fiqih), emphasizing the overarching objectives and values of Islam underlying concrete rules and regulations (Ar., maqasid al-shari’a, the ‘finality’ of sharia), and privileging what they call the ‘spirit’ of Islam, and the Qur’an, over its ‘letter’. Some explicitly give priority to ethics as opposed to law narrowly understood. Reference to the maqasid is common in reformist Muslim discourse on gender, and the role of women in particular (see, e.g., the group Sisters in Islam, based in Malaysia). It is also part of legal policies in a number of Muslim-majority countries that claim to apply sharia (Lombardi, 2006; Otto, 2010).

Established tools of Qur’anic exegesis and legal scholarship, such as abrogation (Ar., naskh), the distinction between generally binding and specific rulings, and historization (placing explicit rulings in what Qur’anic scholars identified as the ‘causes of revelation,’ thereby narrowing their binding power to particular contexts) serve to expand the scope of human discretion without formally abandoning commitment to the sharia as a comprehensive ethical and legal framework. Islamists tend to reject these tools as mere covers for a destruction of the legal and moral edifice of Islam, undermining the collective strength and fibre of the Muslim community to the benefit of its enemies.
Muslims and non-Muslims

Reference to the Qur’an, the prophet Muhammad, and the salaf salih implies reference to Mecca and Medina rather than to the territories conquered in the first century after Muhammad’s death. At this point, prevalent Sunni views of Islam and Islamic history, and Islamist views more particularly, sharply diverge from agnostic ‘scientific’ views, irrespective of where they are formulated. According to the latter, the basic structure of Islamic teachings, practices, and institutions was erected by Muslims, many of them first-generation converts, over the course of some three centuries, in the urban centres of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt rather than in Mecca and Medina. What emerged as ‘Islam’ resulted from continued exchange with representatives of other religious, ethical, moral, and philosophical traditions, notably Jews, Christians, Manicheans, and Zoroastrians. The Qur’an placed itself squarely within the monotheistic tradition and declared Islam to be the perfect religion (Sura 5:3). As importantly, Islam, in the dual sense of a community of Muslims and of a religious tradition in the making, established itself as hegemonic very early on. One century after Muhammad’s death in 632, Arab Muslims ruled over a vast geographical expanse between present-day Morocco, Spain, and Afghanistan. Today, the power and glory of the early period and the Islamic conquests are widely remembered as a source of pride and inspiration among Sunni Muslims well beyond Islamist quarters.

If religious difference easily converted into hierarchy, it could still translate into different policies. According to Muslim tradition, shortly after the journey (Ar., hijra) of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Yathrib, soon to be known as Medina (Ar., madinat al-nabi, city of the Prophet), in 622, the Muslim refugees entered into a treaty alliance, headed by Muhammad, with several of Yathrib’s pagan and Jewish clans. The alliance was based on an implicit distinction between religious and political affiliation and was formally laid down in the so-called ‘Constitution of Medina’ (Lecker, 2004). Many Muslims, and not only Islamists, believe that in Medina, Muhammad created what resembled a modern state, and that Muslims wrote the first constitution in human history (Faruki, 1971).

Under Muslim rule, non-Muslims whom the respective Muslim authorities classified as ‘people of the book’ (Ar., ahl al-kitab, mostly Christians and Jews) were granted protection (Ar., dhimma) in exchange for submission and the payment of a poll tax (Ar., jizya). The so-called Pact of Umar, attributed to the second Sunni caliph Umar b. al-Khattab (r. 634–644) but only fully elaborated several centuries later, was framed as a contractual agreement the Christians of Damascus had sought from their Muslim conquerors. It prohibited non-Muslims from dressing as Muslims did, wearing their hair and beards in a similar fashion, teaching their children the Qur’an, and practising their cult in areas inhabited by Muslims. The principle of rendering religious difference visible could be read as a strategy of conflict prevention. But it also fixed the social ascendency of Muslims over non-Muslims in minute detail (Friedmann, 2003; Emon, 2012).

Over the course of history, Muslim authorities (political rather than religious) extended protection to communities that the majority of Muslims did not recognize as ‘people of the book’; Buddhists and Hindus in the Indian subcontinent are the most conspicuous examples. Some Muslim theologians and jurists worked out rules that would enable inter-religious coexistence based on recognition. Others, first and foremost Sufis, simply acknowledged the diversity of humankind, blithely stating the possibility that there was more than one path to truth and the Divine. The ecumenical approach reflected a profoundly religious approach, with no hint of a secular outlook.

