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Meeting the Western Challenge:
The Early Establishment Response

To present the Muslim confrontation with the West as the principal organizing theme for interpreting modern times in the entire *Dar al-Islam* is not to embrace the simplication of an unchanging East stirred up by a dynamic West. No, the different parts of the Muslim world had not opted out of history until the West arrived and, depending on your politics, (a) disrupted a society whose many different peoples had formed a coherent organism or (b) played the role of the prince whose kiss awakened the long sleeping princess.

Major changes were taking place within various parts of the Muslim world before the Western presence and peril became predominant. Major changes continued within the Muslim world thereafter unrelated or only remotely related to the Western factor. To mention only a few, it was as long ago as the sixteenth century when the great Indian Muslim reformer, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624) resisted the efforts of the enigmatic Moghul emperor Akbar (1542–1605, r. 1556–1605) to synthesize Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism into a unified state religion.[1] The same century witnessed significant advances in the Islamization of Indonesia with a concomitant partial de-Hinduization of its peoples and cultures.

Even in the eighteenth century, which brought what soon became massive Western intrusions, many developments bespoke a dynamism that was both ushering new converts into the Islamic *umma* and intensifying the absorption into mainstream Islamic culture of those already nominally Muslim. The broad-ranging activities of the Naqshbandiyya brotherhood or the early Wahhabiyya in Arabia are examples.

Yet all such developments did usually converge, sooner or later, with the dominant motif of the Western challenge. The Moghul vacillations in religious policy can be seen, in retrospect, as having eased the task of the British East Indian Company in conquering India. The Wahhabiyya, not to mention other Muslim revivalist tendencies, contributed to developments that served either to question existing political authority or to change it. Then, as Western penetration proceeded, these indigenous stirrings blended into the emerging pattern of Muslim peoples facing this dual threat—material and ideological—imposed by the alien infidel.

Confrontations of cultures occur in a context of power disequilibrium. One side is more powerful than the other, sometimes very much so, sometimes only slightly. One side (often but not always the most powerful) is better able to change, to adapt, to innovate. The politically and militarily weaker may be stronger economically or, for that matter, in cultural achievement (however difficult that may be to measure). Or one side in the confrontation may have assembled an awesome combination of strengths virtually across the board. Moreover, the several different power indices are ever shifting even while the process of acculturation proceeds. It is never simply a dynamic dominator and an inert dominated.

All players to the game, the weak as well as the strong, are choosing their strategies—always, of course, with incomplete knowledge of what is going on. Earlier generations did not, could not, see events with the clarity (or presumed clarity) we enjoy in hindsight. The image of the Western potter molding the Muslim clay is a poor parody of reality. All are simultaneously acting and reacting with constantly evolving images of self and other.

Rudyard Kipling, thus, offers a good epitome of Western images of the non-West in the heyday of colonialism but a poor picture of third world reality in writing:

> Now it is not good for the Christian's health to hustle
>   the Aryan brown,
> For the Christian riles, and the Aryan smiles, and it
>   weareth the Christian down;
> And the end of the fight is a tombstone white with the
>   name of the late deceased,
> And an epitaph drear: "A fool lies here who tried to
>   hustle the East."

Rather, for the Muslim world as for others, tactics changed over time. Passive resistance sometimes, active resistance at other times. Emulation at

times, total resistance to even the most neutral aspect of the alien's culture at other times.

Even a summary sketch of Muslim history during roughly the past two centuries would be a disproportionate digression from the broader purposes of this book.[2] Instead, a schematic presentation of the modes and moments of the Muslim response will be presented.

Since the new age aborning in the Muslim world was being created by a powerful alien threat coming from the West, the governments and the political elites of the Muslim world were the first to be in danger and the first to respond.

The rest of Muslim society—whether ulama, artisans, merchants, or peasants—became fully aware of the radical changes being imposed on their way of life only later. Such was the case, at least, where states survived the first shocks of the Western impact. Where, on the contrary, the states fell apart early in the process—as in Algeria whose three-centuries-old Ottoman Turkish government was destroyed in the early days of the French conquest or in India where the Moghuls were a spent force before the end of the eighteenth century—the pattern was that of adjusting to direct alien rule.[3] Even in these cases the first response came largely from the existing indigenous political elite.

Muslim political leaders were usually the first to wrestle with these new problems because the stark reality of Western military superiority soon dictated the rules of the game even if Western hegemony often began with seemingly peaceful trade. Hilaire Belloc's lines written at the end of the century sum up the new age:

> Whatever happens, we have got
> The Maxim gun, and they have not.

