Trauma, Myth, and Politics: Islamic Fundamentalism as Retrotopian Populism

Mohsen Abbaszadeh Marzbali

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran. m.abbaszadeh@umz.ac.ir

Abstract

While the politics of violence in Islamic fundamentalism has caught many eyes and hearts, there has been a void in the analysis of its populist dimension. A potentially insightful perspective might be to focus on the connection between the rise of reactionary mass movements and the effects of theories and practices of modernization. What connections does radical religious populism have with experiences of modernization? The paper hypothesizes that the evolution of fundamentalist ideology and movement can be narrated as the unfolding of constant, triangular interaction among collective trauma resulting from community dislocation, mythical meaning-making, and mobilizing populism. Built on a combinative framework derived from Arendt's conception of mass society and Cassirer, as well as Barthes's conceptualizations of mythical thinking, this paper explores the interconnection of the discontents of modernity, the rise of mythical political worldviews, and politics as a mission for community building. In this vein, the paper highlights the relation between the mythical reduction of sharia, the fantasy of "the pure society," and the constructive function of sacred violence in Islamic fundamentalism, focusing on Jihadi Salafism. Lastly, within a comparative framework, the paper argues that politics of violence in Islamic fundamentalism as religious populism is less derived from Islam than a specific narrative of truth (in mythical political worldview) that can also be viewed in other modern ideologies such as fascism and communism; a narrative which has a considerable connection with discontents of modernity.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

Despite increasing public awareness and some experiences (even though shaking) of democratic institutions in the contemporary Middle East, the region has constantly been subjected to the rise of radical religious populism, i.e., Islamic fundamentalism. While the politics of violence in radical Islamists has caught many eyes and hearts, there has been a void in the analysis of the populist dimension of the phenomenon.

Indeed, from a political practice perspective, Islamic fundamentalism should not be seen as an elitist religious uprising. Instead, it appears as a populist movement that mobilizes the masses under the charismatic leadership of religious elites. Theoretically, religious fundamentalism cannot be interpreted as an individualistic ascetic doctrine that denies worldly life in favor of the afterlife. On the contrary, it is a collectivist political ideology that aims to organize worldly life to ensure salvation in the afterlife. This successful mass mobilization is due to linking material demands with religious teachings (or, more precisely, articulating material and spiritual demands within a religious discourse). Naturally, denying material demands in favor of solely spiritual ones would prevent fundamentalists from achieving mass appeal.

Moreover, the distinction between "political Islam" and "Islamic Fundamentalism" should be noted. Although these two concepts are interconnected by the conviction that "Islam is the solution," they are not entirely identical. "Political Islam" refers to a political agenda centered on establishing a global Islamic order, pursued through two interrelated dimensions: challenging the existing conditions in Islamic nations and building a transnational communication network across the Islamic world to promote Islamic peace and stability. Conversely, "Islamic fundamentalism" signifies an emotional, spiritual, and political response by Muslims to an ongoing social, economic, and political catastrophe. This response targets both the apprehension of the "Westernization" of Islamic culture and direct Western influence (Ehteshami, 1994).

More precisely, "political Islam" is the conviction in a political agenda based on Sharia for governing a Muslim society, whereas "Islamic fundamentalism" relates to the interpretation of Sharia for that objective. This difference clarifies that political Islam may encompass either a fundamentalist or non-fundamentalist reading of Sharia from a theological perspective. It can politically endorse both theocratic and democratic government models. The divide between the extremist and moderate factions of the Muslim

Brotherhood is one of the most evident instances of this division.

Surprisingly, mainstream studies of religious radicalism have ignored these significant dimensions. Nevertheless, the coherent alignment of material and spiritual demands under the idealistic ideology of Islamic fundamentalism (especially when in a negative or oppositional stance rather than a positive or governing one) cannot be understood without considering the context in which this phenomenon emerged.

A possible insightful outlook might be concentrating on a connection between the rises of reactionary mass movements and the effects of theories and practices of modernization historically prevailing over the region. Specifically, another reason for the mass appeal of Islamic fundamentalism lies in how it has emerged and been framed as an alternative and a reaction to the failed modern and quasi-modern ideologies in Islamic societies.

