

Islamic Fundamentalism

The phrase “Islamic Fundamentalism” refers to any group, individual, or ideology that advocates or is perceived to advocate a strict adherence to, or literal interpretation of, the so-called “Muslim fundamentals:” i.e. the Qur’an and the Sunnah. The terms “fundamentalist” and “fundamentalism” were originally developed in the twentieth century to describe Christians who advocated a literal interpretation of the Bible, so some scholars have questioned the validity of using these terms to describe non-Christian religious movements or ideologies, proposing instead the term “Islamist.”¹ In public discussion, both terms are used interchangeably as catch-all terms for individuals, groups, or ideologies that appear to “...derive political principles from a timeless, divine text.”²

If we understand Islamic Fundamentalism simply as a conservative movement that advocates strict (or stricter) adherence to Qur’anic principles, then Islamic “fundamentalists” have existed since the emergence of Islam. However, scholars typically date the emergence of Islamic Fundamentalism to the eighteenth-century.³ As this class has made clear, European colonial powers largely dominated the Arab and Persian Middle East by the eighteenth-century, reducing once proud civilizations to the status of colonial vassals. This was covered in great detail in Units 8 & 9, so here, we will focus on events during the later half of the twentieth-century.

As the Arab nationalist movements of the mid-twentieth century failed to deliver on their promises of rejuvenating and uniting Arab culture, they gradually lost ground in favor of more religiously-oriented Islamic movements. For instance, the Six Day War (1967) fatally weakened “Nasserism,” one of the main varieties of Arab nationalism. Moreover, and somewhat ironically, as Arab nations achieved their goals—decolonization, etc.—the appeal of Arab nationalism declined, creating a power vacuum that fostered the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. This trend culminated in three events that occurred in 1979, leading some scholars to call this the “Year of Islamic Fundamentalism”; these three events were the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iranian Revolution, and the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca.⁴

¹ For an excellent discussion on controversies surrounding the use of this term, please see Wikipedia’s entry on “[Fundamentalism](#),” subsection “Controversy.”

² Youssef M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism* Revised Edition (UK: Biddles Limited, 2002), xi. A preview of this reading is accessible via [Google Books](#).

³ Bruce Gourley, “Islamic Fundamentalism: A Brief Survey,” *BruceGourley.com*. This reading can be accessed via [Bruce Gourley’s site](#).

⁴ Beverly Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Fundamentalism Since 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-6.

