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## Clash of Theologies within Islam

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This paper challenges the clichés of those who subscribe to the notion of Islam as a cohesive, arbitrary, authoritarian and invariant force which breeds fear and distrust. Artificial constructs of an essentialized historical enemy through the prisms of irrationality, hostility and stasis ignore the internal and historical variations of the Islamic civilizational tradition(s) as structured historical units, subject to evolutionary and revolutionary change. They also ignore the various strains within Islam, the numerous sources of Islamic theology and law, the broad and diverse subdivisions within the Sunni and Shiite branches, the many languages, different cultures and diverse customs of Arab and non-Arab Muslims.

Far from being a fixed ideologically monolith existing outside history and in opposition to the West, modernity and democracy, Islam does not and cannot constitute a single coherent entity because different historical, cultural and social contexts and realities make for different islams. Turning heterogeneities into homogeneities does not help solve the major problem of contemporary Islam: Who speaks for Islam? Who really represents tradition? What is Islamic and what is not? There are different kinds of Islam rooted in specific socio-historical contexts and causes, and understanding the dynamics of the competing and sometimes contradictory discourses on any given issue requires an appreciation of the diversity of the contemporary Islamic experience. As there are many Islam(s) there are also many Islamism(s) divided along ideological and sometimes sectarian lines. Salafi traditionalism, jihadism and mainstream Islam are engaged in a struggle among themselves and against dogmatic secularism, and the successful winner of all might become the established tradition. There is no doubt that the consequences of this momentous battle are of historical significance for the Islamic world and its relations with the West.

### **CLASH OF THEOLOGIES?**

A vigorous and often contentious debate on the authenticization of Islam is underway amongst Muslims throughout the Islamic world. The discourse of authenticity and legitimacy revolves around two basic questions: the immutability and mutability of Islam and the compatibility and incompatibility of some interpretation of Islam with some version of Modernity. The divide has always been between traditional dogmatism that mistake the historically contingent forms of Islamic religion for its revealed essence, and progressive Islam which interprets religion as discursive tradition. These two divergent worldviews are also pitted against an aggressively secular modernity which rightly challenges the ideological foundations of religion but wrongly dismisses all attempts to re-invent the Islamic tradition as apologetic Islamic modernism. Dogmatic secularists appropriate to their own values a sense of righteousness and in the process perceive any other current of thought as a threat to their own social-theoretical enterprise. Self-confident secularists believe that their values are more rational, more tolerant, and more progressive than any other belief system. This view converges with traditional dogmatism in that both of them reject the importance of local traditions and believe that they hold the mantle of authoritativeness and authenticity.

Both worldviews are a product of Islam's encounter with modernity and both of them hold to a single interpretation of Islam and modernity.

Yet, neither totalitarian Islam nor authoritarian secular modernity can be imposed on the people indefinitely. The putative defenders of Islam and self-proclaimed defenders of modernity are fully aware of the difficulties and dangers of imposing their narrow and contradictory concept of what a government should look like. This explains their unease with the emergence of a pragmatic (reformist) trend in Islam that negates the ideologization of religion and idealization of secular modernity. This new authoritative religious thinking with its credible vision of a political and social order that synthesizes traditional thought with modern concepts of accountability, pluralism, and the rule of law exposes the intellectual bankruptcy of the religious radicals and moral shallowness of the dogmatic secular enterprise.

The reformist's trend in Islam argues against the absolute theoretical authority of any one reading of the Book, tradition and modernity. In its view, there is no one correct reading of religion but a diversity of interpretations and a variability of religious knowledge. This diversity and variety of interpretations is seen as an unavoidable phenomenon with the end result of the establishment of a pluralistic society. Rejecting any one's right to a monopoly over absolute truth, scriptural interpretation and forms of government as being too reductive and inflexible, this movement for change argues that the activity of scriptural interpretation or any other interpretation, including but not limited to government systems, laws, and politics should be placed into multiple and shifting contexts, for it is neither unique nor fixed in form and content. What many islams suggest is that different interpretations of the Islamic tradition underpin divergent formulations of social, political and economic behavior.

Just as there are many islams there are also many democracies. Conceptualizing democracy as a static set of authoritative beliefs limited to a reified body of meaning fails to recognize cultural diversity by ignoring the importance of local experiences and the possibility of co-learning in a more diversified world. Rather than democracy understood as an all-embracing reality, whose authoritative schemes of thought pertain to all, the emphasis should be on its potential for inclusiveness and capacity for adaptation to distant locales. Only such accent on democracy as a flexible construct versus a static set of beliefs can allow the realization of future discursive communication processes between contending islams and democracies. From this perspective, a deliberative process across differences between and among different ethos and value systems would weaken the exclusivist pretensions of both Islam and Democracy as fixed constructs, imbued with a reassuring certitude that is beyond the reach of change. This weakening of the absolutist singularities of meaning does not in any way negate the contents of the constitutive cultural and moral essence of Democracy and Islam. The processes of history ensure the requirement for de-centered meaning, which in turn pluralizes the ideal of harmony without uniformity.

