Islamic Fundamentalism, diverse political and social movements in Muslim countries of North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, which have as their goal national government based on the principles and values of Islam. Although these movements all seek to restore social justice based on sharia (Islamic law), they differ in the form of government they seek and in how strictly they believe the government should interpret the law.

For many people in the West, the term “Islamic fundamentalism” evokes images of hostage crises, embassies under siege, hijackings, and suicide bombers. But these images hardly present a comprehensive picture. The ranks of Islamic fundamentalists include Muslims who provide much-needed services to the poor through Islamic schools, medical clinics, social welfare agencies, and other institutions. While some Islamic militants try to reach their goals through violence, the majority of Islamic activists work through political parties within the electoral process.

The Resurgence of Political Islam

The causes of Islam's resurgence vary by country and region, but there are several common threads. Among these is a widespread feeling of failure and loss of self-esteem in many Muslim societies. Most Middle Eastern and North African countries achieved independence from colonial rule by the mid-20th century, but the expectations that accompanied independence were shattered by failed political systems and economies and the negative effects of modernization. Overcrowded cities with insufficient social support systems, high unemployment rates, government corruption, and a growing gap between rich and poor characterized many of the newly independent Muslim nations. Modernization also led to a breakdown of traditional family, religious, and social values.

Many Muslims blamed Western models of political and economic development for these failures. Once enthusiastically pursued as symbols of modernity, these models increasingly came under criticism as sources of moral decline and spiritual malaise. Consequently, many countries became disillusioned with the West, and in particular with the United States. United States support for authoritarian Muslim rulers who backed Westernization, such as Iran's Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, as well as America’s pro-Israel policy, strengthened anti-Western feelings.

Israel's crushing victory over its Muslim neighbors in the 1967 Six-Day War became a symbol of this sense of failure. After defeating the combined forces of several Arab nations, Israel seized conquered territory from Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. The loss of Jerusalem, the third holiest city of Islam, was particularly devastating to Muslims around the world.

The Islamic revival has affected both the private and public lives of Muslims. Many Muslims have recommitted themselves to Islam's basic tenets by attending mosque, fasting, wearing Islamic dress, emphasizing family values, and abstaining from alcohol and gambling. Publicly, the revival has manifested itself in the form of Islamic banks, religious programming in the media, a proliferation of religious literature, and the emergence of new Islamic associations dedicated to political and social reform.

The most successful Islamic opposition movement culminated in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. Throughout the 1980s, Iran inspired antigovernment protests in Kuwait and Bahrain, and helped create Islamic militias, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah (Party of God) and Islamic Jihad, both of which were involved in hijackings and hostage-takings. These acts, combined with the 1981 assassination of Egypt’s president Anwar Sadat by religious extremists, contributed to the image of a monolithic radical Islamic “fundamentalist” threat to governments in the Muslim world and the West.

Beliefs Behind Political Islam

A number of beliefs and assumptions lie at the heart of the Islamic political revival. The first of these is that the Muslim world is in a state of decline, and the cause of this decline is departure from the straight path of Islam. The cure, therefore, is a return to Islam in personal and public life, which will ensure the
restoration of Islamic identity, values, and power. Islam is a total or comprehensive way of life as demanded in the Qur'an and embodied in the comprehensive nature of the sharia. Thus, the renewal and revitalization of Muslim governments and societies require the restoring of Islamic law, which provides the blueprint for an Islamically guided and socially just state and society.

Although political Islam condemns the Westernization and secularization of society, it does not condemn modernization as such. Science and technology are accepted, but the pace, direction, and extent of change is to be subordinated to Islamic belief and values in order to guard against the penetration of Western values.

**Beliefs of the Radical Minority**

While the majority of Islamic activists seek to work within the system and bring about change from within society, a relatively small but significant radical extremist minority believe they have a mandate from God to carry out God's will. This extremist minority further believes that because the rulers in the Muslim world are authoritarian and anti-Islamic, violent change is necessary. They seek to topple governments, seize power, and impose their vision or interpretation of Islam upon society.

Radical Islamic movements often operate on the assumption that Islam and the West are locked in an ongoing battle that reaches back to the early days of Islam, a battle that has been heavily influenced by the legacy of the Crusades and European colonialism, and that today is the product of a Judeo-Christian conspiracy. This conspiracy, they believe, is the result of superpower neocolonialism and the power of Zionism (support for a Jewish nation, now the state of Israel). These radical movements blame the West (Britain, France, and especially the United States) for its support of un-Islamic or unjust regimes and biased support for Israel in the face of the displacement of the Palestinian people. Thus, violence against such governments and their representatives as well as Western multinationals is regarded as legitimate self-defense.

Islamic radicals also believe that Islam is not simply an ideological alternative for Muslim societies but a theological and political imperative. Because it is God's command, implementation must be immediate, not gradual, and the obligation to implement is incumbent on all true Muslims. Therefore, those who hesitate, remain apolitical, or resist—individuals and governments—are no longer to be regarded as Muslims. They are atheists or unbelievers, enemies of God, against whom all true Muslims must wage holy war in the form of *jihad*.

**Osama bin Laden and Global Terrorism**

Attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, on September 11, 2001, provided a grim reminder of Osama bin Laden's reputation as the godfather of global terrorism. In 1998 he announced the creation of a transnational coalition of extremist groups known as The Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders.

Osama bin Laden's message resonates with the feelings of many in the Arab and Muslim world. A sharp critic of U.S. policy toward the Muslim world, bin Laden has denounced U.S. support for Israel, which he blames for the failure of the Middle East peace process. He has embraced populist causes such as the “liberation” of Muslims in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Kosovo, and other areas.

Bin Laden and other Islamic extremists justify their use of violence with the claim that most Muslim and Western governments are corrupt oppressors that they resort to violence and terrorism. These extremists use Islam to motivate their followers and rationalize their actions. However, they misinterpret and misapply Islamic beliefs. Claiming that Islam and the Muslim world are under siege, they call for a jihad. Although jihad refers to the right and duty of Muslims to defend themselves, their community, and their religion from unjust attack, extremists use the concept to legitimate acts of violence and terrorism.
Islamic Fundamentalism Worksheet

Directions: Answer the following questions using the Islamic Fundamentalism reading.

1. What is the goal of Islamic Fundamentalism?

2. What do the ranks of Islamic Fundamentalist do for the people?

3. What has caused the resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism in Muslim societies?

4. What happened to the expectations that accompanied independence in many Middle Eastern nations?

5. What were the four major problems that characterized many of the newly independent Muslim nations?

6. Why do many Muslims view modernization as a bad thing?

7. Who did many Muslims blame for these failures?

8. How did the United States strengthen anti-Western feelings in the Middle East?

9. How has the Islamic revival affected both the private and public lives of Muslims?

10. What events did the Iranian Revolution of 1979 inspire?
11. What is the assumed cause of the decline of the Muslim world?

12. What is the impact of Islam in one’s personal life?

13. How does political Islam view science and technology?

14. How does the small radical group of Islamic activists want to bring change? Why do they feel this way?

15. How do radical Islamic groups view the relationship between Islam and the West?

16. How do radical Islamic groups justify a jihad against other Muslims?

17. How do Bin Laden and other Islamic extremists justify their use of violence?

18. What does the term jihad refer to, and how do extremists use it?