



Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam

By Professor Gilles Kepel

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The late twentieth century has witnessed the emergence of an unexpected and extraordinary phenomenon: Islamist political movements. Beginning in the early 1970s, militants revolted against the regimes in power throughout the Muslim world and exacerbated political conflicts everywhere. Their jihad, or "Holy Struggle," aimed to establish a global Islamic state based solely on a strict interpretation of the Koran. Religious ideology proved a cohesive force, gathering followers ranging from students and the young urban poor to middle-class professionals.

After an initial triumph with the Islamic revolution in Iran, the movement waged jihad against the USSR in Afghanistan, proclaiming for the first time a doctrine of extreme violence. By the end of the 1990s, the failure to seize political power elsewhere led to a split: movement moderates developed new concepts of "Muslim democracy" while extremists resorted to large-scale terrorist attacks around the world.

Jihad is the first extensive, in-depth attempt to follow the history and geography of this disturbing political-religious phenomenon. Fluent in Arabic, Kepel has traveled throughout the Muslim world gathering documents, interviews, and archival materials inaccessible to most scholars, in order to give us a comprehensive understanding of the scope of Islamist movements, their past, and their present. As we confront the threat of terrorism to our lives and liberties, Gilles Kepel helps us make sense of the ominous reality of jihad today.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Gilles Kepel's *Jihadis* an intense, detailed examination of the militant Islamist movement over the last quarter-century. Kepel divides his book into two parts--"Expansion" and "Decline"--and posits that the September 11, 2001, attacks, rather than demonstrating "strength and irrepressible might," highlighted the "isolation" and "fragmentation" of a "faltering" and probably doomed extremist ideology. Kepel follows Islamism from its theoretical underpinnings in the late 1960s and its rapid expansion into Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans, and Central, South, and Southeast Asia, through the Taliban's ascendancy in Afghanistan and beyond. He explains Islamism's attractions, and outlines its severe shortcomings. With consummate skill, he illuminates the bewilderingly intricate effects global events (oil prices, the fall of Communism) have had on internal politics of individual countries, and vice versa. Kepel, wisely, refuses to prognosticate. Instead, his achievement is in providing--for the determined reader--a deeply authoritative context for the seemingly inexplicable events of the recent past. --H. O'Billovich

From Publishers Weekly

In this history of fundamentalist Islam, Kepel stands conventional wisdom on its head, asserting that the spate of Islamist violence during the last few years is a result not of the movement's success, but of its failure. A professor at Paris's Institute for Political Studies, Kepel clearly traces the rise of the contemporary Islamist movement from its origins in the mid-20th century through its later appearance in countries such as Malaysia, Algeria and Turkey, as well as in Western Europe. Its apogee, he argues cogently, was the 1979 revolution in Iran that brought about the defeat of the Shah and the rise of a fundamentalist Islamic regime. But while ideologies that fused Islam with political power gained adherents throughout the world in the ensuing 20 years, says Kepel, in no other country were Islamists able to seize and hold power for more than a few years, a factor that he attributes to the ideology's inability to attract both the middle class and the poor. "Muslims no longer view Islamism as the source of utopia, and this more pragmatic vision augurs well for the future," he writes. Despite some outpourings of support, he believes, Osama bin Laden and his followers squandered much of the movement's political capital with its attacks on American institutions, most notably the World Trade Center. Kepel's approach is not without weaknesses in many places around the globe, fundamentalist political Islam has transformed society and politics, even if Islamists have not been able to attain political rule. But amid the plethora of books on Islam released since September 11, this work stands out, both for its erudition and its provocative thesis.

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From Library Journal

The rise since the 1970s of political Islam and its revolutionary message has received ample coverage in popular and scholarly writings in the West. Aside from journalistic reporting, much of it by nonspecialists, there are few comprehensive and analytically sound books in the Euro-American world that explain the recent ascendance of militant Islam to the Western audience. This book by Kepel, a professor at the Institute for Political Studies in Paris and a leading European specialist on contemporary Islamic movements, is a welcome addition to the growing literature on this topic. Meticulously researched and written in a jargon-free narrative style, the book covers the trials and tribulations of political Islam throughout the world. The author explains how and why the promises of political Islam have not materialized and describes why contemporary Islamic movements have failed. A standout in the field of current books, this is a sophisticated and timely work that places the events of September 11 in historical and sociopolitical context and sheds greater light on the influence of Osama bin Laden and his movement. Highly recommended for large public and academic libraries. Nader Entessar, Spring Hill Coll., Mobile, AL

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David Conte:

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