### **CONTESTATION OF ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY**

Recognition of the contestation of Islam and Democracy as a non-unitary, structural totality is the condition of possibility for the development of modern Islamic discourses and counter-discourses that respect the norms of democratic social action and meaning construction based on an ethos of dialogue across differences.

By reconfiguring the notions of abstract universality and the myth of the unitary subject in relation to time and space, the essentialist and coercive conceptions of the social totality gives in to the power of dialogue that recognizes and maintains differences. The quest for social, cultural and political inclusive systems in the Muslim world threatens the order of the current authoritarian structure and challenges the closure of the idea that postulates a radical choice between Democracy and Islam.

There is a vehement debate within a debate in the Muslim Greater Middle East. The discursive contests and negotiations within and between different groups over what it means to be a good Muslim is taking place within an existing ideological contestation of what it means to be a democrat. Accordingly, the belief in a consensus over whose tradition, whose Islam and whose definition of democracy shall define the political order is misplaced. The emphasis should be on the indeterminate character of any one reading of Islam and democracy and the rejection of all attempts to hegemonize one interpretation over the other. To this end, the construction of Islamic-democratic discourses must be done within a terrain of unfixity where indeterminacy serves as a necessary precondition for the creation of a space where contending islams and democracies engage each other through cooperation and mutual assistance.

The compatibility of Islam and democracy, therefore, does not mean that Islam should conform itself to Democracy as an undisputed and all-embracing code of beliefs deriving from reified notions of Modernity nor does it mean that Democracy ought to conform to the centrality of the notion of Islam as monolithic corpus with a single body of opinion. Instead of the contest over which is more important and who holds the keys to the correct model of governance, neither Islam nor democracy should be dismissed as irrelevant or viewed as alien and opposing ethos.

Contextual islams and democracies is the expression of a dynamic interaction between text and context. This interaction brings to the interpretation of the text a context that increasingly forces both religion and modern secular thought to rethink the notions of the universal and the particular in relation to contemporary experiences. Expanding the field of interpretation and meaning construction to contending islams and democracies does not guarantee the creation of a provisional social imaginary where particularized theistic worldviews work in conjunction with non-theistic conception of progress. Nevertheless, recognition of the provisionalism and indeterminate nature of both worldviews might overtime create the conditions of possibility for a Muslim democracy that allows dissent over the interpretations of meaning and is committed to goods, such as justice and truth.

A dynamic interaction between Islam and democracy challenges the rationalist dictatorship of Western triumphalism and the hegemonic discourse of Islamic exceptionalism. This interaction between Islam and other forms of knowledge, namely secular forms of thought, has a precedent in the medieval Arab-Islamic tradition of *munazarat* (the debates). *Munazarat* produced an intellectual space of ideological contestation rich in ideational fecundity and dialectical vigor. Grammarians, logicians, linguists, theologians and philosophers debated one another on the dialectics between reason and revelation, belief and knowledge, philosophy and orthodoxy, free will and determinism, ethics and political philosophy, and many other controversies. This clash of ideas and theological battles set the stage for the maturing of the medieval culture of Islam. This maturity of Islamic thought deepened under the impact of Hellenistic philosophy.

Through a process that valued deliberation and dialogical form of communication across differences, contending islams displayed a remarkable insight in collaborating with the Other under mutual respect. Muslims' openness to the Other and their interaction with Greek and Hellenistic traditions of philosophy marked the condition of possibility for the emergence of the philosophical and scientific achievements of Islamic civilization. By acknowledging the indeterminate character of the universal and taking their mode of interaction with the Other beyond theological bickering and fixed meanings, Islam thrived as a dynamic and discursive tradition.

Only when Islam ceases to function as a singular and all-embracing reality and Muslims break with their bid for hegemonic universality, can there be peace within and beyond the lands of Islam. Any attempt to expand non-hegemonic discourses necessarily involves recognition of a *social imaginary* that respects difference and tolerate (radical) otherness. The reputation and accomplishments of such great thinkers as Ibn Rushd (1126-98), known as Averroës in the West, demonstrate how the openness of the medieval Muslim world to cultural interaction, tolerance and pluralism laid the groundwork for the development of Arab--Islamic thought within a terrain of unfixity. By conceptualizing orthodoxy as a flexible construct that is neither taken for granted nor promptly dismissed, Ibn Rushd went beyond the code of generalizations that posit civilizations as separate poles of a spectrum. The interaction with the Other did not occur in a coercive atmosphere of triumphalism or exceptionalism or did it by any means compromise the individuality of the participants. Muslim intellectuals harnessed religion as a discursive tradition to more specific contexts in which it stood to benefit from Greek scholarship.