What connections does radical religious populism have with experiences of modernization? This is the principal question that guides the narration in the present research. The paper hypothesizes that the story of the evolution of fundamentalist ideology and movement can be narrated as the unfolding of constant, triangular interaction among collective trauma resulting from community dislocation, mythical meaning-making, and mobilizing populism. This hypothesis pertains to Islamic fundamentalism in a general context, with particular instances related to Jihadi Salafism.

2. Theoretical Framework

Built on a combinative framework derived from Arendt's conception of mass society and Cassirer, as well as Barthes's conceptualizations of mythical thinking, this paper explores the interconnection of the discontents of modernity, the rise of mythical political worldviews, and politics as a mission for community building.

2-1. Mass Society (Hannah Arendt)

In Arendt's analysis, a mass society is one where we observe atomized masses. This means a society where the population or people have turned into a collection of isolated individuals who have no mental connection or social solidarity with each other but are merely physically present alongside each other. According to her, the reason for this phenomenon is the encounter of traditional society with rapid and incomplete modernization, which results in an anomic society and the masses being left in a state of identity confusion. This type of individual and social psychological crisis arises from a situation

where, on the one hand, the traditional ties that connected people (pre-modern social groupings) have been severed, and on the other hand, modern connecting links (civil society) have not yet appeared (Arendt, 1973). Consequently, this disillusioned society is thirsty for liberating ideologies and charismatic leaders who can promise to revive solidarity and provide a credible and accessible solution to the sufferings of the anomic situation, according to critical discourse analysts. In such a context, where the masses have become disillusioned with conventional and rational solutions, mythical thinking in the form of political ideologies has the greatest power to provoke and mobilize the masses.

2-2. Mythical Thought (Ernst Cassirer)

In Cassirer's phenomenological analysis, mythical thinking is considered a kind of intentionality or how the mind encounters phenomena, which organizes and gives meaning to the world based on intuitive knowledge. Here, human reasoning and intellectual contemplation play no role in recognition; rather, the mind is captive to the intensity and impression of intuitive feeling. Thus, the order of the world is represented by myth in a way that, relying on intuition, its propositions become immeasurable to humans, and one reaches an understanding of truth merely by "believing" in the myth's narrative of things (Cassirer, 1965). According to this logic, desired political goals, norms, and order are also defined by referring to an essence outside the political community, which can only be understood by believing or intuiting the categories depicted by myth-makers. For instance, concepts like nature, history, ethnic spirit, etc., are portrayed as an authentic essence from outside the political realm that dictates the desired political order as a contrived state. Consequently, legitimate political action can only mean moving within the orbit of political myth. Here, an individual as a subject can only be recognized politically by merging their individuality into the "mythical community" and the "predestined fate." Therefore, political agency is understood concerning this mission and, in fact, by following political authority (as the embodiment of the mythical community). Cassirer identifies political ideologies as contemporary instances of mythical thinking (Cassirer, 1961).

2-3. Ideology as Mythical Discourse (Roland Barthes)

In Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis, ideological discourse is fundamentally mythical discourse because, unlike philosophy, which aims to stimulate individual reasoning, ideology seeks to arouse the audience's emotions by

simplifying the complexities of reality (mythical reduction) and offering simple solutions. Myth, according to Barthes, is a form, speech, or mode of signification that reduces multiple interpretations to a single specific interpretation. In this sense, any content (including religion) becomes a myth when placed in a reductive form. The characteristic of myth is to congeal meaning or to strip meaning of its historical particularity; that is, something historical and related to a specific time and place is detached from its historical context and given certainty and eternity (essentially reducing it). Thus, myth is a system of solid truth that leaves no room for the audience's reasoned examination. The attraction and motivational power of myth for its believers lie in this characteristic, as their relationship with myth is based on a psychological need rather than truth-seeking. This means the consumer of myth perceives its message as truth not because it aligns with logical and rational scrutiny criteria but because it satisfies their need for that truth (Barthes, 2007).

2-4. Combination and Application

This combinative theoretical framework can be used to analyze the relationship between the socio-psychological conditions of Islamic societies, fundamentalist political thought, and populist mobilization. Islamic fundamentalism rises in the anomic conditions of transitional Islamic societies, a product of two synergistic processes in undermining the foundations of traditional society: the exogenous process of colonialism and imperialism and the endogenous process of quasi-modern and Westernizing policies of follower states. Here, Islamists exploit the traumatic psychological conditions of disillusioned Muslim masses, maneuvering around the failures of secular, liberal, and socialist ideologies to provide solutions and instead offering an ideological and reductive interpretation of Islam as a native alternative. In this framework, they present their political myth to mobilize the masses under the fantasy of a "pure Islamic society" and advance their political project even through the notion of sacred violence.