In the modern period, inherited notions of superiority and submission have not entirely disappeared. Yet the emergence of the modern nation-state also entailed the concept of citizenship, and in most Muslim-majority countries, the poll tax was replaced with other symbols of
patriotism and national belonging, notably military service. Sunni Islamists such as Hasan al-Banna endorsed the principle of civic equality with reference to the established formula ‘same rights same duties’ (Ar., la-hum ma lana wa-‘alayhim ma ‘alaynā). In contrast, militant Islamist groups from the Egyptian Jama’at Islamiyya to the Islamic State/Daesh have sought to reintroduce the stipulations of the Pact of Umar including the poll tax in territories under their control (Emon, 2012; Krämer, 2022).

**Jihad and takfir**

Violence in the name of Islam against people of different faith, belief, opinion, and lifestyle, both physical and discursive, has been subject to intense inner-Muslim debate for centuries. In the modern period, it has brought forth a massive body of literature. ‘Jihad in the path of God’ (Ar., al-jihad fi sabil Allah) is only part of this larger phenomenon. Like the English term ‘crusade’, jihad can cover a broad spectrum of activities, from the peaceful fight against ignorance, hunger, and poverty to the armed struggle against those who have been declared the enemies of God. Muslim scholars have elaborated complex taxonomies, distinguishing among other things between ‘greater’ and ‘smaller’ jihad, or offensive and defensive warfare (Peters, 1996; Bonner, 2006; Afsaruddin, 2013). A major role was given to the religious affiliation of the enemy: Muslims; non-Muslims living permanently in the dar al-islam (territories ruled by Muslims) and recognized as protected people (Dhimmis); non-Muslims/unbelievers living outside the dar al-islam; and individuals and groups who consider themselves Muslims but who are judged to have left Islam of their own accord, under no duress, and who for this reason are classified as infidels or apostates. Most Sunni critics of Islamist violence do not critique the concept of jihad as such but rather the fixation on armed jihad, especially if it poses a threat to Muslim lives. Their argument tends to be primarily based on the Qur’an (see, e.g., al-Qaradawi, 2005; Amin, 2014).

Alongside the possibility of inclusion, tolerance, and recognition, Muslims have always had the option of seeking religious sanction for non-recognition, intolerance, and exclusion. The latter could go well beyond discursive othering, and islam in the sense of ‘submission’ to God could entail fighting those who resisted the call to Islam (Ar., da’wā). Non-Muslims permanently installed on Islamic territory and recognized as Dhimmis were by definition protected against attacks on their bodies, lives, and property. By contrast, jihad against external enemies has been an integral part of Muslim history. It was often offensive (examples include the conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries), but it could also be largely defensive, such as the struggle against colonialism, in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. Both are usually uncritically reviewed by Sunni authors well beyond Islamist circles.

**Shi’a and Sufis**

Inner-Muslim critiques focus on religiously sanctioned violence against men and women who self-identify as Muslims. In the latter case, such action requires that the target first be declared an infidel (Ar., kafir, pl. kuffār) and excluded from the community (Ar., takfir) because of ideas and practices they either espouse or are said to espouse. In many instances, this involved the charge of worshipping people at the expense of worshipping God alone, which was equated withpolytheism (Ar., shirk, ‘association’), violating the core tenet of Islam that there is only one God (Ar., tawḥīd). Frequently this charge was directed against Shi’is and Sufis for their alleged veneration, if not idolization, of their imams, shaykhs, and saints. Like Sunni Muslims at large, Sunni Islamists have adopted different attitudes vis-à-vis Shi’i Muslims, ranging from their recognition
as believers (Hasan al-Banna and the early Muslim Brotherhood) to their exclusion from the community and even active jihad against them (examples include Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda/al-Qa’ida, Daesh, and their respective affiliates) (for a critical approach, see al-Khunayzi, 2012).

Similar diversity characterizes Islamist attitudes towards Sufis: many Sunni Islamists view Sufism with extreme suspicion. Militant Sunni Islamists in countries from Mali to Afghanistan have destroyed sites of Sufi congregation and saint veneration. Yet important figures of the Sunni Islamist trend, such as Hasan al-Banna and Abd al-Salam Yasin (1928–2012), who in 1987 founded the Moroccan Jama’at al-‘Adl wa-l-Ihsan (Association for Justice and Spirituality), held more nuanced positions: they distinguished ‘sober’, sharia-based Sufism from what they called ‘philosophical’ and ‘popular’ Sufism, considering the former a noble expression of Muslim spirituality and condemning the latter as alien to the Islamic faith and tradition (Lauzière, 2005; Krämer, 2022).

