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Islam and the future of dissent after the ‘end of history’

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Abstract

In the pronounced instability of the current international order, Islam has emerged as the focus of global dissent, fulfilling a role vacated by earlier ideologies of the left. This has confounded ‘end of history’ theses which predicted global cultural and political homogenisation, and foresaw the marginalisation of non-western cultures. This role of Islam coincides with a period of turmoil inside Muslim countries which are struggling to find just social systems. Partly to emasculate Islam’s role and the challenge it posed to hegemony on the world stage, some trends in western policy favour feeding the turmoil and instability in the Muslim world by resisting the trend towards democratisation. Persistence in this approach is not likely to eliminate the global role of Islam, but it may change its character, as events in Afghanistan and the rise of new terrorist threats indicate. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

The future begins at the ‘end of history’. When some communities look at the future in the the post-cold war era, they are forced to stare the horrors of the past right in the face. The bizarre events, in early 1995, in the normally obscure (Former Yugoslav) Republic of Macedonia provide an example. In this tiny newly created state (inhabitants 2 m), the Minister of Interior sent bulldozers overnight in early January to raze to the ground a building which was being constructed to house a private educational facility. He did this apparently without consulting with some of his ministerial colleagues, some of whom threatened to resign and led demonstrations

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in protest. In February, police was again sent against a building in the town of Tetova where classes were being held, clashing with demonstrators there, killing one of them and injuring some 28 others. Senior officials were speaking of a ‘serious threat’ to the country’s very existence.

The threat, it appeared, came from attempts to set up a private Albanian-language university to cater for the quarter of the population who speak the language. After failing to get government support for the project, the academics and activists behind it decided to set up the college privately. The government was not happy with that either. Some officials argued that the project was the brain-child of radical Albanian nationalists who threatened the cohesion of the country [1].

It sounds like dark fiction straight out of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But it is real enough. In 1995, with democracy breaking out everywhere, and human rights becoming the new universal religion, a government declares the founding of a college a serious threat to the country and sends bulldozers at dawn to level its buildings to the ground. And it is not the first time. In 1991, the only Albanian language university in Pristina, capital of the province of Kosovo in neighbouring Serbia, was also closed down.

Only in the Balkans, one might say. The Balkans are the realm of the weird. It was, after all, in Bulgaria barely a decade ago, that over three hundred thousand Bulgarian ethnic Turks were forced to flee the country after laws were passed requiring them to change their names or face severe penalties. Where a mere name can be a threat, a faculty may be mistaken for the equivalent of a nuclear missile heading towards the capital.

Being paranoid, as the joke goes, does not preclude you having enemies. And, one may add, paranoids tend to have more enemies than the average person: they create them. But when paranoia becomes universal, its pathological character tends to be obscured somewhat. When compared to recent reactions in some western capitals to events that are much farther from home than leaders in Pristina and Skopje had to contend with, the Serbs and Macedonians may not appear so irrational after all. Compare, for example, the remarks of NATO’s former secretary-general Willy Claes who, in early 1995, appeared to designate Islam (or at least some expressions of it) as the West’s new Enemy No. 1. One may need reminding at this point that the main fault of the Albanian citizens of Macedonia and Serbia and the Bulgarian Turks is that they were all Muslims; at least nominally. That is at least what sets them apart from their neighbours who feel threatened by their otherness.

In spite of their careful wording, the remarks of the former NATO chief had provoked, as they were bound to, a hostile reaction from Muslims, including some staunch western allies [2],² calling for yet more retractions and qualifications. However, Mr. Claes’s assertion that “Islamic fundamentalism” was now “one of the most

² See for example the critical remarks by an Egyptian diplomat in the Saudi-owned daily *al-Hayat*, March 20, 1995, p. 15. (Salah Bassiouni, “Ayna Sidqiyyat al-Hilf fi Hadha al-Taharruk?” (Where is the Credibility of the Alliance in these Moves?)). For a Saudi reaction see Fuad Abd al-Salam al-Farsi, “al-Haqiqa wa’l-Tajanni ‘ala al-Islam fi I’lan Wily Claes,” (Truth and anti-Islamic Prejudice in the Declaration of Wily Claes), *al-Hayat*, March 18, 1995, p. 17.

important challenges facing the West after the end of the Cold War”. posing a threat more serious than communism had once been [3], are far from being a mere indiscretion. They betray not only the deeper inclinations and prejudices of key western policy makers, but also a growing consensus among the intellectual and political elites in the West that war with Islam is both imminent and inevitable.