3. Community Dislocation and Collective Trauma

Islamic fundamentalism, as a religious ideology, can be understood and analyzed as a form of "reactionary modernism." Jeffrey Herf uses this term to describe the coexistence of anti-modern ideas (denial of Enlightenment values such as rationality, freedom, equality, and liberal democratic institutions) with extensive reliance on modern instrumental rationality and its products

(bureaucracy, advanced industries, military technologies, propaganda techniques for mass mobilization, etc.) (Herf, 1984). Similarly, Islamic fundamentalism emerges by "ideologization of religion" as a blend of two contradictory aspects (myth-making and alignment with instrumental rationality): "Their magical and irrational categories stem from the unconscious metaphorical role, and their rational apparatus functions by instrumentalizing rationality" (Shayegan, 1994, p. 19).

Given the syncretic nature of Islamic fundamentalism and, more precisely, Jihadi Salafism, John Gray notes, "Anyone who doubts that revolutionary terror is a modern invention has chosen to forget recent history. The Soviet Union attempted to embody the Enlightenment ideal of a world free of power and conflict. In pursuing this idea, it killed and enslaved tens of millions of people. Nazi Germany committed the worst genocide in history, aiming to foster a new type of human. No past era conceived such projects. Gas chambers and gulags are modern. Similarly, no stereotype is more misleading than seeing al-Qaeda as a return to the Middle Ages. Al-Qaeda is a byproduct of globalization … its most distinctive feature is the organized planning of private violence on a global scale, which was previously impossible" (Gray, 2007). Slavoj Žižek, in a similar analysis, deems "perverted modernism" an apt term for describing ISIS's radicalism: "While their message may be old and premodern, their form and methods are entirely modern. Therefore, instead of seeing ISIS as extreme opposition to modernity, we should understand it as a distorted form of modernity" (Žižek, 2014).

This type of ideology appears in reaction to the "discontents of modernity," aiming to resist the main pillars of modernity originating from the Enlightenment era (liberalism and capitalism). (Nolte, 2020). The point is that in the context of Islamic societies, the discontents of modernity appeared in the form of the dual traumas of foreign imperialism and domestic despotism. The common element of both, regardless of their level and manner of connection, was the imposition of external political and economic policies on domestic social relations, prompting resistance from the native community led by Islamists (Sayyid, 2003).

On one hand, colonial interventions in the 19th and early 20th centuries to secure exploitative privileges were like wounds on the bodies of various strata of Islamic society. In this context, Bernard Lewis, in his book What Went Wrong? views the anti-colonial stance in Islamic societies as a repetitive action rooted in paranoid fantasies and conspiracy theories, which emerge in response to the question, "Who did this to us?" He describes this as a "blame

game," targeting Mongols, Turks, British and French colonialists, Jews, and now American imperialism, which he argues stems from Muslims' anger at having lost their former civilizational supremacy over the West (Lewis, 2003). Although this analysis cannot impartially capture the broad and varied phenomenon of Indigenous resistance movements,[1] it may be apt in the context of Islamic fundamentalism (and its peak in Jihadi Salafism).

On the other hand, the economic, social, and cultural structure of these societies underwent fundamental dislocation under "authoritarian modernization" projects. Bobby Sayyid, in A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism, provides a fitting summary of the academic literature on Islamic fundamentalism, listing the causes for the rise of this phenomenon as follows: (1) the failure of secular elites' plans, whether liberal or socialist, to gain public support, leading them to recreate European colonial order; (2) the absence of political participation, as civil and military disciplinary methods implemented by post-independence authoritarian regimes encroached unexpectedly upon people's lives and legitimate public spaces; (3) a middle-class crisis, as the ruling elites monopolized power and wealth; (4) economic inequality driven by petrodollars, where economic growth eroded traditional patterns of life and social ties, weakening traditional enterprises and rendering them vulnerable to global economic fluctuations; and (5) cultural decline, whereby Islamism emerged as a local reaction to Western-led global dominance and the erosion of indigenous culture (Sayyid, 2003).

