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Non-Radical vs. Radical Islam

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In some ways, Islam is difficult to characterize. The reason for the difficulty is because it is conceived of and practiced differently among different Muslim groups. One possible way to characterize it is by denomination. Different denominations of Islam conceive of religious practice in different ways. However, this does not allow us to make the kinds of distinctions we need to make to get at the heart of understanding what makes different groups of Muslims tick. Even within some denominations there are radical and non-radical elements.

Another way to categorize it is to distinguish between political and religious Islam. This gets us closer to understanding the dynamics that occur within Islam, but still doesn't get us all the way there. It is still helpful, though to start there as a foundation for getting to a final understanding.

What is the difference between political and religious Islam?

The difference between religious and political Islam is primarily about scope and purpose. That is, what does Islam govern, and how is it meant to function in society?

1. Religious Islam (Islam as a Faith)

The focus of religious Islam is on personal belief, worship, ethics, and spiritual life. It is primarily concerned with:

- Belief in Allah, with Muhammad as his prophet,
- Religious practices concerning the five pillars (prayer, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage, confession of faith),
- Moral conduct and personal piety, and
- Community life within a religious framework.

Its authority source is the Qur'an and Hadith, and these are interpreted with a focus on personal and communal religious guidance. In this form, scholars function primarily as religious teachers, not rulers.

They believe Islam can coexist with secular governments, so where this form is dominant, Islam guides personal and communal life and is not necessarily involved in lawmaking. Countries where Muslims vote or engage civically without seeking Islamic law as state law (to varying degrees) include such places as Indonesia, Senegal, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Kuwait, Syria (despite current instability), Algeria, Sudan, and Djibouti.

2. Political Islam (Islamism)

Political Islam, on the other hand, sees Islam as a total system governing religion, law, politics, and society. It is primarily con-

cerned with establishing an Islamic state, implementing Sharia as state law, and as the basis for legislation, governance, and public order. It is mostly opposed to secularism and Western political models.

Its primary authority sources are Islam's religious texts that are interpreted as binding political law. Clerics or ideologically aligned leaders are seen as the legitimate people to head government.

In political Islam, the state's legitimacy is derived from conformity to Sharia. Law, education, gender roles, and public morality are regulated religiously based on Islamic law. Citizenship and citizen rights may also be regulated based on religious status.

There are two basic forms of political Islam:

- Non-violent electoral - This form is found in such places as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Tunisia, among others.
- Authoritarian theocratic - Iran is a prime example of this form. It is militant and revolutionary. ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban, among other radical groups, follow this model.

Side-by-Side Comparison

Category	Religious Islam	Political Islam
Primary role	Spiritual and moral guidance	Governing ideology
Scope	Personal and communal life	Entire state and society
View of law	Moral and ethical guidance	Binding state law (Sharia)
Secular government	Acceptable	Rejected or subordinated
Use of force	Rejected	Accepted by some forms
Diversity tolerated	Generally high	Often limited

Is Political Islam Inherently Radical?

In a big-picture sense, political Islam is not inherently radical. That said, it does have a built-in tendency toward radical outcomes. Political Islam (often called Islamism) is the belief that Islam should directly govern society and the state, not just personal faith.

The central idea here is that Islam is not only a religion, but a complete political and legal system. Based on that, Sharia should shape law, governance, and public life.

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While political Islam is not inherently radical, structurally it does lean that way in that it is ideologically absolutist. It views:

- divine law as above human law,
- Allah's authority as above popular sovereignty, and
- revelation as above pluralism.

These beliefs don't require violence, but they do conflict with:

- liberal democracy,
- religious freedom, and
- equality based on secular law.

As a result, even "moderate" political Islam tends to erode pluralism over time.

To get a clearer picture of political Islam, we can identify three tiers.