1. Islam and global dissent

The fact that Islam is being nominated as the focus of global dissent against the established world order, as well as the presumable threat to a variety of states, is not without ambiguities. In a recent meeting discussing the topic ‘Islam and the West’ (a rather frequent occurrence these days), the participants dwelt at length on what the Western side regarded as the ‘threat’ of Islamic militancy in the Middle East. But when the discussion turned to South and South East Asia, an American participant was quick to affirm that Islamic militancy was not an issue there as far as United States policy was concerned. (The meeting took place, let us hasten to mention, before the current obsession with the Saudi dissident Usama bin Laden and his Afghan hosts). Islamic militancy, therefore, does not appear to be regarded as an intrinsic threat in itself. After all, one could not help notice that the Saudi regime, which US policy favours, appears to be more ‘fundamentalist’ than those of Iran and Sudan, which are not so favoured in Washington, even if they could be deemed relatively more liberal, in particular where it came to rights of women and political participation.

The nature of the ‘threat’ in question appears to have been shaped by a perception of what is threatened, rather than what ‘threatens’. The examples we referred to above demonstrate this amply. A name could be a threat, so could a college. A newspaper is regularly regarded as a deadly menace. In Tunisia and Turkey, ‘moderate’ Islamist parties or human rights group are regarded as a serious threat. In October 1998, the appeals court in Turkey confirmed a heavy (10 months) prison sentence on the popular Islamist mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which would automatically deprive him of most of his civil and political rights for life. The crime which warranted this political ‘execution’? A speech the mayor gave at a rally of his party in December 1997, in which he criticised some government policies, in particular the ban on women students wearing headscarves. During the same month in which Mr. Erdogan was sent to jail, a popular Jordanian politician, the leader of the Engineers Association and former Member of Parliament, Dr. Laith Shbeilat, was freed after completing a nine-months sentence. Again the crime was speaking his mind on public issues. Shbeilat, a moderate Islamist affiliated to no party or group, refused a conditional royal pardon which would have restricted his right of free expression. This was the third time the man was sent to jail for his outspoken views in the last six years. The month before that, a popular Islamist Malaysian politician, former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, was arrested under the draconian Internal Security Act, barely three weeks after being removed from office. Again the crime appears to have been expressing his political views and defending himself against charges he claims have been trumped up.

There are, of course, other forms of dissent. Violence in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon and the Palestinian Occupied Territories is the preferred form of expression by some Islamist dissidents. But there is nothing specifically ‘Islamic’ about this form of protest. In Palestine and Lebanon, the issue continues to be the search for justice and liberation from occupation, a cause supported by secularists and many Christians. In Algeria and Egypt, the fight for democracy and political rights unites many who do not share the views of the radical Islamists or approve of their methods. In a sense, ideology served here as a weapon in a struggle with more or less universally recognisable objectives. By contrast, the counter-attack against Islamic militancy, especially when it shows no inclination to tackle the root causes of the protest, appears to take the form more or less of an attempt at disarmament. Treating Islamically-based dissent a ‘threat’ rather than a challenge smacks of attempts to prolong and protect unjust and hegemonic systems which Islamic dissent threatens.