According to his analysis, political Islam should be seen as a response to the hegemonic consequences of authoritarian, Western-oriented modernization. The dismantling of the Ottoman Empire by European powers territorially and by Kemal Atatürk and his followers ideologically fragmented the Muslim world into multiple nation-states led by modernized elites who removed Islam from major state issues and legitimized the idea that the national identities

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1. In criticizing such generalizations, Edward Said, citing Huntington's warning that "the Islamic crescent from the Horn of Africa to Central Asia has bloody borders," sees these analyses as oblivious to the obvious reality that Western interventions in foreign lands naturally foster a culture of resistance (Said, 1997). Said's concern, however, is not to absolve certain reactionary and radical Islamic trends but to highlight how one-sided representations and media stereotypes ignore the objective and historical conditions that give rise to such phenomena. Žižek argues that by searching within cultural traditions for the political causes of these issues, they are framed as if all Muslims possess an inherent genetic predisposition or inferiority complex, as if a "Muslim anthropological species" could be traced with a fixed and unchanging essence (Žižek, 2002).

embedded in nation-states were the only valid forms of political community. They also attempted to remove Islam from the public space by redefining it as an obstacle to modernization (Sayyid, 2003).

The initial potent feelings that shaped the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood were in response to the ostentatious excesses of the British in the Suez Canal area. This happened during a period when non-Muslim movements and narratives of Turkish Kemalism resonated in Egyptian culture. These considerations compelled Hassan al-Banna to vehemently reject foreign and heretical influences in an attempt to preserve the "Islamic community"— specifically, Western culture, materialist philosophy, and a lifestyle that neglected religious edicts. He swiftly acquired widespread popularity and converted the Muslim Brotherhood into an indisputable political entity (Nolte, 2020, p. 236).

As the milieu increasingly mirrored the effects of foreign interference and domestic political oppression, inclinations toward fundamentalism and violent conflict escalated. The transition of the Muslim Brotherhood from early moderation to radicalism may be examined in the context of post-World War II Egypt and the establishment of the state of Israel on Islamic territories (Ahmadi, 2011, p. 61–62).

Expanding this analysis to the contemporary globalized world, Roland Robertson and Manuel Castells argue that the rise of "fundamentalisms" can be viewed as the confrontation between local culture and rapid global culture—a rise of "particularism" in opposition to "universalism." Robertson notes that the pervasive influence of universality inevitably leads to a sense of threat within local cultures and institutions, which nostalgically turn to "fundament-seeking" to restore identity and maintain cultural cohesion (Robertson, 1992). Castells concludes, "The dynamics of globalization dialectically intensify the dynamics of fundamentalism" (Castells, 1999). Some analysts, referring to this as "postmodern geopolitics," explain the rise of new terrorism based on the contradictions stemming from "globalization as culture" versus "globalization as technique." The former enrages fundamentalists, while the latter shows them ways to respond (Luke, 2003). In this sense, the attack on the Twin Towers could be seen as an assault on the totem of the "cosmopolitan bourgeois lifestyle" and a reaction to its narcissistic compassion (Achcar, 2002).

The outcome of both processes appeared as a form of "mass trauma," formed from the accumulation of ignored demands and crushed values in the wheels of imperialistic or authoritarian modernization policies or

globalization. The widespread appeal to Islamic fundamentalism should be understood in the context of the masses' thirst to heal this collective trauma. Islamic fundamentalism, as an ideology, provides a straightforward, familiar (native) critical explanation of the crisis, i.e., the national backwardness results from the synergy of foreign colonialism and internal despotism. Then, it proposes solutions in the form of political Islam ideology as a way to transition to the desired order, seen by its mass audience as an antidote to the imperialism-despotism coalition.

In conditions where collective disillusionment manifests as a fundamentalist reaction against the internal and external symbols of the established global order, we witness, in the words of Fanon and Malcolm X, a "strategy of negation" (the boomerang moment or violent counter-action), an action that doesn't lead to any dialectical synthesis that could complete a future harmony, as the genuine process of political constructivism can only be achieved with positive logic, free from colonial dialectics (Hardt & Negri, 2001). In forming this reactive process, fundamentalist leaders, as ideologues of the movement, owe their success to an appeal to feelings of injustice, inequality, and humiliation among the masses, who see the established global order as responsible for these grievances (Sen, 2008). Leaders capitalize on this mass trauma by presenting an ideological narrative of religion, mobilizing the disaffected masses toward their political aims.