**Faith and works**

Looking beyond Shi‘i and Sufi Islam, hostility could also be based on ideas and behaviour that the men and women concerned considered perfectly legitimate within their own understanding of Islam, or that they attributed to culture, custom, and tradition. Sunni Muslim scholars disagreed over whether a particular act constituted a mere misdemeanor (‘minor sin’), which did not challenge the individual’s status as a believer, or a ‘grave sin’, which excluded them from the community and even justified taking up arms against them. Disagreement was related to the debate over the relative weight of faith and its profession, works, and consistent adherence to all obligations, commandments, and interdictions set down by God, the prophet Muhammad, or Muslim scholars of later generations. Religious scholars were not the only Muslims to reflect on this issue, and *din* was not the only Qur’anic term available to them. There was *iman*, *islam*, and *ihsan* (here: righteousness), *milla* and *umma* (both denoting community), none of them unambiguous. In addition, they resorted to post-Qur’anic terms, such as *’aqida* (creed or dogma) and *’itiqad* (creed, belief). Some distinguished between *din* and *islam*, in the sense of ‘surrender’ and ‘submission’ to God. Others placed *iman* (which is normally translated as faith), *’aqida*, *islam*, and *’ibada* under the rubric of *din*. Still others used *din* and *iman* synonymously, or subsumed *din* under *iman*. Some drew fine distinctions between belief and faith, such as, ‘belief’ as the confirmation of accepted teachings, or dogma, and ‘faith’ as the individual’s inner feeling and experience.

*Iman*, which is almost as difficult to pin down as *din*, emerged as crucial to definitions of belief and unbelief (Ar., *kufr*, literally ungratefulness; Adang, 2001; J. Smith, 2002; Schöck, 2010), and to the question of what determined the religious status of a Muslim, and what excluded them from the community (for the intricacies of the issue, see Modarressi, 2016). Many Sunni scholars of theology and law defined *iman* and *islam* as comprising ‘word and acts’ (*qawl wa-’amal*), that is to say the profession of faith (*shahada* and *tasdiq*, ‘confirming as true’) as well as praxis in the shape of correct ritual performance and habitual pious conduct (Krämer, 2021, pp. 24–29). The issue gained added urgency in the context of *takfir*, the exclusion of Muslims from the community under the charge of heresy or apostasy, often likened to excommunication as known from the Jewish and Christian traditions (Barakat, 2014; Adang et al., 2016). Prominent representatives of the Sunni Ash‘ari–Hanafi and Maturidi schools confirmed the necessity of both confession and acts but took the confession of faith as the ultimate criterion of belonging as long as it was not clearly contradicted, or invalidated, by speech and other acts that had to be classified as a denial of truth, i.e., Islam. By refusing to equate ‘minor’ sins
with apostasy, this position served the function of maintaining the unity of the community and protecting Muslim life. It was not just established Sunni Muslim scholars up to senior representatives of al-Azhar, based in Cairo, who many of their Islamist critics saw as mere ‘parrots of the ruler(s)’, who insisted that professed belief was decisive in recognizing a person as a Muslim, without denying the importance of praxis. Influential Sunni Islamists such as Hasan al-Banna adopted the same position (Krämer, 2022, pp. 247–250).