2. Islam After the ‘End of History’

The emergence of Islamic ideologies as vehicles of protest both internationally and locally points to a number of important questions. The first set of questions refers to the international environment which provoked this protest, and made it necessary, even functional. The second relates to the character of Islamic doctrines which made them a powerful weapon in the struggle in question. We attend to the first set of questions first. The trumpeting of the ‘threat of Islam’ emerged in the context of a prolonged debate in the West over how the world was going to look after the collapse of communism. With the apparent triumph of the West over its main rival from the East, the ‘Islamism Debate’ (as it has come to be known)[4] came to top the agenda in academic and policy discussions in major western capitals. What was seen as the ‘triumph of the West’ was looked at in two interlinked ways: a buoyant and upbeat assessment seeing in this triumph of western liberalism the ‘end of history’, (Francis Fukuyama’s famous thesis of 1989) [5], and a more pessimistic stance foreseeing a possible ‘clash of civilisations’ (the term was first coined by Bernard Lewis in 1990) [6], pitting the west against Islam, among others. Samuel Huntington came out forcefully in favour of this latter stance, with stark predictions of an Islam/West conflict, complete with prescriptions on how to go about preparing for it [7]. His prescriptions appear to have been an important component of NATO’s own plans to counter such an eventuality.

It was left to assorted pundits to try to reconcile the implied sense of insecurity with the buoyant confidence which characterised predictions at the end of the cold war. A look at the deeper instincts behind the now fading euphoria which had for some time prevailed in the writings of many analysts and intellectuals may shed light on some of its dimensions. As Leon Wieseltier remarked from the start, the basis of this triumphalist attitude is at bottom religious (‘eschatological’, to use his precise term [8].) Millenarianism, as we well know, is not just prediction: it is ideology. In this sense, the belief in the existence of a terminal point at which history comes to an end is at bottom a philosophico-religious view that has two major

components: ethnocentrism on the one hand, and a belief in some form of ‘divine election’, on the other. The Greeks, Romans or ancient Egyptians did not believe in divine election per se, but they were reasonably ethnocentric to believe that their gods and civilisations were the best there was or could be. Humanity could never aspire to a better way of life, and all those ‘others’ who lived beyond the confines of this worldview were essentially barbarians. The ancient Hebrews took refuge in the concept of election by the One Supreme God. This idea was interesting in that it did reconcile itself to the fact that the Egyptians or Romans may be superior to the Hebrews in worldly matters, without in any way denting Hebrew self-esteem. Medieval Christian Europe decided to combine the best of both worlds: it regarded itself as heir to the Roman Empire and a divinely elected community. Associating itself with the ‘Son of God’, it went one up on the Hebrews. For when it is a comparison between Abraham’s family and God’s own, there was no question of who was superior.

Islam settled this matter in its own unique way. The Muslims saw themselves as custodians of God’s final message to humanity: “the best community that has ever been brought forth to mankind” [9]. Their mission superseded all earlier revelations and embodied what was best and most universal in them. And, to top that, worldly success has caused this community to defeat the two greatest empires of the time and become their heir, attaining the status of the ‘world’s sole superpower’ in a few miraculous decades. ‘History ends here’, they also believed then.

In spite of its origins in Hegelianism, the current western self-congratulation is more akin to the Greco-Roman ethnocentrism. For although the sense of the finality of western hegemony is unconsciously buttressed by the Christian belief in a superior divine mission, there is no hiding the fact that the attempts to blend this with a belief in the supremacy of rationalism has, since Hegel, led to grave contradictions. Hegel’s disciples realised this early, and were instrumental in jettisoning Christianity in favour of pure rationalism. History cannot end while people were still awaiting the Messiah or Christ’s second coming. There was, therefore, an inherent internal tension within this worldview that does not exist in Islam. Islam believes that history, in the sense of a theodicy, has well and truly ended with God’s final message to mankind. All the rest was a mere post-script: humanity had to await the impending Day of Judgement as best it could, deriving guidance about how to prepare oneself for the end from the final revelation. Western rationalism, on the other hand, had to reaffirm the end of history simultaneously with its attempts to outgrow Christianity.

3. Failure of an American revolution

However, the sense of insecurity implicit in the warnings of an Islamic threat does not emanate from these inner contradictions in the western worldview. They express, rather, a sense of unease and lack of confidence in the continuous well-being and ascendancy of western civilisation. It is the old fear of ‘barbarians’ at the gates which characterises great empires in their hour of decline.