That Greek philosophy was associated with unbelief did not threaten the potential for Muslims interactions with and learning from the experiences and structures of that body of knowledge and belief. Such enlightened perspective of ideological deconstruction of the self as the point of origin that is historically and ideologically fixed, essential and beyond any form of change naturally led to Muslim renaissance which in turn contributed to the development of Europe and other parts of the world. When the norms of meaning construction become ideologically fixed, however, the essences of indigenous concepts become congealed. Such a process of fixation becomes perverted into reified narratives of identity which serves to uncritically glorify particularized sets of one-dimensional beliefs. It is not surprising then that when the fundamental ground of medieval Islam lost its mobility and capacity to interact confidently and modestly with the Other, the imagined whole of a progressive and tolerant socio-cultural imaginary slid away, limiting the future developments of Muslim societies.

The historical practice of the development of the civilizing process within Islam was largely made possible because contending medieval islams gave the best of their traditions when the space for ideological contestation was relatively free of state coercion and the hegemonic conception of unitary social totality. The misfortunes of medieval Islam started with the fixing of meaning construction and totalizing reduction of the field of discursive formation. In this process of the fusion of power in the realms of politics, legalism and knowledge, the indeterminate character of Islam lost its flexibility and multipolarity, resulting in the tragic "five illusions of Muslim politics". These are the myth of *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) as fixed divine construct; the essentialist conception of *ijma* (consensus of the community) as consensus of the religious scholars; the formalization of the meaning of *shura* (decision making process) into an enterprise of consultation between and within vested group interests; the ideological fixation of the meaning of jihad as holy war; totalizing reduction of the field of knowledge to religious knowledge and the meaning of scholars (*'ulama*) to religious *'ulama*.

The *Shari`ah*, is not a set of prescribed divine laws; rather it is what enables, through a dynamic methodology, the practices of understanding God's will. This is why the core of the *Shari`ah* is comprised of legal rulings by classical Muslim scholars. The mutation of this view of *Shari`ah* as a flexible human construction into a divinely ossified monolith meant the closure of the field of the infinite play of meaning construction and interaction with sacred texts. The hegemonic reduction of the content of the *Shari`ah* into a reified and singular meaning during the Abbasid era (750–1258) transformed Muslim politics into a social imaginary where Islam became a fixed hegemonic ideology, legitimizing the state's actions and the ulama's edicts. The latter were more interested in preserving order and cementing the conception of unity and social totality through the production of seemingly internal consensus than in promoting the democratic spirit of Islam where contending islams engaged each other within a terrain of unfixity. In such a process, Islam as a historical and discursive tradition whose dynamic nature served it fairly well in responding to multiple and diverse situations lost its fluidity for fear of disunity. The ulama became so obsessed with preventing opposition to authoritarian rule lest the outbreak of *fitnah* (chaos) might shatter the myth of the unitary Muslim *ummah*. The Sunni jurists' collusion with the power that be led to the imposition of a homogenizing order that stripped Islamic principles like *ijma'* and *shura* of their contestability and democratic trappings. This "rationalist" dictatorship of religious scholars became a *terminus a quo* from which state authoritarianism came to be justified as Islamic.

The absolutist reduction of Islam's mobility and fluidity into a dominating and exclusionary ideology that is fixed, foundationalist and essential has had more than any else a catastrophic effect on Islam's civilizing process. The experiences of Iran and Saudi Arabia attest to the devastating effect that totalitarian visions of both Sunni and Shiite Islam can have on the socio-cultural development of society. In Iran, religious rule has been built on a system of exclusion where the concept of centered structure became reified into the principle of *velayat-e faqih*. This hypostasized ideology-based system serves to integrate and legitimate a permanent hegemonic structural order that defines the norms of social, political and cultural action. Such totalizing institutionalization of *velayat-e Faqih* as fixed, foundationalist, and outside the play of history has severely limited the potential for indigenous institutions to co-evolve with their environment and undermined the centrality of the notion of *velayat-e faqih* as a static body of authoritative laws.

A growing number of Iranians are getting disenchanted with the clerics' incapacity for adaptation to changing social conditions. By fixing the relationship between democracy and theocratic governance, many aspects of interaction between the two are not much of an interaction as they take place in a coercive atmosphere where the *rahbar* (*vali-e faqih*) enjoys absolutist power over all branches of government. Against the backdrop of this unfortunate development, it has now become so self-evident to a great number of Iranians that the miseries inflicted on them by their oppressive, manipulative and corrupt political order is the direct result of a religious system based on totalizing hierarchies and fundamental immobility. This does not mean that religious thought lost its essence and moral authority. What is contested is the concept of religion as a singular, formal and hegemonic construct. There is a growing realization of the indeterminate character orthodoxy and the importance dialogical form of communication across differences.

In Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism as a legitimizing state ideology has lost its appeal as well. The monarchy's moral bankruptcy, its opulent lifestyles, and the repressive social and cultural strictures it enforces have nurtured popular support for militant Islam in the kingdom and contributed to the radical mutation of Wahhabism from a retrograde status quo prone ideology into a radical one.