- Soft/Participatory Islamism - This form is open to elections, speaks the language of democracy, and is willing to take a gradualist approach to spreading the faith. As such, democracy is often treated as a means to a greater goal, not as a guiding principle. The guiding principle lies in Islamic beliefs, not democratic ones. As a result, when power consolidates, pluralism tends to narrow.
- Hard/Authoritarian Islamism - In this form, Sharia is enforced by the state, dissent is criminalized, and minorities are restricted. This stage is clearly radical, even though there may not be constant violence.
- Jihadist Islamism - Jihadist groups consider violence to be a religious duty. They believe Islamic rule must be imposed everywhere, and they have a global revolutionary vision.

There are reasons there is a drift toward radicalism in Islam, and why it struggles to remain moderate. Those reasons include:

- Divine law cannot be negotiated
- Compromise becomes apostasy
- Opposition becomes religious rebellion
- Political dissent equals sin
- Power becomes a religious matter
- Leaders rule "in Allah's name"
- Pluralism undermines the Islamic system

Thus, if Islam governs, non-Islamic beliefs and ideas threaten its legitimacy. That makes moderation unstable.

Theological and Practical Differences Between Radical and Non-Radical Islam.

There are both theological and practical differences between radical and non-radical Islam. Grasping these differences gets us one step closer to understanding why some Muslims are radical and others are not.

Theological Differences Between Radical and Non-radical Islam

The difference between radical (often called extremist or jihadist) Islam and non-radical (religious) Islam is not a difference in sacred texts. Rather, it is in how their re-

ligious texts are interpreted theologically, the way the political system is structured, and how morality is expressed in society. Thus, radical Islam is not a separate religion, but is a literalist and militant reading of Islam's own sources. Non-radical Islam does not deny difficult texts, but interprets and restrains them through context, ethics, and legal traditions that are different from those in radical Islam.

1. Sources of Authority

The Qur'an (as the literal word of Allah), Hadith (reports about Muhammad), and Sharia (Islamic law derived from the other two) are generally shared by all Muslims, both radical and non-radical. The disagreement is not in what authority sources they accept as much as in how they are interpreted and applied.

2. Interpretation of Jihad

In **radical Islam**, jihad primarily means violent struggle. For them, armed jihad is obligatory and ongoing until Islam dominates politically. It is considered legitimate to fight against non-Muslims, and against Muslim leaders deemed insufficiently Islamic. For them, martyrdom operations (suicide attacks) are often theologically justified. They do this by deeming militant Qur'anic verses to be normative and universal, while earlier peaceful verses are overridden (see abrogation below).

In **non-Radical Islam**, jihad is multi-layered. They read the Qur'an in context and tie the violent verses to specific historical conflicts. They acknowledge three basic forms of jihad.

- Greater jihad is defined as moral and spiritual struggle.
- Lesser jihad is considered defensive warfare only.
- Armed jihad is restricted to legitimate authority, is defensive in nature, and is governed by ethical limits so that non-combatants are protected.

3. Abrogation

There are passages within in the Qur'an that literally contradict one another. Since the Qur'an is understood to be a direct revelation from Allah and must be believed and followed, a contradiction within the text is a huge problem. To deal with this, Muslim interpreters have come up with the concept of "abrogation." Abrogation is the replacement of an earlier divine ruling within the Qur'an (and/or the prophetic tradition) with a later one. The idea is that Allah gave a revelation at one point, but later the situation changed and he had to give a different one to meet the new circumstance. With that, the previous ones have been "abrogated" or made of no effect. There are considered to be three types of abrogation.

- Abrogation of Ruling - With this type, the text in the Qur'an remains, but the legal command is no longer binding (ex. early tolerance verses are replaced by later warfare verses).

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- Abrogation of Text - Here, the ruling remains even though there is nothing specific in the Qur'an that commands it (ex. stoning for adultery is claimed to be practiced based on hadith teachings, despite not appearing in the Qur'an).
- Abrogation of Both Text and Ruling - These are known mainly through hadith reports, but nothing in the Qur'an or previous legal rulings have been invalidated).

Radical Islam has a strong use of abrogation, particularly as it relates to warfare verses. Later warfare verses are seen as canceling earlier peaceful commands, and are binding for all times and places. This creates a permanent warfare theology.