As a triumphalist western (or, more precisely, American) rallying cry, the ‘end of

history' thesis experienced its brief life and death against the background of American euphoria at the unravelling of the rival Soviet empire. This optimistic worldview, we must concede, has got something noble and humane about it. It is the childish and naive, but rather exalted, belief in the intrinsic virtuous nature of humanity. The big human family, divided by artificial barriers, is finally coming together again. We can now live happily ever after as one large and prosperous liberal-democratic family. Politics no longer needs to be the obnoxious skullduggery it had been for centuries. All men and women can now be honest, benevolent and brotherly. The American Dream, which has remained alive (if far from realised) can now be the World Dream.

But to sustain this vision, America must sustain its dream. Today, however, America is a deeply troubled place. We are witnessing today the collapse of what would have been the sixth major American revolution. (After the 'original' American revolution, we count, for our present purpose, the civil war, the New Deal, the Civil Rights Movement and the Reaganite upheaval). The current abortive revolution, as envisaged by the Clintons, would have combined elements of the New Deal and the Civil Rights Movement to restructure a fairer America fit to lead the world, one where it would be appropriate, if not quite true, to boast about a triumph of liberalism and a resting point for history. As it turned out, not only had the revolution not taken off, but it provoked a backlash that threatens the very fragile basis on which the American society had been dangerously perched.

The significance of this failure is hard to overestimate, given that the collapse of communism has been brought about precisely because it was too successful in exposing the fatal flaws of the market system and acting as a spur for reforms that saved it. In fact, many of Marx's prescriptions, and not only in the realm of the welfare state, are today standard practice, including the 'revolutionary' idea of locally controlled police forces. Marxism's major failure had been to assume that capitalism would forever adopt the crude and unbridled market approach of the type preached by Thatcherism and Reaganomics. It may be an irony if 'market forces' fundamentalism were to create the context for a revival of Marxism, or worse.

Reviewing the successive American revolutions we referred to above, it would be possible to point to the abolition of slavery as the core indicator of the direction in which the struggle for a more humane society pointed. This direction, we may suggest, is towards establishing the equality of human worth through a progressive shift towards the equalisation of the value of human labour. The value of slave labour approached zero in human terms, while the value of that of a free, independent and reasonably well-off citizen approached unity. In practice, the majority of people fell in between, since most individuals, even in liberal-democratic societies, were never completely free or equal. In fact, the worth of most men's labour had tended to gravitate towards a value not much higher than the value of slave labour. The successes achieved by the New Deal and the Civil Rights protests were precisely to free the poor and oppressed classes more, and to empower them to become full citizens, to a degree. In the process, the reforms benefited society as a whole. These reforms also destroyed the premise on the basis of which Marx predicted the collapse

of capitalism: that capitalism would tend to push the value of labour towards zero for the vast majority of people.

Capitalism has temporarily saved itself by abandoning mercantilism which treated demand as limited and tried to ration it through protectionism, or artificially expand it through colonialism, and accepting instead to expand the market through spreading the benefits accruing from industrial production wider. In some form, this assumption had later been made explicit by John Maynard Keynes. Marx had predicted that capitalism would inevitably collapse under its own logic, since it stimulates production well beyond demand while at the same time eliminating demand by impoverishing and expanding the proletariat. The abolition of slavery and successive social and economic reforms up to, and following, the New Deal were vital in preventing such an eventuality [10].³ By increasing the value of human labour, by redistributing wealth more, it became possible to sustain an ever-expanding capitalist system. Keynesian economics, the Civil rights movement, the welfare state, the Marshall Plan and foreign aid to poor countries, worked in the same direction. As John Kenneth Galbraith aptly put it, “It is one of the least advertised, and for the very affluent the least attractive, of economic truths that a reasonably equitable distribution of income throughout the society is highly functional” [11,12].⁴

It is of great significance that, at the precise moment when more of the same reforms were needed to save capitalism, New Right ‘end of history’ triumphalism is working to achieve quite the opposite: to undermine the basis of capitalist success through the elimination of the very props on which this success rests. The attack on welfare, foreign aid, etc., is just what is needed to cut the branch from under the capitalist system and thus bring the collapse that Marx had predicted. And if we add to this the general loss of direction, reflected concretely in a wide-spread loss of faith in the integrity and abilities of the whole political class in the industrialised countries, the situation appears even more precarious. As Hobsbawm aptly put it, the problem was not just the failure of communism, but of both pure socialism and pure capitalism, in addition to “the disorientation of what might be called the intermediate or mixed programmes and policies which had presided over the most impressive economic miracles of the century”. Late twentieth century experience has ‘revealed that human collective institutions had lost control over the collective consequences of human action’. The ideologies which guided men throughout most of modernity suddenly proved completely unable to guide anybody [13].