4. Mythical Alternative and Religious Mission

There is inherently a gap between religious texts and their interpretation, allowing for conflicting readings with opposing political implications. In other words, from the perspective of the approach to Sharia, if the dominant view among Islamists is rational (ijtihad-based), they are more likely to lean towards modernist and democratic Islamic models. In contrast, if the prevailing approach is literalistic and fundamentalist, as for Jihadi Salafism, there will likely be a tendency toward reactionary models, which, when combined with the instrumental aspect of modernity, lead to a form of Islamic totalitarianism (Ghezelsofla & Abbaszadeh Marzbali, 2023).[1]

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1. As discussed in analyzing the emergence of mass trauma (Sayyid, 2003), the ability of either tendency to gain hegemony depends on environmental variables such as the level and orientation of economic development, the quality of national governance, the dominant cultural discourse, and the structure of political opportunities. For more detail, see (Ghezelsofla & Abbaszadeh Marzbali, 2023)

Within Islamic fundamentalism, more especially in Jihadi Salafism, the Islamic alternative to the existing condition is conceptualized based on a literalistic, nostalgic, retrogressive, and, in Barthes's sense of the word, mythical understanding. Rather than attempting to rearrange religious knowledge and discover contemporary instances of the Sharia message, fundamentalists seek the "foundations," i.e., a Sharia untainted by rational and mystical interpretations. They rigidly adhere to the literal interpretation of religious texts (the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet) and the understanding of Primordial Islam, rejecting rational methods for understanding religion and considering this literalism as the sole expression of religiosity (Shihadeh, 2016, pp. 12-14). In fact, without regard for the historical context of religious texts (i.e., the circumstances of revelation of the verses and the meanings of the narrations), they merely reference the form (the literal text). Instead of engaging intellectually (ijtihad) with the complexities of texts and arguing to discover the meaning of commandments, they pursue simplicity and action according to the apparent rules to address complex historical and contextual issues with simple, supra-historical, and abstract truth (pure Islam).

Hence, drawing from Roland Barthes' conceptualization of ideological discourse, we observe a kind of ideologization of religion within the framework of Islamic fundamentalism, manifested through a mythical engagement with religious texts; the ideologization of religion entails disregarding the extensive interpretability of faith and reducing it to a specific and definitive interpretation. Therefore, there is not only no room for recourse to collective reason and custom to create suitable laws to meet the needs of Muslim individuals and manage contemporary Islamic societies but also, ijtihad (interpretative reasoning) to update the religion is considered impermissible, as it is believed that there are explicit rulings for all aspects of life. Consequently, the function that ijtihad could serve in making religion more flexible is not only absent but also regarded as a source of deviation from religion and innovation.

The result of this methodological reductionism in understanding Sharia is to make matters meaningful based on a solid, immeasurable truth in the form of a religious commandment, where intellectual endeavor and logical reasoning have no place, but intuitive belief and faithful action are presented as the conditions for religiosity. Utilizing Cassirer's analysis, an individual can only acquire knowledge by dissolving their mentality in the "mythical narrative," where the object becomes knowable. Anything that lies beyond this focal point

is effectively removed from the view of the mind. These other things remain "unseen" until they are equipped with a "mythical index" (Cassirer, 1965). This trait is closely related to the purpose of mythical discourse: providing meaning and stimulating action; here, the relationship between intention and the way of mythical signification becomes apparent. Myth is a symbolic and metaphorical expression aimed at justifying and promoting its claimed truth, to convince and incite the audience to act following it.

One of the most prominent examples of this mythical approach to religion can be seen in Jihadi Salafism, which mythologizes the common interpretation of Sharia from a historical period (early Islam), considering it eternal and an absolute truth that future generations must follow without any ijtihad. Therefore, without regard to the historical content of religious texts (the context of revelations and the meaning of traditions), they merely refer to the form (the apparent text). Thus, they strip religion of its rational purpose and turn it into an ideology oriented toward action and a fighting ritual.