Non-Radical Islam either rejects broad abrogation or limits it to narrow, historical cases. It considers that peaceful coexistence verses remain valid which allows for pluralism and stable coexistence with non-Muslims

4. View of Non-Muslims

Radical Islam rigidly divides Muslims and non-Muslims. Muslims have two categories of people: Dar al-Islam (House of Islam) and Dar al-Harb (House of War). For radicals, all non-Muslims must either convert, submit, or be fought. As for non-compliant nation-states, they are rejected as illegitimate.

Non-Radical Islam accepts modern categories of citizenship and religious freedom (though to varying degrees). They consider that non-Muslims can be neighbors, citizens, and political partners. They believe there can be treaties and peaceful relations between Muslim and non-Muslim countries.

5. Belief About Excommunication (Takfir)

Radical Islam makes extensive use of *takfir*. Muslims who support secular law, cooperate with non-Muslims, or reject jihadism are declared apostates – which is often punishable by death.

In **non-Radical Islam**, *takfir* is rare and strongly cautioned against. Apostasy debates remain, but coercion is widely rejected in practice.

6. Role of Sharia

In **radical Islam**, Sharia must be imposed immediately and replace all man-made law. The very idea of democracy is viewed as idolatry and is a rival to Allah's sovereignty.

Non-Radical Islam sees Sharia as moral guidance, not always as state law. Democracy may be accepted as a pragmatic system.

7. Authority Structure

Radical Islam rejects traditional Muslim scholarship when they deem it inconve-

nient. Instead, they prefer to follow the teachings of charismatic leaders and militant clerics as the ones who are faithful to "pure Islam."

Non-Radical Islam values established legal schools, scholarly consensus, and gradual reform.

8. End-Times and Urgency

Radical Islam holds an apocalyptic world-view. For them, violence is seen as fulfilling prophecy and accelerating divine judgment.

Non-Radical Islam does hold end-times beliefs, but they are rarely used to justify violence or political upheaval.

Practical Differences Between Radical and Non-radical Islam

The practical differences between radical and non-radical Islam show up mainly in how its beliefs are lived out in daily life, politics, law, and social relations, rather than in the theological belief structure. That is, radical Islam enforces religion through coercion and violence, while non-radical Islam seeks to live out their religion through persuasion, ethics, and coexistence.

1. Everyday Life & Social Behavior

In **radical Islam**, daily life is highly regulated and policed. There is strict enforcement of:

- gender segregation,
- dress codes,
- public prayer and religious observance, and
- cultural expression (music, art, and entertainment are often banned or heavily restricted).

Morality is enforced through:

- religious police,
- vigilantism, and
- social pressure.

In **non-radical Islam**, religious practice is voluntary and personal. Additionally, there is wide diversity in:

- dress,
- gender interaction, and
- cultural expression (music, arts, and leisure are commonly accepted).

Beyond that, proper moral behavior is encouraged through teaching, community norms, and personal accountability.

2. Treatment of Women

In **radical Islam**, women:

- are often confined to the private sphere,
- require male guardianship, and
- have limited access to education or work.

Legally, their testimony in court has less value than that of men, they receive unequal inheritance, and there is strict veiling that is enforced by law or violence.

In **non-radical Islam**, women are able to:

- participate in education, work, and politics,
- make personal choices about veiling, and
- take advantage of various legal reforms.

There is also an emphasis on dignity, consent, and mutual responsibility in marriage.

3. Law, Punishment, and Justice

In **radical Islam**, corporal punishments (*hudud*) are enforced by amputation, flogging, and stoning. There is also quite limited due process, and punishment is seen as a religious duty regardless of context.

In **non-radical Islam**, criminal law is handled through modern legal systems and within human rights frameworks. Sharia principles are used primarily morally and symbolically, and *hudud* is rarely enforced, if ever.

4. Attitude Toward Violence

In **radical Islam**, violence is glorified, treated as sacred, and taught as virtuous. Additionally, terrorism and insurgency are seen as legitimate tools to fight their enemies. It is not uncommon for children to be indoctrinated for martyrdom.

In **non-radical Islam**, violence is rejected except for self-defense. Terrorism is condemned. Those who follow this path believe that conflict should be resolved through law, diplomacy, and social reform.