In Northern Africa, for example, three decisive defeats frame the beginning, middle and end of the nineteenth century rather better than precise chronological dates: 1798: Napoleon's routing of the Mamluks at the Battle of the Pyramids; 1844: the French defeat of the Moroccan forces at the Battle of Isly; 1898: British victory over the Mahdist forces in the Battle of Omdurman. At other times and in other places Muslim leaders came to realize the radical change in the power balance between Muslim lands and the old enemy, Europe, not so much after a cataclysmic battle but rather in

response to incremental changes. An incident in the beylik of Tunis in the early 1800s illustrates the point. Reacting to a dispute with Sardinia, Husayn Bey wanted to go to war, but an old Mamluk serving the bey put the case poignantly: "Sardinia and Genoa are not what we used to know. They have advanced in prosperity and power just as we have declined."[4] Even the lesser European states could henceforth threaten the Muslim states.

The Muslim political leadership faced limited choices. The crushing defeats of 1798, 1844, and 1898 inflicted on Arab Africa demonstrated the futility of military confrontation. Major defeats elsewhere could be added to the roster: Plassey in India as early as 1757, the naval battle of Navarino in 1827, and the Russian victories over Persia in 1812 and 1826. Seemingly, a more promising strategy for Muslim rulers was to enter into alliance with one or another European power against the more immediately threatening European power. Thus Muslim rulers sought to play off the British and French contending for control of India or the British and the Dutch in the East Indies. They jockeyed between the British and the Russians facing off in that vast area from Anatolia to Afghanistan in the celebrated nine-teenth-century equivalent of the twentieth-century cold war that the British dubbed the "great game."[5] Beleaguered Muslim rulers in the Mediterranean area tried as best they could to take advantage of the mul-tipower Eastern Question diplomatic confrontations among the several European powers.

Along with this strategy of divide to avoid being ruled[6] there grew up among a few prescient members of the Muslim elite the will to study the institutions and ideas that seemed to undergird Western strength with an eye to adapting them to their own societies. Thus arose, beginning some two centuries ago, the pattern of seeking to play "catch-up" with a neighboring and threatening state system. The heirs to this tradition of "Westernization" and "defensive modernization" remain in power in most Muslim states to this day.[7] They are, in the eyes of Islamic radicals or fundamentalists who oppose them, at best foolish fellows smitten with "Westoxication"; at worst they have so abandoned the true faith of Islam as to be deemed not just infidels but apostates deserving death. This pejorative appraisal of the Westernizers is, however, a parody of reality. In fact, both the so-called secularists (or, a more benign label, the Muslim Erastians) and the Islamic radicals (or fundamentalists) have embraced a number of ideas and actions traceable to the West. Both groups are also aware, indeed, oppres-sively aware, of the still intrusive Western "Other." Both are trying in their quite diverse ways to reconstitute a self-sufficiency that began to slip away from Muslims in the modern era. Many things have changed in the past two

centuries, not the least important being the vastly widened circle of those involved in politics, but the core challenge of defensive modernization still confronts them all.

The struggle within the Islamic world since the Western impact became predominant may be schematized as being between those prepared to adjust to the world as it is versus those insisting on making the world adjust to their image of what the world should be. The former risk eventually losing important aspects of their religious tradition through piecemeal accommodation to alien ways. The latter risk losing all in one cataclysmic defeat, somewhat like the fate of the Jewish Zealots in confronting Rome. The former may well succeed in achieving a workable new synthesis that maintains the core religious values while being in line with the world they are fated to live in. The latter by their inflexible resistance may manage to do the same by challenging overly latitudinarian ways. Neither accommodationist nor rejectionist is always correct or more "religious" than the other. Specific historical circumstances govern each case. The opportunists and the sincere are to be found in both camps.

Another way to classify the two approaches that have developed in response to the intrusive West is as establishment versus antiestablishment groupings. The former, having a stake threatened by but not yet totally lost to the alien challenge (such as ruling an existing state with its army, bureaucracy, and other institutions) have usually tended to adopt some combination of accommodationist, play-for-time strategies. The latter, with little or less to lose, are more inclined to radical measures.

The accommodationists/establishment forces were not only first in the field against the Western challenge. They have also been more important than the resisters/antiestablishment forces in terms of political power wielded. They continue to be so even today, although the cumulative weight of the Islamic radical forces may yet swing the balance to a degree unmatched during the past two centuries. More on that later.