The greatest threat to a united future for humanity is going to remain the many walls which have replaced, and are replacing, the fallen Berlin wall. The walls which

³ Many right-wing opponents of Keynesianism dispute this, naturally. They argue, not without justification, that the New Deal never ended the depression. The fact remains, however, that without the huge and sustained government spending during the war and after it (including the Marshall Plan), the major industrial communities would not have emerged from the Depression.

⁴ One could have quoted Francis Bacon who, five centuries earlier reiterated this self-evident wisdom: “Above all things, good policy is to be used, that the treasure and money in a State be not gathered into few hands; for, otherwise, a state may have a great stock, and yet starve. And money, like muck, is not good except it be spread.” Ibn Khaldoun expressed similar thoughts three centuries earlier.

were brought down from the East are being built from this side, most notably along the old East-West divide and on the US-Mexico border.

4. A role to be filled

Economic inequity is only one aspect of the unfairness of the western-dominated world order that had emerged after World War II. The post-cold war system has added to these inequities. The values of liberalism, pluralism and fairness, said to have triumphed as a result, are still a mirage for many. The people of the Muslim world, who had been at the receiving end of western violence for over three centuries cannot help remember that they owed what limited liberties they enjoy to internal western feuding, and not to any leading figures from the liberal-democratic pantheon. It took two world wars and a cold one to push the colonial powers, who all came from systems they called democratic at home, to allow subject nations to go free.

If the propensity to subjugate others can only be checked by the threat of an outside challenge, then there is a role waiting to be filled. And in such a case, the assertions that Islam represents a challenge to the West are generally true. It is the major remaining viable non-Western cultural universe, and it is capable of posing a serious challenge for world leadership. This challenge is already working to benefit Muslims and others. Western countries are already volunteering aid to countries they would never have cared about so as to 'combat Islamic fundamentalism'. It is an open secret that the deal Israel struck reluctantly with the PLO in 1993 has been the result of Israeli fears that the PLO, demonised for years as the epitome of the terrorist organisation, was about to cede the way to radical Islamic groups that were more effective in fighting Israeli occupation and hegemony. In this case, countries that do not have a 'fundamentalist' problem should do better to manufacture one. And many do. Tunisia, Uganda and Eritrea are among countries exaggerating virtually non-existent 'Islamic fundamentalist' threats to win foreign aid and support, a wise policy under the circumstances. Those who possess such a scarce resource are loathe to squander it. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's reluctance to crack down on his militant Islamic opponents is not due only to his concern for the welfare of his people. He knows that he owes a lot to this 'threat'.

What distinguishes the 'fundamentalist' form of dissent against western hegemony from other forms, such as the Marxist or nationalist ones, is its efficacy. The form which a protest takes against perceived injustice is only incidental. If the injustice persists, resistance is also likely to as well. In the Arab-Israeli conflict, the struggle was carried during different stages under traditional Islamic banners, nationalist banners, liberal-democratic banners, left-wing socialist banners, extreme Marxist banners and now modern Islamist banners. The resistance can only end when the belief prevails that justice has been done.

This applies to the whole international system. Liberal democratic principles do contain, as Fukuyama's basic insight suggests, the elements of a universally acceptable world order. If they were applied, that is. The values of pluralism, democracy and respect for basic human rights are the only conceivable basis for a human com-

munity that has a place for every one. But to achieve this, common international institutions should embody these values, wealth should be fairly distributed and fair mechanisms for conflict resolution should be put in place.