5. Relationship to the State & Politics

Radical Islam rejects secular nation-states and seeks to form a caliphate under theocratic rule. Democracy is often rejected as idolatrous, while loyalty to their religious movement is valued over country.

Non-radical Islam accepts both citizenship and national borders. It believes Muslims should participate in elections and civil society. There is also support for pluralistic governance (though to varying degrees).

6. Treatment of Religious Minorities

In **radical Islam**, non-Muslims are either forced to convert, relegated to second-class status (dhimmi), expelled, or executed. Additionally their places of worship are often destroyed, and public worship is restricted or banned.

In **non-radical Islam**, non-Muslims are free to worship and are protected under the law. Additionally, interfaith dialogue is encouraged and religious diversity is valued, or at least tolerated.

7. Education & Indoctrination

In **radical Islam**, education is highly ideological and based on memorization of the Qur'an without critique. There is a strong emphasis on obedience and militancy, while scientific and secular education are minimized.

In **non-radical Islam**, education integrates religious and secular subjects, while also encouraging critical thinking and entry into professional careers. Religion is taught as moral formation, not militancy.

8. Economic Life

In **radical Islam**, economic activity is strictly controlled and often based on the black-market. All charity is directed toward militant causes.

In **non-radical Islam**, participation in the global economy and banking through Islamic institutions are encouraged. Charity tends to be focused on poverty relief, healthcare, and education.

9. Global Engagement

Radical Islam is isolationist in nature. It is hostile to western culture and international institutions. The media is used primarily for propaganda.

Non-radical Islam engages globally in education, trade, and diplomacy. It uses the media for dialogue and cultural exchange.

Muslim Support for Radical Islam

Obviously, the Muslims who hold the highest profile and get the most press are the radical Islamists because of their violence and intolerance of anyone who doesn't conform to their beliefs. But even that is somewhat difficult to characterize because there isn't just a single, definitive statistic that tells us exactly what percentage of all Muslims worldwide follow radical Islam. That is true for two reasons. First, radical Islam is not a single clear-cut category. And second, reliable survey data varies by definition, country, and the questions that are asked. Generally though, there are several distinctions we can make.

What we can discern, based on large, systematic surveys by the Pew Research Center across many Muslim-majority countries, is that clear overall majorities reject violence in the name of Islam. Active support for extremist violence is a minority position in most Muslim societies.

One issue that greatly affects the percentage who support radical Islam is how one defines it. When measured by support for extremely violent tactics, like suicide bombings, surveys often find single-digit to low double-digit support in many countries.

But when it comes simply to ideological support for extremist groups such as ISIS or al-Qaeda, versus actual extreme tactics, we get a slightly different picture. Ideological support can approach fifty percent. With this, we are distinguishing between those who are personally radicalized and those who simply have positive feelings toward radicals.

As far as the number who are actually radicalized, polls tend to show that is roughly 10 - 15% of the global Muslim population. While that is a relatively small percentage, it still equates to between 200 - 300 million people.

Allowance for Radical Islam to Operate in Islamic Dominated Countries

There is no precise global tally as to how many majority-Muslim countries allow radical Islam, as that is also subject to how one measures it (for example: merely tolerating political Islamist movements, supporting active terrorist operations, or actual state sponsorship). That said, based on patterns and credible reporting, we do know enough to make some general classifications.

The truth is, most Muslim-majority states have laws that actually ban extremist groups, and they actively combat radical Islamist violence through the use of police, military, and counter-terrorism units). That is because these jihadist groups pose a threat to them, as well. For example, Morocco dismantles ISIS cells and arrest militants, and Jordan has banned the Muslim Brotherhood and cracked down on related activities it considers violent.

