

H: Islamism: The Revival of Triumphal Islam (1979)

1. After the world wars and disintegration at the hands of Europe, Islamic culture found itself in a world in which even Europe was not dominant, but rather communist Russia and the United States.
2. Under these conditions, it seemed impossible to imagine a future in which Islamic culture would triumph over all others. A trend already underway in Islamic culture towards a more *cosmopolitan* version of Islamic belief was reinforced by its state of political disintegration. (The word “cosmopolitan” in this context means, “part of the whole world—as opposed to limited to one’s local culture.” Islamic cosmopolitanism is a modern version of Islamic culture that sees Islam *as a part of the world, instead of triumphant over it.*)
3. Tragically, in 1979, the enemies of cosmopolitanism found a way to revive the idea of an Islamic religious triumph over the world.
4. The revival of triumphalism came in Iran, a country allied to the United States against Russia. Iran was ruled by a traditional monarchy opposed to communism, but its king was a tyrant, and his alliance with America was seen as a shameful symbol of the powerlessness of Islamic culture.
5. In 1979, that king was overthrown by rebels who were loyal to a religious teacher known as Ayatollah Khomeini. The Iranian Revolution succeeded in creating a theocracy—a *government dominated by religious authorities*—in place of the monarchy.
6. That was a significant boost to triumphalists in Islam, but what came next was possibly even more important. Terrorists stormed the American embassy in Iran’s capital of Tehran and took the American staff hostage.
7. The American president Jimmy Carter could find no way to respond to this crisis. Inaction made the world’s police power look pitiful. The *American Hostage Crisis* became a symbol of a new kind of religious triumph, even against the most powerful country in the modern world.
8. The renewal of Islamic triumphalism in the modern world is called “Islamism.” Though based on Islam as a religion, *Islamism* is a modern set of ideas for a modern context. It is a reaction against cosmopolitanism, modernity, and America as a world police power. Islamism says that Islamic culture can triumph over all these things.
9. With Islamism unanswered since 1979, its influence has increased steadily, and the tactic of terrorism has been used more widely, including against the United States.
10. In 2001, with the attacks of “9/11,” Islamists finally triggered a massive American response, dubbed the “War on Terror.” To combat Islamic terrorism, the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, overthrowing both their governments, and trying to help the people of those countries create democracies.
11. The Iranian theocracy that sparked the modern Islamist movement, however, has not yet been confronted by America, and terrorism continues to plague the Middle East and the wider world.