Sketching the Middle Eastern and North African response to the Western threat may illustrate the above interpretation. This important segment of the larger Muslim world offers the example of several long-established states confronting the Western state system. Largest and most important by far was the Ottoman Empire. This long-lived state had two autonomous provinces that can be counted as de facto states, Egypt and Tunisia (Algeria would have been another but for the French occupation beginning in 1830). To the east and west of the Ottoman lands were two other Muslims states, Iran and Morocco. These five—the central Ottoman Empire, Egypt, Tunisia, Iran, and Morocco—went through a strikingly sim-

ilar development during the nineteenth century. The pattern may be pre-
sented schematically as follows:

1. Military defeats by Western forces.
2. Efforts to catch up by adopting Western military procedures and
   technology.
3. Leading to new schooling for the military, student missions to
   Europe, Western military advisers recruited to serve in the host
   countries, and construction of factories to produce needed military
   supplies and thus attain military autonomy.
4. Increasing contacts with Western ideas and institutions produced
   by the above brought forth a small but slowly growing number of
   Muslims seeking to substitute more "constitutional" forms of rule
   for the centuries-old autocracy. These "Westernizers" often came
   from the existing political and bureaucratic class bent on consoli-
   dating their gains within existing governmental structures.
5. Efforts to adopt Western-style conscript armies and a state support-
   ed military-industrial complex (however puny by twentieth-centu-
   ry standards) greatly increased the level of state expenditures. This
   occurred at a time when Western commerical penetration sapped
   the vitality of indigenous industry and thereby weakened the avail-
   able tax base.
6. The gap between state expenditures and revenues was later covered
   by state loans at extremely unfavorable terms in the European
   money markets. Since most of the loans went to current expenses
   and not capital development, it was only a matter of time before
   each state could not longer meet its debt obligations.
7. This led to increased European intervention (formal European
   financial control and debt collection established in three cases: the
   Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and Tunisia).
8. In three of five cases (Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco) the fiscal crisis
   plus the loss of state legitimacy in the wake of the failed efforts to
   "catch up" with the West led to an internal time of troubles that
   gave Europe the opportunity to establish direct colonial rule—
   French protectorate in Tunisia, British occupation of Egypt, and
   French and Spanish protectorates in Morocco. The Ottoman Empire
   and Iran escaped this fate largely because the European states could
   not agree on which of them should get these spoils.

In other parts of the Muslim world either the state crumbled much ear-
lier (as the Moghul Empire in India) or the states, being less bureaucratic
and more local, were in no position to follow the sequence of steps outlined

above. Such, grosso modo, was the case, for example, in Afghanistan and the East Indies. Still other Muslim entities succumbed early on to outright Western control. Examples include the steady Russian advance into the Caucasus and Central Asia and the French conquest of Algeria.

For all these varieties of power relationship with the West one significant consistency characterized the Muslim world. Here and there throughout the vast and diverse Muslim umma a few individuals came forward to offer a similar answer to the combined politico-military and ideological threat posed by the West. That answer came down to variations on the following: We can't beat them. We don't want to join them. We must try to learn from them.

Three individuals from three different parts of the Muslim world illustrate the early Muslim accommodationist and modernizing responses to the Western challenge. They are Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi (1810/1820?–1879), Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), and Shaykh Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905).

Khayr al-Din was a Circassian mamluk who spent most of his active life in the service of the beys of Tunis and then capped his career with a brief (alas, inglorious) year as grand vizier in Istanbul. His long and active political life gave him extensive contact with European culture (he became fluent in French) and convinced him that the Muslim world could catch up with Europe only by openly adopting many of Europe's ways. During a period of political exile in the 1860s, he wrote a political treatise, *Aqwam al-Masalik fi Ma'rifat Ahwal al-Mamalik* (The Surest Path to Knowledge Concerning the Conditions of Countries).[8] Soon translated into Turkish and French, this small work was an appeal to Europe on the one hand and to the conservatives (especially the ulama) in the Muslim world on the other.[9] Khayr al-Din asked Europe to join hands in supporting the Muslim modernizers (he specifically mentioned, and himself identified with, the reformist Ottoman Tanzimat statesmen).

Then, in appealing to conservatives at home, Khayr al-Din set forth a number of themes thereafter often used by Muslim accommodationists justifying massive borrowing of alien ways. These include:

Learning from others is not only permissible but is enjoined. Did not the Prophet Muhammad accept the good advice of Salman the Persian in adopting appropriate battle tactics? This was the celebrated Battle of the Trench, so called because Salman the Persian had advised the digging of a trench in order to hold off the forces from Mecca seeking to crush the early Muslim community. Failure of the seige was a turning point leading later to reconciliation with the Meccans and the victory of Islam in Arabia.