A clear instance of this "reduction of religion to myth" can be seen in the rigid adherence to the form of religious rulings, which reduces faith merely to the performance of rituals by neglecting the purpose of Sharia. In this sense, Salafi Islam appears as a mythical ideal through which all dimensions of contemporary societies must be rejected as manifestations of a state of ignorance and deviation (Qutb, 2007) to restore this mythical truth. Here, every subject is divided into a primary binary opposition, where no scale exists other than the phrase "either this or that." Takfir (excommunication) is also based on this polarization, meaning the complete acceptance of the principles of a specific belief, while rejecting and deeming a person a disbeliever when they deviate from this path (Belkeziz, 2009). Naturally, when the current situation is deemed "ignorant" (Jahiliyya), and conventional mechanisms for organizing it (including modern and quasi-modern arrangements and even jurisprudential systems) are rejected and excommunicated to pave the way for a "real revival" of religion (according to the fundamentalist interpretation), the realization of this "mission" will depend on an unwavering "will" that stems from belief in the myth (Islamic fundamentalist ideology).

Therefore, unlike traditional Islamists, fundamentalist Islamists "establish a mechanical connection between action and faith" (Sayyid, 2019, p. 195) because ideology must be transformed into a coherent practical program (Minhaj). Thus, instead of merely imitating tradition, a true Muslim must go beyond adhering to the five pillars of Islam and engage in activities to build the ideal society, challenging both religious institutions and state power

(Dekmejian, 1995). In this context, the term "action" refers specifically to "struggle." As Abd al-Salam Faraj, the leader of the Jihad Organization, states in his pamphlet The Absent Obligation: "An Islamic state is impossible without the struggle of a committed minority… Now, when all means of communication are in the hands of infidels, corruptors, and enemies of faith, how can we imagine that propaganda or preaching and invitation will be successful?" (Sivan, 1985, p. 127).

Here, the interpretation becomes clearer that ideology, by calling for struggle in pursuit of definite goals and preparing the necessary mechanisms within chains of group actions, is the primary element that drives individuals toward violent actions (Borum, 2004, p. 46). Therefore, although the main tool of ideology in linking theory and practice is the construction of a "social myth" (Jennings, 2001), and social myth is essential for any collective action, as it mobilizes the creative forces of an era, it can sometimes be co-opted by reactionary forces. Myths are prone to intertwining with violence, especially in totalitarian ideologies.

The most significant and dangerous illustration of this mythical religious story is seen in the conception of jihad, which justifies violence and terror against both non-Muslims and Muslims alike. In this ideological (literalist) context, Jihadi Salafism perceives jihad as an obligatory individual duty, but conventional Sunni jurisprudence classifies jihad as a collective responsibility, rather than an individual obligation. Jihad is seen as necessary within the Islamic community, although, traditionally, it has pertained to opposing a non-Muslim foreign adversary.

In explaining this phenomenon, attention to the impact of the ideological interpretation of religion on personality structure can be enlightening. In ideological actions, the authenticity of the "self" transforms into the authenticity of the ideological organization of the mind. An ideological individual, of any type, prefers the ideological "self" over the personal self. Consequently, ideological belief leads to the emergence of a certain type of believing individual who claims a monopoly on truth. This "belief" is nurtured within the framework of "particular modes of reasoning," which Arendt refers to as the "logic of ideology" in her book Totalitarianism; a logic that develops the course of events as if it follows the law of the logical expansion of its idea (Arendt, 1973). Daryush Shayegan explains this principle by stating: "For instance, if the main idea is that only a superior race should survive because it is inherently more deserving, or that only the class with a historical mission should prevail, or that only those truths found in sacred texts hold validity,

then, based on the reductive logic of ideologies, one can conclude that in the first case, 'unworthy' and 'inferior' races should be eradicated; in the second case, 'depraved classes' should be destroyed; and in the third case, the pages of history should be cleansed of the existence of infidels" (Shayegan, 1994, p. 10).

5. Mobilizing Populism and Sacred Violence

Georges Sorel, in his book Reflections on Violence, considers violence mythically inspired as a tool for liberation, as he believes that politics is a domain where ideology must strive to create a new situation through negation, and the will to achieve this manifest as violence, albeit violence acting according to specific moral principles. Myth, as a set of images appealing to instinctively aroused emotions of humans, can create an irrational fervor among people, encouraging them to act courageously and engage in "heroic action" (Tudor, 2003, p. 32). In this framework, since the prerequisite for mythical thinking is the readiness to equate the part with the whole, no individual is regarded merely as a single person; rather, they are a representative of the group to which they belong and a symbol of all the characteristics—whether right or wrong—that people attribute to the members of that group (Tudor, 2003).