The House of Al Saud' Islamic yet manipulative and authoritarian model of power has become the greatest obstacle to save Islam and the kingdom from their state of disarray. The Saudi leadership has cornered itself into being manipulated and intimidated, on the one hand, by a religious establishment intent on sabotaging any democratic opening and, on the other hand, by a jihadi "Frankenstein monster" that has turned on the regime that nurtured it. Saudi Arabia today oscillates between promises of reformulating its flawed Islamic model and continuing its self-defeatist policies of the past.

### **THE RISE OF PROGRESSIVE ISLAM**

A plethora of emerging islams are challenging the exclusivist, oppressive and corrupt ideology that dogmatic traditionalists pose as Islam and radical secularists pose as modernity. By confronting the ideational and ideological underpinnings of Muslim literalist exclusivists and authoritarian secularists, progressive Muslims try to reevaluate the political use of theological and secular concepts, and formulations of social, political, and economic norms. This is evident in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia where moderate Muslims are struggling to liberalize and rationalize the political, social and religious culture of two of the worst militantly ideological states in the Islamic world. This struggle is also evident in Algeria and particularly Turkey where the ruling Justice and Development Party is treading cautiously in its attempt to limit the power of a zealous institutional core that is obsessed with enforcing its own reading of the state secular ideology. Like the Mullahs in Iran and the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia, the Turkish army enforces dress codes for women and suppresses any challenge to its ideology. Working in opposition to the political and cultural narrowness of the official reading of religion and the secularist conception of modernity as a single construct, modern Muslim thinkers demonstrate how religion determines eternal values and represents abstract formulations that are shaped and influenced by the differences in interpretive frameworks and contexts. Mohsen Kadivar highlighted this need for historicism of the Islamic tradition and cautioned against universalizing from specific historical practices, injunctions, and utterances.

Religious intellectuals assert the historicity of revelation, the primacy of reason, and the necessity of rethinking Islamic theology and reinterpreting the Qu'ran. As the Saudi Abdallah al-Hamid put it, "an innovative rereading of the sacred texts is necessary, nowadays more than ever, for it is out of this that our political thought will emerge." Modern Muslim thinkers condemn blind adherence to tradition and see the rebirth of innovation of thought and interpretation as a necessary means to the escape from intellectual sterility and the further decay of Muslim societies. "It is essential to borrow from our ancestors, for they have played an important role, but what I criticize is the behavior of these traditionalists who refuse to go beyond them, (...) who regard them as saints, as if they were the incarnation of the Book and the Sunna," Abdallah al-Hamid argues. No measure of religious certainty will resolve the Muslim world's crisis of legitimacy without first acknowledging the contested nature of religious knowledge.

By drawing on the mastery of modern hermeneutics and Islamic jurisprudence, reformists engage in social criticism to marginalize the official reading of religion and discredit the absolute authority of any one reading of Islam. This trend of religious and political thought is credited with breaking the taboo on questioning Khomeini's theory of *velayat-e faqih* in Iran and Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. Social and political Islamist reformers in Saudi Arabia have been moving gradually away from the radical concepts advocated by Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab. Despite their different readings of religion, different understanding of the dialectic of tradition and modernity and disparate political visions, former rejectionists like Mansur al-Nuqaidan, Abdallah al-Hamid and Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim have opened a critical public debate about Saudi tradition, Wahhabism and the fundamental principles of order. This debate is articulated within "webs of meaning" and in dissociation from the politically ruling religious interpretation and abuse of tradition. Debate of this kind is necessary to develop a critical theory for reformulating Islamic thought and setting the stage for a Wahhabi reformation.

### THE QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY, DEMOCRACY AND THE ISLAMIC STATE

In the contemporary greater Middle East, there is an interesting process of dynamic change in the outlook of moderate Islamism that is informed by the logic of the Islamic modernism movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A prime example of this ideological evolution is the significant *mura-ja'a* (revision) of doctrine and strategy carried by former rejectionists and Islamist activists. Former radicals such as Mansur al-Nuqaidan and Mishari al-Zaydi in Saudi Arabia have awakened to the fact that their rejectionism undermines Islam and worsens their political, social, and intellectual ferment over the proper way to make sense of a troubling world. The defeat of the jihadists in Algeria and Egypt and their loss of popular support and sympathy represented a solemn occasion for self-evaluation and introspection about the causes of the moral and practical bankruptcy of the jihadi strategy and the intellectual impoverishment of the thinking which inspires it. The public renunciation of the use of violence and jihad against the government by Algerian Islamic activists and the Egyptian *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* is a dramatic development in this process of slow but ongoing ideological revision.

The initiative of *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* in Egypt to review, assess and reverse its jihadist theoretical position stems from a pragmatic realization of the catastrophic consequences of engaging in conflicts that are beyond the organization's power to win.

*Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*'s repudiation of its irrational jihadi ideology and its reexamination of its theoretical position in light of a rational reassessment of normative rules of conduct and the prevailing realities on the ground are encouraging signs of the debate occurring within Islamists circles about the need for contextualized understanding of the issues of jihad and *ijtihad*. There is a long way to go in this process of ideological revision. It is easy to dismiss this break with jihadists ideas as tactical gimmick but it would be a mistake to write it off completely. It is hard to ignore the role that experience can play in driving significant changes in people's values and beliefs. The heavy human losses that *Jama'a al-Islamiyya* suffered in its confrontation with the regime and its complete loss of any moral standing and popular support set the dynamic for a gradual change in behavior and modification of radical discourses. It also precipitated the eclipse of the jihadi ideology and the rise of peaceful Islamic activism. The fact that the group has not engaged in violent activities since the 1997 massacre of tourists in Luxor attests to this change of strategy.

The debates in Islamists circles in Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and everywhere else in the lands of Islam, however, have not yet moved beyond denunciation of violence against the state and excommunication of fellow Muslims to the next difficult level of effectively challenging the intellectual underpinnings of jihadi ideology. There are profound disagreements among Islamists about how to challenge the theoretical totalistic and essentialist jihadi worldview and the practical challenges posed by the modern age without being seen as compromised by the radicals and dangerous by feckless and authoritarian regimes. The Islamists inability to agree on a progressive authoritative reading of Islam that not only reject violence but also challenges the absolute theoretical authority of jihadism and transcend their deep-rooted clashes of interest risks wasting this enormous opportunity of self-evaluation. The Muslim world is in desperate need of rethinking the way Islamists or non-Islamists interpret scriptural sources.

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that we are witnessing the beginning of a long overdue critical reassessment of jihadism and the catastrophic flaws of that ideology. The initiative taken by a number of the younger members of the Muslim Brothers to establish a political party with an Islamist orientation that is qualitatively different from the Brothers movement is a major development in terms of the evolution of Islamists political, ideological and intellectual conceptions of constitutionalism and appreciation of gender equality. The *Wasat* party (the "middle way") has a woman and a Christian on its central committee, a first in Middle East Islamic political activism. By advocating political pluralism and human rights as major components of its political platform, and defining "its reference to Islam in terms of Islamic civilisation rather than the Islamic faith," the *Wasat* established "the doctrinal basis for a non-sectarian party of democratic reform."

In Algeria, the majority of Islamic political activists have broken with their narrow and dangerous formulations of Shari`ah. As their Egyptian counterparts, they engaged in a process of rational and logical ideological revision that condemned violence and *takfir* as unIslamic and counterproductive. After several bloody years, Algerian Islamic political activists came to recognize that the best way to rationalize the political culture is by first rationalizing the religious culture of the Islamic movement. Their defeat triggered a debate about the compatibility of Islam with modern socio-political values of open political systems, democracy and human rights. With the exception of small though still dangerous jihadists, Algerian political Islamists have come publicly in favor of the adoption of democratic values, institutions, and procedures. There are, of course, differences of view among Islamists about the nature of the state but a general consensus has developed among the different factions about the need for the establishment of a democratic government. These attempts to reclaim, reinterpret and reconcile Islam's pluralistic and democratic elements with modern forms of governments represent a partial recovery of the outlook of the "Islamic modernism" movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The ideological revival of the ideas and discourse of Islamic modernism set the dynamic and the general course of the movement intellectual and political development in several other Muslim countries. Even in Saudi Arabia, several rejectionists (such as Mansur al-Nuqaidan and Mishari al-Zaydi) and reformers (including Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim and Abdallah al-Hamid) have embarked on a public re-examination of Wahhabi theology and its retrograde rules of conduct in light of the prevailing democratic standards. This orientation towards social reforms and political moderation has not only sparked a storm in clerical circles but also triggered a debate about the role of the ulama and the state, tolerance versus violence, rights versus duties, and so forth. The rise of this new way of thinking about the relationship of Wahhabism and the concept of jihad and *Ijtihad* in particular configurations and particular local circumstances might constitute one of the most ideologically innovative episodes in the intellectual history of modern Saudi Arabia.

There is a growing realization that religious freedom and tolerance of the Other secure rather than undermine religious authenticity. There is also an awareness of the diversity of Saudi voices and the necessity to search for common ground through shared values such as justice, peace and human rights.

The process of critical reassessment of political Islam as a contested and dynamic concept that is neither a singular condition nor an all-embracing reality stems from a realization of the vulnerability of its absolutist pretensions to the tests of texts and contexts. The move from the conception of Islamism as a fixed authoritative body of opinion to other alternative notions is driven by a historical moment in the Greater Middle East where the view of Islamism, secularism and democracy as predefined, culturally sanctioned categories is being challenged by a plethora of contending islams and democracies. The challenge resides in the indeterminate character of each category and the fundamental requirement for de-centered meaning. There is a deep contestation around religious and democratic thought. Neither can be fixed outside the play of history nor detached from the other. Accordingly, recognition of the fluid nature of both concepts enables Islam and Democracy to negotiate between and among themselves for a reconciliation of religious political thought with the experiences and structures of the project of modernity.