As things stand, the majority of the human race cannot identify with the present international system, or lack of it. Many believe that international law is being applied selectively, in a perfidy of justice. Particularly in the Muslim world, the belief is wide-spread that the major powers, like Mafia bosses or the corrupt Sheriffs in old western films, are meting ‘justice’ as a terrorist device to cow and subjugate dissidents, rather than a system of legitimate enforcement of common norms. Western policy in the Middle East has epitomised this ‘bully’ mentality. Attempts to justify these policies only serve to reveal their blatant inconsistency and lack of moral basis.

The United States declared strategy in the Middle East calls for draconian and intrusive measures designed to virtually run the Middle East as a colony. As David Hirst writes in the *Guardian*, not only is the US, the “World’s Only Superpower”, resigned to seeing the Middle East defying the drift towards democracy ‘in this era of collapsing totalitarianisms’, but it seems to support deliberately the status quo. “In practice, the US now depends, more critically than ever, on the absence of democracy to achieve its purposes in the Middle East.” And this from an administration that has assigned itself publicly the ‘high moral purpose’ of ‘enlarging democracy everywhere in the world’ [14].

The argument is that these measures, which include the maintenance of US military superiority in the region, are justified by the need to safeguard vital American interests in the area. These include: maintaining the independence and prosperity of the United States and its citizens; safeguarding US economic interests; and ‘promoting a stable and secure world where political and economic freedom, human rights and democratic institutions can flourish’ [15]. Without higher values to appeal to, however, the mere reference to the need to safeguard self-interest and even independence, can only mean the prevalence of the law of the jungle. After all, Iraq justified its invasion of Kuwait by the need to safeguard its vital interests against perceived Kuwaiti-American conspiracies to drive oil prices down by over-production and other ruses designed to destroy Iraq’s economy and consequently its independence. So who is to adjudicate such claims, and on what criteria?

The selective application of international norms can only serve to discredit the system and undermine its legitimacy. The questions of arms proliferation, terrorism, instability, etc., could only be addressed within an international system that is accepted by the bulk of the human race as legitimate. This could only be achieved if the system is truly pluralistic, democratic and reasonably accommodating of the values interests of the bulk of humanity. Otherwise, attempts to victimise and further humiliate nations that are already aggrieved can only exacerbate conflicts. And this approach becomes even more dangerous in this era which has witnessed what Hobsbawm calls “the democratisation and privatisation of the means of destruction”, which weakened the monopoly of effective force, the defining criterion of state power, even within particular states [16]. After the Tokyo subway poison gas attacks,

and the Oklahoma bombing, this prospect is becoming more terrifying than ever. In regional set-ups, the need to minimise risks is even more urgent.

5. Islam on protest

That religion should take the lead in attempting to restore balance to international relations is a rather surprising phenomenon. Religion has been regarded by sociologists generally as a conservative force, supportive of established interests [17]. In Marx's famous words, it is the "opium of the people", and the "soul of the soulless condition". When it supports dissent, sociologists scramble for ulterior explanations. The role religion plays, however, depends on the context.

Like all major religions, Islam arrived on the world scene as a protest movement. Christianity has a similar history. A major difference between the two world religions is that Christianity evolved and took shape independently of any state, while Islam expressed itself fully on the political as well as the social and individual fields. It is interesting to note, though, that the 'natural' corollary of this parallel development did not follow in practice. Given that the Christian Church has evolved outside the state, while the Muslim community, the *Umma*, has its own state to start with, one would have expected Islam to be more conservative politically and more pro-state than Christianity had been. The reverse was the case, however. Contrary to prevalent views about the relation of Islam and the state, the mutual relation between religion and the state continued to be one of tension, rather than mutual reinforcement.

Apart from the brief period of the 'Righteous Caliphate' (the thirty years following the death of the Prophet Muhammad) no fusion of political and religious authority of the type witnessed in some phases of Christian history, ever took place in Islam. Even during the Righteous Caliphate period, religiously and morally inspired protest resulted in the murder of two of the Righteous Caliphs, and endless revolts in between.

The main reason for this instability was the fact that neither the political nor the religious authority had been properly institutionalised in Muslim communities. Rules were being made as people went along, and charisma and personal distinction decided who was listened to on religious and moral matters, while political acumen and military prowess decided political disputes. Two consequences emerged from this turmoil: first, instability became endemic, and religious and political conflict a constant fact of life; secondly, and as a result of the first consequence, the self-defeating nature of violent protest (the only form of protest available in societies where power has not been properly institutionalised) has generated pessimism about the prospects of reform and led to acquiescence in political systems which were regarded as far from perfect, but the price of changing them was deemed to be too high.