The creation or revival of a pure community, central to the mythic depiction of a desirable future, motivates heroic action among the ideology's followers. Heroic action legitimizes violence as a tool for transition. This process leads to the dominance of collective fervor over critical reasoning and individual responsibility through two mechanisms: (1) The erosion of critical thinking foundations due to the dissolution of individual subjectivity in the distorted conceptualization of the community (or more precisely: the ideological imagined community), (2) The transformation of the other into evil through identity formation based on extreme othering, inevitably turning the other into a deserving object of violence and the subject of sacrifice in the political rituals that solidify the ideological community. In this sense, collective violence is founded on rejecting two fundamental concepts that, according to mythic worldviews, act as counter-notions to unity and community cohesion, namely, individuality and the other.

Jihadi Salafism, the most radical form of Islamic fundamentalism, provides the most prominent examples of the process of exporting collective violence from mythical thinking. In this religious ideology, the ideologization of religion is conducted through a simplistic understanding of religion (literalist,

past-oriented, and rigid) to stimulate action, adopting an inflexible stance toward the current state and methods of its reform. Politics in this discourse is perceived as a mission rather than a sphere of transactions or, in legal terms, dealings that can be negotiated regarding their aspects. Since politics is the arena for establishing and realizing principles, discussions of negotiation, compromise, and prioritization become meaningless; politics offers no other path than to judge individuals and categories and then engage in jihad based on that judgment (Rajaei, 2002, p. 150).

Therefore, the current state appears as a state of exception that needs to be rectified, but this necessitates a will to accept the obligations that arise from it. The cleansing of society in alignment with this aforementioned mission is one of the essential stages. Thus, violence as an unavoidable tool for fulfilling this duty (and, therefore, a sacred act) becomes necessary. Naturally, the act of violence is directed toward an audience whose existence is considered a threat to the cohesion and unity of society. This requires the sacrifice of the other of the authentic and faithful community (i.e., the infidel as homo sacer) as a definite part of the project of revival of pure society. (For example, the concept of Rafidhi[1] (especially Shia) for ISIS was akin to the Jew for Nazism). Since violence is justified by the creation/restoration of the "authentic community," it is based on a form of populist polarization (the community of believers versus the community of Rafidhis and infidels).

Populism promotes a specific moralistic view of politics by establishing a particular relationship among three concepts: the people, the elites, and the general will (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). It presents the people as a single, homogeneous block, embodying an absolute "moral sovereignty" that does not err, set against corrupt elites; the people whose unassailable public will is expressed by the leader without the mediation of elites or intermediary institutions. However, there is a duality in the populist notion of the people, or more precisely, the ordinary people, which transforms it into a concept that is both unified and divisive. On one hand, it refers to a "homogeneous whole" that indicates the "formless and institutionalized mass" as a "mysterious body" (Muller, 2016). On the other hand, it considers a part of the people to represent all people. That is, the concept of the people refers to the "true people," abstracted from the totality of citizens, or, in other words, to the non-

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1. "Rafidi" is a derogatory term used to mock those Muslims who have turned their back on their leader. Some Sunnis use this term for Shiites, given their rejection of the Sunni Rashidun Caliphs.

experimental people that rely on details of the "entirety of the people" (from the perspective of class or social and cultural status) (Taggart, 2000).

The root of this contradiction stems from the fact that the characteristics of the people are determined according to the particular narrative of populists from the ideal center of society or, more precisely, it relates to the fact that populism, more than being an ideology (even in its diluted sense) with a fixed content, is a form and style of political practice, whose content is determined by the discourse or host ideology. The existence of conflicting possibilities for populism, such as left-wing populism, right-wing populism, and religious populism, can be justified by this flexibility resulting from the lack of content.

With these considerations, the collective violence associated with Islamic fundamentalism can also be analyzed through its populist politics. This ideology defines its people based on cultural or religious status, i.e., it designates believers as the true people in the populist sense, justifying violence against those who do not fit this ideological concept of believers and even drawing upon mass support for this process by framing it as a mission to construct an ideal community.

Islamic fundamentalists provide an intellectual framework of Islam as an indigenous substitute for contemporary ideologies, constructing a political fiction to galvanize the populace under the illusion of a "pure Islamic society." By defining "the people" and identifying "the enemies of the people," they pursue their religious-political project—even resorting to the notion of sacred violence. This sanctity is warranted on the premise that it is established on the collective desire to restore the authentic religious community. In radical versions of Islamic fundamentalism, such as Jihadi Salafism, there are not only supporters but also mass agents.