European progress is not because these are Christian nations. The Vatican is the most backward state in Europe.

The decline of Muslim countries is not due to Islam. Rather it stems from Muslims having abandoned the rules governing life in this world as set out in the time of the Prophet and the early Muslim community.

Europe's progress is to be explained in part by its people's having earlier had the good sense to borrow from the Muslims their great advances in philosophy, mathematics, and the other sciences. It would be ironic if we Muslims are not equally open now to borrowing what is useful from others.

Reason and Revelation are in accord that good government is based on justice and security. There must be fixed rules that men can count on. Thus, autocracy is both unreasonable and un-Islamic. No one can ensure that the good ruler today will be good tomorrow or that his successor will be good. Non-Muslims can establish the rules of good government using reason. Muslims, using reason, and sustained as well by divine revelation, should be able to do even better.

Khayr al-Din, given the opportunity to serve as chief minister in Tunisia from 1873 to 1877 (when he was arbitrarily dismissed by the bey responding to the intrigues of a court favorite and foreign consuls), sought to put into practice his ideas concerning openness to alien ideas and institutions and government based on fixed justice and security. The most influential and long-lived of his reforms was the creation of the Westernizing Sadiqi College in 1875.[10]

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (knighted by the British in 1888) had family connections with the Moghul court but opted, early in his career and against the wishes of his family, to work with the British East Indian Company.[11] Seeing the 1857–1858 Indian Mutiny as futile, he remained loyal and was instrumental in saving many Europeans.

Thereafter, he set out to accomplish the dual goal of 1. convincing the British that the Muslims of India could be loyal and useful subjects and 2. urging Muslims to adopt modern Western ways. In seeking to implement this latter goal he too (just like Khayr Al-Din and Muhammad Abduh) maintained that Islam, properly understood and interpreted, was perfectly compatible with modernity. In order to establish that point he rejected *taqlid* (imitation, i.e., of the decisions worked out by earlier theologians) and welcomed *ijtihad* (independent judgment, use of one's own reasoning). Sayyid

Ahmad Khan was even not prepared to accept the traditions of Sunni Islam as hammered out by earlier generations of ulama. In a manner reminiscent of Protestant theology based on the Bible (*sola Scriptura*), he offered a Muslim interpretation that relied almost exclusively on the Qur'an. Although not trained as an *'alim*, he nevertheless undertook to write in Urdu a commentary on the Qur'an that he was unable to complete before his death.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan was, however, the very opposite of a scriptural literalist in any fundamentalist sense. Islam, he insisted, was completely compatible with reason and with "nature" (a key concept in his thought, which al-Afghani—discussed later—singled out for attack). This meant that any supernatural events in religion, even in the Qur'an, could properly be interpreted either allegorically or psychologically. In short, he was very much a nineteenth-century advocate of science and positivism. His regard for Britain—one could even say his loyalty to Britain—was not just tactical. He truly admired what he saw as British accomplishments. A high point in his life was his trip to Britain in 1869–1870. This unfeigned admiration was matched by a sense of shame concerning the state of his Indian compatriots. Writing from England in 1869, he observed: "Without flattering the English I can truly say that the natives of India, high and low, merchants and petty shopkeepers, educated and literate, when contrasted with the English in education, manners, and uprightness, are as like them as a dirty animal is to an able and handsome man."[12] Still, like several other modernists of his generation (and, indeed, later too) his sense of the failings of his own community evolved not into a rejection of his roots but rather an intensified concern to make the Muslims of India worthy of Islam as a religion and a culture.

Convinced that Muslims must adopt Western ways, he involved himself in getting English works translated into Urdu, writing numerous tracts presenting his reformist ideas, and establishing schools. His crowning achievement was the creation in 1877 of the Westernizing Muslim Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, now the Aligarh Muslim University.

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Shaykh Muhammad Abduh is the only one of our three Westernizing examples who came from the ranks of the ulama. He was also younger than the other two, and his active contributions came a generation or more later. This conforms to the pattern of first responses to the West usually coming from within the political elite with the ulama joining in later.[13]

For a time he was a disciple of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (al-Asadabadi),[14] the mercurial and peripatetic champion of Muslim unity and resistance to Western (especially British) imperialism. Al-Afghani, a thorough activist prepared to consider armed resistance, clandestine cabals, assassination, or whatever tactic might seem to offer immediate result, personified the adamant resister scorning the strategy of the accommodationists.[15] Abduh's association with al-Afghani brought him banishment from his native Egypt following the ʿUrabi Pasha revolt and the ensuing British occupation, but in exile Abduh's more meliorist mindset won out. Permitted to return to Egypt in 1888, Abduh accepted the British occupation, even becoming a personal friend of Lord Cromer whose later support won him in 1899 the lofty post of mufti of Egypt. He held this post until his death in 1905.