However, the capacity for dissent and protest, implicit in the lack of recognition by the (un-institutionalised) religious leadership of the legitimacy of the political establishment lived on. While some religious schools, such as that of Zaydi Shi'im (dominant in Yemen) stipulated that any properly qualified person who could muster

over three hundred followers is duty-bound to revolt against an unjust ruler, most other schools put more stringent conditions on rebellion, stating that the system must be irredeemably corrupt, its defiance of religious precepts quite overt and the prospects for success against it quite high, before a revolt could be embarked upon. But rebellions and millenarian movements continued to flare up constantly. A significant number of existing Muslim states today are the outcomes of such religiously-inspired uprisings, and we are not speaking here about Iran and Afghanistan. The Moroccan and Saudi dynasties trace their roots to such revolts, while Yemen and Libya lost dynasties with similar genealogy only relatively recently.

Partly to counter these destabilising tendencies, Muslim governments have, since Ottoman times, tried to institutionalise some form of a state-controlled religious authority. Posts such as that of the Grand Mufti were created in almost every Muslim country (the British were instrumental in some colonies such as Egypt and Sudan). A number of ancient religious institutions of learning, such as Al-Azhar in Cairo, were simultaneously given a special status. New religious universities were also created in countries such as Saudi Arabia. However, this does not appear to have resolved the question of religious authority, which remains as open as it ever was. Official religious scholars, the *ulama*, continue to be subject to challenges from both left and right, and whatever authority they retain depends mainly on the state, and at times needs to be buttressed by repression. There is thus a certain circularity in this logic: attempting to legitimise religious authorities by reference to states which lacked legitimacy to start with, and needed the legitimisation of religious authorities which were their own creation.

Attempts to make the 'spiritual capital' in the Muslim World the monopoly of the state or a hierarchical establishment have thus failed everywhere. And since this 'spiritual capital' remains accessible to all in a way power and wealth are not, it continues to be a reliable ally for those who feel disadvantaged, just as it is used as a tool by those in power. However, it tends to favour those out of power more. But this contest ensures that religion remains at the centre of politics.

This capacity of Islam to generate resistance to foreign domination, and to offer a protective shield that resists cultural and political annihilation, has significant implications for world politics, as Ali Mazrui notes, pointing to the Algerian war of independence, which not only liberated Algeria, but also transformed France itself and affected the structure of NATO. Mazrui even argues that the Afghan 'jihad' had been the prime cause of the unravelling of the Soviet empire [18]. This might give support to the arguments about the 'Islamic threat.' However, one cannot blame people for fighting for their freedom. In these cases, the threat came from those who wanted to dominate others.

But Islam's vitality is also the other side of its troubled present. Unlike most other cultural systems in the world, Islam has been shielded from the changes around it for too long, facing no significant cultural threat prior to the modern era. The Mongols who overran the world of Islam in the thirteenth century and threatened its integrity were eventually checked militarily and then converted to Islam, helping to spread it to new areas. Christianity represented a military and political challenge to Islam, but never a cultural one. It was the death of Christianity and the rise of the modern

secular West that disturbed the soul of Islam. The West's material success and military superiority undermined the self-confidence of a community that had been used too long for not only being masters of their own fate, but a perennial world power. The agony has produced much soul-searching and is at the root of the present turmoil.

This turmoil is also the function of the fact that the present order in the Muslim world exists by default, not by design. It was not the result of a conscious and deliberate decision to jettison Islam. Such a decision had been taken only in Turkey in the 1920's, and was not the result of a society-wide consensus. A small elite had imposed this choice by force, and continues to uphold it by repression, making the formula inherently unstable. In most other parts of the Muslim world, the elites had only recently started to grapple with the choices involved. None had the courage to say that they want to jettison Islam. Most lack the intellectual and moral authority to lead the necessary movement to rethink Islam in modern terms. Almost all impede the necessary rethinking by implementing brutal and repressive policies inimical to free thought and free speech.