Modern discourse on takfir and violence directed against self-identifying Muslims refers mainly to three representatives of what has been categorized as militant Islam, two of them preceding the emergence of Sunni Islamism as commonly understood: the Kharijite movement of the seventh and eighth centuries; Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792), eponymous founder of the Wahhabi movement, based in the interior of the Arabian Peninsula, and Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), Egyptian literary critic, Muslim Brother, and one of the earliest and most influential theorists of militant Islamism. The Kharijites, who arose before Sunni and Shi’i Islam consolidated into clearly identifiable entities, called for exclusive obedience to ‘God’s judgement’ or ‘decree’ (Ar., hukm Allah) and considered even minor transgressions as a violation of this judgement, one that required Muslims to fight against their perpetrators, who were classed as infidels (Pampus, 1980; Francesca, 2003). As a historical phenomenon, the Kharijites were marginal – tribally organized men and women from the interior of the Arabian Peninsula whom many of their urban opponents saw as uncivilized. As a type they are still referred to today, mostly in order to delegitimize jihadist Islamists as modern-day Kharijites who through their acts of violence, placed themselves outside the consensus of the community and destroyed its unity and power (Kenney, 2006). In certain respects comparable to the Kharijites, with whom they shared the geographical and tribal background, but rooted in the Sunni Hanbali tradition, Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab and his followers regarded even minor infractions of Islamic norms and rules as manifestations of unbelief, classified the majority of their Muslim contemporaries as infidels, and actively pursued jihad against them. Their Sunni critics raised many of the charges still levelled against modern-day jihadist Islamists (Peskes, 1993).

Qutb, Hakimiyya, and Jahiliyya

In establishing the criteria of belief and unbelief, Sayyid Qutb drew on certain strands of the Sunni tradition but gave existing terms and concepts a new coloring. In line with the Muslim Brother aversion to speculative, or what they called ‘philosophical’ theology, Qutb shifted the emphasis from issues of theology strictly speaking (God, his essence, and attributes, which Muslims had debated for centuries) to issues of Muslim conduct, piety, and obedience. In doing so, he did not devalue the ethical dimension of Islam but put heavy emphasis on its legal obligations, facilitating a narrow understanding of sharia as law. Researchers with a focus on the modern period have highlighted the importance of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), leading scholars of the Hanbali school of law, for Qutbian and radical Sunni Islamist thought more generally (Sivan, 1985; Calvert, 2011). In contrast, experts on Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim have shown that in contrast to Qutb, both were deeply familiar with theology, philosophy, and Sufism, and modern radical readings are not only selective but often distorting (Krawietz and Tamer, 2013; Rapoport and Ahmed, 2015; Vasalou, 2016).

Qutb based his argument on the Qur’anic denunciation of those ‘who do not judge according to what has been sent down’ (Q 5, 44, 45, and 47), identifying it with sharia as law. He is best known for further elaborating the notions of jahiliyya (state of ignorance) and hakimiyya (the sovereignty of God). Qutb changed the established concept of Jahiliyya from a temporal
term denoting the pre-Islamic period, when ignorance did not reflect a personal decision, to a term implying a conscious revolt against revealed truth, amounting to apostasy (Ar., ridda), which was subject to severe punishment under Islamic law. Qutb considered those responsible enemies of God and declared jihad against them legitimate or even obligatory. Similar to the appeal to hukm Allah raised by the Kharijites, hakimiyya oscillated between the fields of law (judgement, decree) and politics (rule). Building on Maududi, who in the 1940s had coined the neologism to contest British rule and legislation, Qutb used it to delegitimize the Nasserist regime as equally un-Islamic. His distinction between societies acknowledging the ‘sovereignty of God’ (hakimiyyat Allah), and those where the ‘sovereignty of humankind over humankind’ (hakimiyyat al-bashar lil-bashar) prevailed because they were following man-made laws, is one of the reasons why Qutbian thought has been read by some as an Islamic theology of liberation (Yunis, 1995; Khatab, 2006).

In their response to Qutbian thought, Sunni Muslims and Islamists in particular have disagreed on when Jahiliyya had set in: after the period of the rightly guided caliphs, which ended in 661, and the onset of dynastic rule, or centuries later, after the intrusion of colonialism and the modern nation-state. Of more immediate concern was the question of who was to be classified as an infidel – the rulers who were held responsible for upholding Islam and the sharia, or society as a whole, with every single Muslim who did not openly denounce the existing socio-legal order being considered an infidel. According to Maududi, only parts of Muslim society had slipped back into the state of ignorance. Hasan al-Banna had rejected any kind of takfir except for instances of manifest apostasy (Krämer, 2022). The Muslim Brotherhood under the leadership of Hasan al-Hudaybi (1871–1973) distanced itself from Qutb’s revolutionary ideas in general and takfir in particular. A book published in the name of Hudaybi, Preachers Not Judges (Du’at la qudat), explicitly rejected the politization of terms derived from the Arabic roots q-d-y and h-k-m, which they saw as being essentially legal (al-Hudaybi, 1977).