#### **America and the Middle East: Clean Break or Dirty War**

Resolving the tension between religion and politics in the Greater Middle East requires more than the hegemonic reduction of the field of meaning informed by the "Lewis Doctrine" and its obsession with Ataturkist dogmatic secularism. The fundamental claim of the Lewis doctrine is that only a Western secularized Muslim democracy is worthy of support. From this perspective, an ideologically fixed and essential vision of the secularization of Muslim politics becomes the basis of a socio-political imaginary that would be imposed from above in the same fashion Ataturk imposed his puritanical model on Turkey. Such a process of ideological exclusion and reconstitution is detrimental to Islam's contemporary debates. The name for any fictitious fixing of meaning or forceful imposition of the rationalist dictatorship of ataturkist secularism is hegemony. No group, model or theory has a monopoly on defining the norms of social, political and cultural action. As the current struggle for democracy in Iran and elsewhere in the lands of Islam illustrates, theistic traditions and democratic political thought are flexible constructs that are discursively reconstructed within a terrain of ideological contestation. This contestation is conducted in a context of new, still inchoate, often unpredictable, perhaps more tumultuous politics. Yet, the resulting uncertainty of this ideological contestation of tradition and modernity is at least as hopeful as anything the Islamic world has witnessed in decades.

The contingency and contestability of Islam and Democracy is the condition of possibility for the emergence of divergent social imaginaries that meet as partners and moral equals in their battle against delegitimized state rule. Conceptualizing Islam and Democracy as discursive traditions imbued with a spirit of religious and cultural tolerance is the way forward for building a shared future that transcends extremism, bigotry and essentializing. Islam and Democracy as contested and historically dynamic concepts can interact with each other, creating the potential for the creation of a single though decentered new logic for democratization in the Greater Middle East and beyond. For the most part of Islamic history, Muslims have failed to critically engage their discursive tradition and draw on its contestability to develop coherent theories and structures of political checks and balances. To begin to understand the failure of Muslims to mobilize the indeterminate character and contested nature of Islamic ideals is to comprehend their inability to engage Democracy as a non-static, flexible tradition.

In this era of indeterminacy, hybridity and contestability, the West can offer a great deal of help to a Muslim world yearning for democracy by first observing its own ideals when dealing with that part of the world and second by refraining from the dangerous temptations of supporting one model of democracy over another. Since the end of the cold war and most certainly after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Western theoreticians and strategists strived to fill the paradigm gap left by the defeat of the red menace philosophy with another central, unifying and controlling paradigm to provide direction for the West's sense of purpose. The architects of this strategy with its totalizing discourse of "West vs Islam" "good vs evil", "tolerance vs absolutism," "secularism vs Islamism" believe that the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be subject to judgment in terms of a single paradigm. The problem, however, of creating a unifying paradigm against which all policy must be measured is that it is reductive in nature and does a great disservice for policy makers by failing to take account of the fragmentation of the geopolitical Islamic world, the complexity of events and diversity of movements in the Muslim world. Even when the target is political Islam and not the religion, the differences between Islamists in religious views, political conceptions and social orientations should not be overshadowed by the compelling quality of lumping all Islamic movements together as organizing principle in the war on terrorism. Political strategists need to be aware of the defining features of Islamism as a complex and multi-faceted movement to be able to identify those with whom they can work to promote democracy and isolate the jihadists. Resistance of engaging moderate Islamists known for their commitment to moderation and pluralism makes a mockery of the West stated goals of promoting democracy in the region and further complicates its task of reducing the causes that lead to extremism.

If the West is to successfully extend freedom to the Greater Middle East, it has to drastically rethink the way it approaches the region. Disregard for the internal order or disorder of Muslim countries is no longer an option. Excessive intervention in or coercive democratization of these countries, however, is not the ideal alternative it was made to be given its potential destructiveness. The invasion of Iraq did not lead to the triumph of secular political ideologies but the resurgence of nationalistic and religious sentiment. It is Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, not the secular Ahmad Chalabi or interim Prime Minister Iyad Al-lawi, that emerged as the most powerful and respected figure in post-Saddam Iraq. Ironically, it is the cleric's Islam that is acting as an ideological bulwark against the Islams of Osama bin Laden and his lieutenant in Iraq, Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi.

The United States should be given credit for focusing on the question of reform in the Islamic world and for trying to craft a sustained strategy to politically transform the region. President Bush is right when he says that "It is presumptuous and insulting to suggest that a whole region of the world--for the one-fifth of humanity that is Muslim--is somehow untouched by the most basic aspirations of life." He is also right to state that "The Middle East has often been left behind in the political and economic advancement of the world. That is the history of the region. But it need not and must not be its fate. The Middle East could write a new story of trade and development and democracy. And we stand ready to help." President Bush's vision of "a new Arab charter that champions internal reform, greater political participation, economic openness and free trade" is a welcome dissociation from the undercurrents of thought that (mis)guided US policy for decades. This abrupt reformulation of the fundamentals of Middle Eastern exceptionalism might put an end to America's excuses for tyrannical repressive regimes in the region.