6. Conclusion

The fact that Islam has come to be regarded as the focus of global dissent is not a problem in itself. In fact it may be a positive and functional development, given the need for countervailing forces to promote an equitable and pluralist world order. It is how various actors react to this which could determine the positive or negative consequences of this capacity to feed and strengthen forces of dissent.

The way some analysts have come to see the future in a monolithic light, with only one cultural-political system dominant, is the more reason why culturally-based dissent is vital. Major western schools of thought tend to see rival cultural systems as destined for imminent extinction, or at best a savage existence on the margins of civilisation. The continued vitality of Islam continues to confound these predictions. However, rather than seeing this as an anomaly or aberration, one should look at the positive side. Cultural diversity can only enrich our world.

Unfortunately, some short-sighted perspectives reject this diversity, especially if it threatens the unjust international order they seek to reinforce. The present of the Middle East gives an indication of the future some may like to impose. Unpopular and corrupt regimes are backed unconditionally with the aim of maintaining unequal and humiliating conditions under various pretexts. This could not fail to feed turmoil and instability, even though the professed aim may be to stabilise the status quo. Attempting to buttress this untenable situation by adopting a policy of 'cultural disarmament' seeking to deprive dissenting voices from their ideological weapons will precisely bring into focus the cultural elements which tend to strengthen dissent.

Needless to say this enthusiasm for 'cultural disarmament' is in itself a refutation of the prediction of cultural harmonisation implicit in the 'End of History' thesis. And it is more likely than not to fail and even prove counterproductive. Foreign challenges have tended to strengthen adherence to Islamic values. Some of the violent challenges have even led to a severe cultural backlash, as the case of Afghanistan

demonstrates graphically. The current international pre-occupation with terrorist threats involving Islamic actors points to another dimension.

As Afghanistan also shows, the real struggle in the Muslim world is, and has to be, with the self. Conflicts with outsiders had served as a spur to Muslim revivalism, but had more often than not provided an alibi and an excuse for not facing oneself and for shirking important decisions. A struggle is needed in the Muslim world first to establish freedom of thought and speech, and secondly to reshape and revitalise Islam. The existence of repressive regimes is no excuse for shirking this duty, although it makes it much harder.

The fact that Islam has emerged as the major focus of global dissent while the Muslim world continues to defy the global trend of democratisation is an anomaly that must resolve itself very soon. One way it could do so is to repeat the Afghan-Algerian scenario, where internationally-backed repression creates a spiral of violence that is sure to marginalise the Muslim world and thus eliminate its role as leader of global dissent. This does not mean that global dissent would be eliminated, only that it may take new forms and adopt new ideologies.

The other scenario is for the Muslim world to accept progressive democratisation. This could occur if all parties within Muslim countries come to an understanding based on accommodation, mutual tolerance and the safeguarding an agreed spectrum of basic rights. The pressure to adopt this course is growing steadily, and may soon prove irresistible.

The turmoil engulfing the world of Islam is, in part, a natural process of rebirth that will have to run its course. The length of this period, the intensity of the conflicts, and their outcome would depend on many factors. The way Muslim elites of various persuasions respond, and how imaginative, bold and morally responsible they prove to be is crucial. Moral courage and the strength to resist the temptation of the short cut of dictatorship are vital for any progress. Intellectual creativity and deep insight are another. Other factors are the conduct of foreign powers, and how far-sighted their leaders prove to be, eschewing the myopia of short-term considerations. The complacency manifested in recent analyses of the emerging order is tragically misplaced. The current approach which leads first to the marginalisation of sizable sections of communities in industrialised countries, as well as the marginalisation of whole areas, such as Africa, is untenable in the long run. Without political accommodation and economic reform on the global stage, it would be impossible to resolve existing conflicts and avoid new ones flaring up.

Islam thus looks to have a long future after the 'End of History'. The role it will continue to play will depend on how major players on the global scene conduct themselves, as well as how Muslims react to internal and external challenges. And unless both sets of actors adopt a radical revision of attitudes and approaches, we look set for a long period of conflict and turmoil.

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