In this context, alongside the mobilizing social myth, what creates mass appeal for such violence is the populist, anti-hierarchical theology embedded in the concept of ittibaʿ al-nass (adherence to the text). The fatwas of extremist Salafi ideologues assert that the text has a clear and literal interpretation. Therefore, a Muslim individual can act based on their personal and direct understanding of the text (Forati, 2017, pp. 112, 116).

Here, the populist aspect of this religious worldview affirms Olivier Roy's analysis in Holy Ignorance. He argues that in recent decades, we have witnessed the rise of new forms of religion that bypass theology and jurisprudence to establish an immediate, unmediated relationship with God. These movements consider traditional systems of religious knowledge as obstacles to understanding religious truths and emphasize religious identity

over religious knowledge (Roy, 2010).

Meanwhile, as the content of "the people" is determined by the host ideology, Islamic fundamentalist leaders have the flexibility to pragmatically define "the people." For example, in his speech announcing the caliphate, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stated that in his envisioned Islamic State, Arabs and non-Arabs, whites and blacks, easterners, and westerners would all live together as brothers. Iraq does not belong solely to Iraqis, nor Syria to Syrians. ISIS ideologue Abu Bakr al-Naji pragmatically emphasized the need to polarize society as a prelude to mass mobilization (Naji, 2018, pp. 159-160). Rational calculation dictated that the conflict should be framed in religious terms (Shia-Sunni) while avoiding alienating other ethnicities to attract a wide array of society's outcasts, some through a particular religious interpretation and others with promises of greater material and social status in the promised order or immediate material rewards.

In reality, although a mythological worldview largely fuels passion and fervor in the ideological mobilization space, this does not contradict the relationship between ideology and a kind of rationality that shapes social interests. Therefore, when explaining the violence of Islamic fundamentalists, one must recognize that the mythological dimension's suggestive impacts are more relevant to analyzing how followers are mobilized and act. Naturally, the formation, expansion, and survival of fundamentalist movements also require a form of instrumental rationality in the leaders to organize and direct the disaffected masses. From this perspective, Islamic fundamentalism, by placing religious concepts within a mythological framework and replacing ideology for religion while claiming a return to an "ideal past," seeks to construct a kind of "political religion" to mobilize the masses for the seizure of power. In this framework, violence (in the form of jihad) emerges as the dominant political logic, combining faith-based support (jurisprudential teachings on violence techniques) and modern instrumental rationality (calculated application of violence).

6. Conclusion

Concentrating on the specific populist mobilizations and narratives of radical Islamist followers, this paper attempts to provide a new understanding of the dynamics of Islamist fundamentalist movements. Within a comparative framework, the paper argues that politics of violence in Islamic fundamentalism as religious populism is less derived from Islam than a specific narrative of truth (in mythical political worldview) that can also be

viewed in other modern ideologies such as fascism and communism; a narrative which has a considerable connection with "discontents of modernity."

As William Cavanaugh points out in The Myth of Religious Violence, instead of habitually linking Islam with the violence of radical Islamists, we must consider that as various theological-political identities are constantly evolving, essentialist narratives of religion cannot fully explain them. What is labeled as religion in each context is shaped by power configurations (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 59). In this sense, the violence enacted by radical Islamists in the name of religion is the result of a specific approach to religion (a mythological interpretation, or in other words, reducing religion to an ideology) in reaction to environmental conditions (crises in transitional societies). This violence is inherently tied to practical needs and power strategies.

In this vein, the paper highlights the relation between the mythical reduction of sharia, the fantasy of "the pure society," and the constructive function of sacred violence in Islamic fundamentalism, focusing on Jihadi Salafism. Islamic fundamentalists, by rejecting rational methods of understanding religion and focusing solely on form rather than the historical context of religious texts, mythologize a specific interpretation from a historical period (the early Islamic era), considering it timeless and an absolute truth. In doing so, they strip religion of its rational purpose, transforming it into an ideology oriented towards action and struggle. Consequently, in dealing with modern world issues, they adopt a mythological, nostalgic, and retrograde understanding, resorting to reactionary and violent measures to revive a lost ideal society (a retrotopia). Nonetheless, due to the ideological nature of this type of religious thought, a degree of instrumental rationality can also be observed in Islamic fundamentalism—manifested in the use of populist polarization for mass mobilization, modern communication technologies, modern strategies for organizing conflict, and acts of violence.

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