The combination of economic stagnation, political turmoil, and security deterioration with persistent and serious American prodding for reform have triggered exceptional explosions of non-governmental reform conferences and seminars in the Middle East discussing human rights, the rule of law and freedom. The "Alexandria document" is a remarkable example of how a group of Arab intellectuals and activists came together in Egypt under the aegis of president Hosni Mubarak and produced a bold document demanding cultural, political and religious reforms. Other seminars in other parts of the Middle East dealt with the thorny issues of renewing Islam, reviewing the roots of Islamic heritage, reinterpreting sacred texts, just to name a few. This proliferation of fora where the ills of Muslim societies are discussed openly signal that there is a movement in the Muslim world, if perhaps not yet a consensus, that Muslim societies have to reform their political, economic, social and religious institutions. Questions, of course, remain regarding how governments will respond to this push for change and how the United States and Europe can support it.

It is important that America and its Western allies keep pushing regimes to change and reward those that already started that process. But in the process of aligning themselves with the movements of change inside the region, they need to tread carefully and certainly keep a lower profile. Western democracies should resign themselves to the fact that each country is going to have to find its own way of democratization and resist the temptation of dictating specific contents of reform and positing as the main actors of the reform process. Authoritarian and retrograde voices in the Muslim world take advantage of America's negative image and perceived excessive bias towards Israel to discredit advocates of democratic change and mobilize highly nationalistic and religious populations against the schemes and advances of an "imperialistic" America that is seen as determined more than ever before to impose external political models inimical to Islam and Muslims. America's talk of democratization is being compared to the 19th Century European ideas expressed by the British as the "white man's burden" or the "mission civilizatrice de la France", and anybody that talks about democracy is accused of being a tool or an agent of the United States and of the Israelis.

It is important to note that reform-minded Muslims are not only Western-educated and secular but also progressive Muslims. The US public embrace of groups that seem to fully embrace its ideals and visions of political, social and cultural transformation is counterproductive and risks alienating them from a society yearning for change but deeply suspicious of the "hidden" agenda of Western democracy. To the extent that reform is viewed as Made-in-America it will fail. The US government has largely ignored the potential transformative force of progressive Muslims, choosing instead to promote ideologies and avowed pro-American secularists who represent a minority view among Muslims. The US interests in the region are usually defined by selfish considerations and driven by ill-defined plans for how change might be achieved. As Jonathan Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, put it "They (some members of US government and their proxies outside government) appear to have no clear audience in the Arab world in mind other than some ill-defined notion of "the masses," and they can identify precious few in the Middle East who wish to work with them."

The European Union experience provides insights into the ineffectiveness of regional cooperation based essentially on terrorism, immigration and economic assistance. Europeans thought that luring the Arab world by lucrative incentives like better access to the Union's internal market and more development aid would encourage autocratic regimes to implement structural adjustment programs and political reforms. This was wishful thinking, of course. Smart autocrats knew full well how to accommodate Europe's economic and security concerns without compromising their hold on power. Europe's timidity in pressing for political reforms and over-sensitivity to the putative cultural uniqueness of Arabs certainly did not help in promoting the ambitions of the 1995 Barcelona process.

Efforts to garner popular support for change can benefit greatly from recognizing the constructive role of engaging progressive Muslims known for their progressive ideas, enlightened interpretation of religion and willingness to work with non-Islamists. The last few years witnessed the emergence of a potentially transformative force in several Middle Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia. The rise of a broadly shared political consciousness between a number of religious modernists and liberals is a novel and striking development that needs encouragement and support. This new trend of networking between Islamists and non-Islamists gave birth to a unified political rhetoric and demands for new structures of authority and new vision for the future development. It also gave a new potency to the movement for change by granting an unprecedented opportunity for liberals to benefit from the Islamists ability to mobilize and the Islamists to reconstruct their image in the eyes of skeptics.

The construction of centrist coalitions, cutting across religious and intellectual lines and encompassing progressive Islamists and liberals deserves support. It is instrumental that the United States and its Western allies push authoritarian governments not to sabotage efforts underway to promote debates between religious intellectuals and non-Islamists on an interpretation of Islam, which is modern and compatible with universal human rights, pluralism and democracy. It is in the U.S best interest to encourage healthy debates and strengthen all reformists in their efforts to rid their societies of jihadist mentalities and authoritarianism. The liberals alone cannot make change happen without active collaboration, coordination and synchronization with the progressive Islamists whom they share with a common goal. "Making peace, getting together, coming to an agreement — call it as you like — is nowadays an urgent and pressing necessity, that can't be postponed... in this sense, it is exactly like the question of reform itself — and has no less importance," argues Muhammad Sa'id Tayyib, a Saudi liberal, who believes in the necessity of joining forces in the face of adversity between moderate Islamists and liberals. Democracy has to largely be homegrown and it is counterproductive for the US to insist on any one model for reform. A beneficial policy for the United States as an outsider power is to help bridge the gap between progressive Muslims and secularists. There are differences between the two movements but their convergences far outweigh their disagreements.