Abduh's message was that Islam, properly understood and implemented, was easily compatible with the requisites of modern times and thus of Westernization. All the general points mentioned above in summarizing Khayr al-Din's ideology could be found, with no more than slight stylistic modification, in Abduh's as well. Islam, he insisted, imposed upon believers the obligation to use their God-given reasoning powers in adapting the basic principles set out in the *Shari'ah* to changing conditions of life in each generation. In Muslim technical terminology the pious Muslim must use ijtihad and not taqlid. Abduh's attacks on what he saw as the excesses of Sufi mysticism were of a piece with his emphasis on reason and ijtihad. It was a major step away from a premodern mindset in which the world was seen as beyond man's comprehension and requiring otherworldly intervention mediated by holy men or amulets or what have you.

The world, to Abduh, not only made sense. It was given full religious significance. Thus, the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad "Work for this world as if you would live forever, work for the world to come as if you would die tomorrow" became an oft-cited slogan of Abduh and his followers in the movement that took the name of Salafiyya. Abduh

> made popular a hopeful attitude toward politics, a belief that human action, based on rational and scientific principles, could ameliorate the human condition. He felt that the intellectual, by denouncing superstitions and propagating science and philosophy, held the key to political and social progress. Needless to say, such an attitude is a radical departure from the attitude of the traditional intellectual leaders of Islam, whether they were in the mainstream of orthodoxy or were philosophers transmitting a corpus of esoteric knowledge deeply suspect to orthodoxy.[16]

The name *Salafiyya*, from the Arabic *salaf*, plural *aslaf*, meaning "pre-cedessors" or "ancestors," refers to the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community. Just as the Protestant reformers spoke of eliminating the presumed deviations brought by the intervening centuries, so too did Abduh and his disciples challenge the existing societal synthesis as having badly deviated from the true religion. Abduh's message presented as well the Muslim equivalent of the priesthood of all believers. All Muslims were able—indeed, were enjoined—to understand the Islamic precepts governing life in this world and to adjust their lives accordingly. Such an orientation downgraded the standing not just of the Sufi shaykhs but of the ulama as well. Nor did the imperial presumption of the ruler as the "shadow of God on earth" coupled with the idea that submission to political authority is required to avoid disorder (*fitna*) escape scrutiny. Political leadership has to pass the test of reason or, in a word, efficacy. Moreover, the Salafiyya movement highlighted the concept of *shura* (consultation) to argue for representative government.[17]

Emphasis on the golden age of early Islam as the paradigm for later ages did, however, risk undercutting the case made by Abduh and his followers for massive borrowing from the infidel. The more traditionally minded could readily heed only half the argument and seek to restore a distant past, ignoring the call for openness to new circumstances. This is why much of the later conservative as well as liberal Muslim political thought stems from the Salafiyya.

Another characteristic, now generally seen as a weakness, was that Abduh and his school were so eager to assert Islam's compatibility with modern times that they often slipped into measuring Islam by prevailing modern Western ideals. To the extent that Western ideals changed, the Salafiyya case would appear anachronistic or even ridiculous. Yes, Islam favored, or prefigured, democracy or capitalism or socialism or women's liberation . . . The touching search for Western spokesmen, past or present, who had a good word for Islam betrayed a tendency to let the intrusive Other set the rules.

The ideologies and political programs epitomized in the lives of Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and Shaykh Muhammad Abduh did not completely win over the political elites, and the extent to which they penetrated into the larger Muslim society was even more limited. Such leaders have long been highlighted in historical scholarship largely because from the twentieth-century perspective they seemed to represent the dominant motif of future developments. In recent years, with the rise to prominence of Islamic radicalism, second thoughts are being expressed.[18] This

much, however, survives even the most adamant historical revisionism: these Westernizing liberals addressed the existing political class. To the extent that they gained the ear of existing political leadership—which they did, not consistently but often—they possessed an influence out of all proportion to their numbers.[19] Their influence also reached alien political leadership. Thus, Sayyid Ahmad Khan or Shaykh Muhammad Abduh could influence the policy of their colonial overlords just as Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi or the men of the Tanzimat could, working with still independent governments, have some impact on the European powers.

Moreover, they initiated a major ideological shift in Muslim political thought by rejecting political quietism and giving religious value to this-worldly concerns. That orientation is still very much in play and has become part of the cultural heritage of intellectuals and political leaders throughout today's Muslim world.