Many exegetes, including later generations of militant Islamists, understood Qutb as differentiating between the diagnosis of collective Jahiliyya on the one hand and takfir on the other. Jihadist groups inspired by Qutb and the Azhar-trained radical preacher Umar Abd al-Rahman (b. 1938) (‘Abd al-Rahman, 2006) followed different trajectories. The Jama’at al-Islamiyya (Islamic Associations) and Tanzim al-Jihad (Jihad Organization), which in the 1970s formed at Egyptian schools and universities, restricted takfir to the rulers as representatives of the modern state. By contrast, Jama’at al-Takfir wa-l-Hijra, headed by former Muslim Brother Shukri Mustafā (1942–1978), extended takfir to the entire Sunni community and called for hijra (withdrawing from jahili society after the precedent of the prophet Muhammad) (Kepel, 1985; al-Fitna al-ghaʾiba, 2012; Lav, 2012).

But here, too, positions were not fixed: around 2000, the Jama’at Islamiyya, which in 1981 had assassinated Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat as the ‘pharaoh’ who had led his people astray (Kepel, 1985), renounced takfir and violence, explicitly warning Muslim youth against al-Qa’ida, and justified their ‘revision of concepts’ in a number of public statements and publications (Silsilat tashih al-mafahim, 2002, 2004; Zuhdi et al., 2004). The fact that they did so in prison, counselled by prominent Sunni scholars such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926–2022), and presumably with the hope of being pardoned by the authorities, aroused suspicion. But the revision was widely discussed (see, e.g., Ahmad, 2002; Habib, 2002; Munib, 2010; Raʾiḥat al-barud, 2011), and it fell in line with Islamist self-critique as articulated by members of the Egyptian and Kuwaiti branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, who in the 1980s denounced authoritarian patterns, intellectual rigidity, and unjustified violence within their own organization (al-Nafisi, 1989).
Yusuf al-Qaradawi is also one of the foremost advocates of wasatiyya, an appeal to moderation and a centrist position (Ar., al-wasat), especially when confronted with violence in the name of Islam. Wasatiyya as an abstract noun can be traced back to the 1960s (Gräf, 2009) and was given a fresh impetus by the jihadist violence of 11 September 2001. The term suggests a balanced mind and position, or the golden mean, as cherished by philosophical, moral, and religious traditions as different as the Aristotelian and Confucian ones. Muslims could refer to Q 2:143, according to which they constitute the ‘community of the centre’ (umma wasat) (al-Talibi, 1996; al-Madani, 2007; al-Sallabi, 2007). In the Sunni tradition, moderation or centrism translated into the maxim to do neither too much nor too little, even in devotion (Ar., la ifrat wa-la tafrit). When pre-modern Sunni authors condemned ‘exaggeration in religion’ (Ar., al-ghuluww fi l-din), they denounced devotional practices such as ‘excessive’ nightly prayer and ascetic self-denial as monkish and hence un-Islamic (for these practices, see Reid, 2013). They also objected to what they regarded as the excessive devotion to, and veneration of, human beings, especially Shi’i imams and Sufi masters. At the same time, ‘centrism’ could be seen as an attempt to redirect a diversified community towards its core, or centre, as a precondition for regaining the strength, power, and unity projected onto the early period. As such, it is primarily political in character. Moderation and ‘centrism’ have been advocated by leading Sunni Islamists from al-Banna to al-Qaradawi, as well as by political regimes combatting (certain representatives of) militant Islamism, such as Tunisia, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Given the risks of instrumentalization, wasatiyya has met with a certain amount of distrust, not only on the part of Islamists.

Notes
1 All dates refer to the Common Era (CE) not what today is called the Islamic calendar (hijri), starting with the migration of the prophet Muhammad in 10/622 from Mecca to Yathrib, which later became known as Medina. CE is calculated in solar and hijri in lunar years.
2 The relevant debates are restricted to specific segments of violence. As a rule, they do not extend to domestic violence.

References
Gudrun Krämer

Sunni Islam and Islamism


Masuzawa, Tomoko. (2005), The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism. Chicago: Chicago University Press.


Opwis, Felicitas. (2010), Maslaha and the Purpose of Law. Islamic Discourse on Legal Change from the 4th/10th to 8th/14th Century. Leiden: Brill.


Reichmuth, Stefan. (2016), 'The Arabic Concept of Dīn and Islamic Religious Sciences in the 18th Century: The Case of Murtuḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1791)', Oriens, 44/1–2, pp. 94–115.