There is no doubt that there are uncertainties about the Islamists true intent. The experiments of Iran raises serious concerns as to whether, once in power, the Islamists would ever yield control over government and tolerate diversity. To assume, however, that Islamists and their politics are all of a single stripe is false. Such conceptualization of Islamists as theoretically uniform zealous ideologues fails to recognize the variability and non-violent essence of their doctrinal outlook. Rather than excluding Islamism from contemporary Islamic debates, Western policymakers and governing elites should appreciate the value of deliberation and dialogical form of communication between the plethora of Muslim voices contesting Islam and Modernity.

**WHAT'S AT RISK?**

There is no doubt that the United States and its Western allies face a daunting challenge of balancing between the requirements of the war on terrorism and stability on the region and promoting democracy and groups who share their vision of reform but who are often strongly opposed to US policy particularly with regard to the Palestinians. This is why it is extremely crucial that the United States and Europe invest so much capital to solve this perennial problem. It is also crucial that the United States uses its influence with Muslim governments to convince them that reform of their system of governance is in their best interests. Change does not have to be radical and does not mean displacement of the existing order, and it is certainly the less dangerous strategy to pursue. Muslim rulers have put off for so long the issue of reform that every choice they now face carries some risk. Obstinate pursuit of repression and exclusion not only fuels the forces of intolerance that threaten the regimes but also endangers the United States and the Western world as the terrorist events of 9/11 demonstrated.

In several Muslim countries, the state is reluctant to rethink its catastrophic hegemonic politics and totalizing reduction of Islam's mobility and fluidity into a dominating and exclusionary ideology. The broader lesson that emerges from the Iranian case is that religious fixity and absolutism do significant damage to the positive qualities of Islam. Public Islam can act as a constraint against oppression and a counterweight to the excesses of the state but when Islam becomes a totalizing state ideology, it naturally loses its humanity and becomes subordinated to the whims and vagaries of religious despots. Such a process of ideological hegemony through fixation of meaning and identity acts to reify and maintain the status quo. The processes of history, however, ensure that for the positive qualities of Islam to survive, the state has to adjust its policies in light of changing social conditions. Not surprisingly, the ideological reformation of the Iranian state ideology is increasingly seen as a necessity to save the system from disintegrating. The Mullahs bid for hegemony in Iran is seriously threatened from within and without. The conservative bloc is fragmenting and further fragmentation is anticipated unless the *rahbar* and his followers address the economic, social and political malaise of the country.

The revival of the Islamic lost tradition of *munazarat* and *ijtihad* within a terrain of unfixity can be promising for the future of Islam. Islam, Islamism, secularism and democracy are some of the phases and functions of any deliberative process. Discursivity across differences, however, can occur only when all parties drop their absolutist pretensions of Islamic exceptionalism or secular triumphalism. As the Saudi case demonstrates, progressive Islamists and non-Islamists can work across differences to try and defeat authoritarianism and religious bigotry. It remains to be seen whether family-based regimes or populist rulers are willing to engage in any meaningful intellectual activity that recognizes and maintains differences. Most countries in the Middle East put restrictions on the operations of even secular parties, ending up suppressing any viable alternative and enabling the Islamists, particularly the extremists to cast themselves into the role of being the only creditable alternative to the existing government.

The triumph of the state in its war against *jihadi* groups does not mean that the state has succeeded in demolishing the doctrinal underpinnings of jihadism as an ideology. And while the repudiation by *al-Jama'at al-Islamiyya* in Egypt and some influential militants in Saudi Arabia and Algeria of their own jihadi doctrines represent an enormous victory for the state, failure to capitalize on this remarkable evolution of Egyptian Islamism and Saudi jihadism risks fuelling the revival or reinforcement of marginal but dangerous tendencies within the Islamist movement. In view of the tremendous economic, social and political challenges that countries of the Middle East face, minimalist approaches and superficial damage control would most certainly lead to a revival of local *jihadi* activism.

Some countries seem to grasp the delicateness and urgency of implementing prudent but meaningful economic and political reforms. They also seem to realize that procrastination and denial create a dangerous vacuum that would expedite their worst-case scenarios. By their own passivity, countries most resistant to change would relinquish their right to positively influence the future of the region.

For the West, progressive Muslims may not be the liberal democrats its wants them to be but they do represent a trend whose conception of Islamic government significantly differ from those of jihadists or radical fundamentalists. To overcome the anarchical state of affairs of the Muslim world one has to overcome the domestic and regional challenges that hinder the formation of coalitions of moderate Islamists and non-Islamists committed to representative government. There is an interesting debate raging in the Muslim world and beyond over the fate of Islamism, the dawn of a post-Islamist age and US role in re-mapping the Middle East. It would be unfortunate if this unique opportunity to produce authoritative, legitimate and authentic models of consciousness which provide a rationale for support of pluralism, democracy, and human rights goes unexploited.