That said, there are states where radical Islamist groups do operate. Here too, though, there is a great deal of diversity. Some do not push back against radicals, but at the same time do not allow them to operate in the country. Others allow political Islamist parties, but not violent radical Islamist organizations. Another situation is where there are active insurgencies or militant groups that are active in parts of a country against the will of the government. Those would be places where a government simply lacks full control over all its territory. For example:

- Afghanistan - The Taliban is a radical Islamist movement that controls large parts of Afghanistan and governs much of the country following the U.S. withdrawal in 2021. The state's authority varies by region, but for years the government has effectively supported or been dominated by radical Islamist leadership.
- Parts of the Sahel in Africa (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) - Various Al-Qaeda affiliated groups operate widely and control territory in some rural areas. Governments often struggle to assert full control over those areas, and extremist groups operate as insurgencies. While those countries don't officially allow radical Islam, it exists anyway.
- Pakistan - Militant groups such as Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami have historical roots in Pakistan, but most are banned and designated as terrorist organizations. The country maintains laws against terrorism, though enforcement effectiveness varies by region.

Some countries allow political Islamist movements to participate in politics but don't allow radical groups. For instance, Turkey has Islamist-rooted political parties (e.g., the AKP) that operate within electoral politics, but are not violent extremist organizations. These are accommodations to political pluralism toward Islamist ideology, but violent radicalism is not allowed.

Then there are some states that actually support extremist groups abroad as tools of foreign policy. This does not necessarily mean they are allowed to operate domestically. Iran, in particular, has historically supported groups like Hezbollah (Lebanon), Hamas (Gaza), Houthis (Yemen) and various groups in Syria.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have both, at times, supported Islamist fighters in geopolitically contested regions.

Limitations of Non-Muslim Practice

There are Muslim dominated countries where non-Muslim religious practice is severely limited, restricted, or in some cases actually prohibited. Below is not an exhaustive list, but some of those countries include:

- Saudi Arabia - In Saudi Arabia, public practice of any religion other than Islam is banned. Non-Muslims may only worship in private settings, and non-Muslim houses of worship do not legally exist. Proselytizing and visible non-Islamic worship can lead to arrest or deportation.
- Maldives - In the Maldives, only Sunni Islam is legally recognized. All citizens must be Muslim. Based on their constitution, non-Muslim citizens cannot exist. Beyond that, non-Muslim residents and visitors may only practice their faith privately. Public worship and proselytizing are forbidden. Also, apostasy (leaving Islam) carries severe penalties, sometimes including even death.
- Mauritania - In Mauritania, non-Islamic worship is tightly controlled. Churches do exist, but are generally only for expatriates. Proselytizing of Muslims and distribution of non-Islamic religious literature, is strictly prohibited.
- Iran - While not exclusively limiting all non-Muslim practice in law, Iran recognizes only a few minority religions (Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity), and the rights of these groups are severely limited. Baha'is are banned entirely and face systemic persecution. Other minorities face discrimination and various legal barriers.
- Yemen - Due to civil war and extremist control in parts of the country, Yemeni Christians and other minorities face severe danger if they practice openly. Conversion from Islam is prohibited. Although this is not a uniform state policy everywhere, local groups often enforce very restrictive norms.
- Somalia - Somalia does not formally recognize religions other than Islam, and extremist groups often publicly threaten or kill those who practice non-Islamic faiths.
- Oman & Qatar - These countries don't have total bans, but significant restrictions do exist. Churches and temples may exist but are tightly regulated by the state and must be registered. It is illegal to proselytize Muslims, and apostasy and criticism of Islam can lead to imprisonment.

Conclusion

The number of Muslims in America continues to increase, and very few Americans, relatively speaking, understand this religion at all. What most people know comes from the news as they report on radical Islamists killing people and attempting to take over countries. The purpose of writing about this is to help demystify this religion in order to help Christians become more proficient in sharing their faith. There is no need to feel unprepared or intimidated.

While there is a contingent of Muslims that are radical and violent, the vast majority are not. They simply want to live and let live, and are open to relationships with non-Muslims. As with those who follow virtually every faith system, there is a whole range of beliefs and motivations. There will be those who are be open and friendly and others who might be hostile, but the majority will be somewhere between the extremes.

One thing we know, though, is that regardless of anything else, they all need Christ. It is up to Christians to put themselves into a position to effectively share Christ with those who need Him.

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