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The Paradox of Islam's Future

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ISLAM TODAY PRESENTS ITSELF CLOAKED IN A PARADOX. By all economic and political measures, the late twentieth century was a time of dramatic decline for the Islamic world, particularly its Arab heartland. The deterioration continued through the first decade of the twenty-first century, accelerated by the American shattering of Iraq and Afghanistan. Sober voices from the Islamic world now regularly and accurately describe their current state as the worst in the 1,400-year-old history of Islam. Not surprisingly, Western analysts routinely speak of Islam's decline, particularly in terms of its political dimensions. Only Marxism rivals "political Islam" in the number of times it has been pronounced dead, dying, or in some obscure "post" state. Yet, again and again, Islam appears at grave's edge to renew itself in unexpected ways. It does so today in the form of a worldwide *Sahwa Islammiyya* or Islamic Awakening that has been in the making for a generation or more.

Precisely in these times of unprecedented material vulnerability, Islam of the Awakening has emerged as a powerful wave of world-historic change that is sweeping through communities of Muslims around the world. Islam has established itself as the only transnational force able to resist America's homogenizing power on a global scale. It has inspired the most successful Arab resistances to the American-backed expansion of the Israeli state. Extraordinary popular revolutions in the spring of 2011 in Arab lands, though not led by Islamists, evinced a distinctive Islamic coloration. Everywhere the Islamic presence in public life has been strengthened in the wake

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of uprisings. The ordinary Muslims who made these revolutions, notably in Egypt and Tunisia, framed their mobilizing calls for freedom and justice in an Islamic idiom rarely appreciated or even understood in Western commentary. As people took to the streets by the hundreds of thousands, calls celebrating the greatness of God mingled with those demanding the end of tyranny. This improbable assertiveness of Islam in so many unexpected ways is the central and little-understood paradox of Islam in our time: How at a time of such unprecedented weakness has Islam made itself such a powerful transnational force? How has an Islamic world in decline and under attack succeeded in initiating a centrist, global wave for renewal? By what alchemy does Islam translate the visible weaknesses of Muslims into a formidable wave of Islamic resistance?¹

THE MAINSTREAM AND THE ISLAMIC AWAKENING

The simple and straightforward answer to all three questions is the constantly renewed capacity of the Islamic mainstream, the *Wassatteyya*, to energize and guide the Islamic Awakening. The Islamic mainstream draws as no other force on the inherent strengths of the revelation. It is mainstream Islam that is safeguarding the faith in these difficult times. It is the mainstream that will ultimately shape the future of Islam and Islamic societies. The obsessive focus of the West on contemporary Islamic extremism has obscured and at times even obstructed and delayed this outcome. The horrific violence used to combat extremism has had the effect only of augmenting its role at the expense of the mainstream. Military invasions and occupations radicalize the Islamic world in destructive ways and temporarily crowd out the mainstream. In the end, when calm returns to Islamic lands, mainstream Islam will more effectively assert itself. Consistent with well-established historical patterns the mainstream will reabsorb the extremists into a re-centered and inclusive Islamic body.

What exactly is the Islamic *Wassatteyya* and how does it work these effects? It is most useful to *start* with the provisional definition that the *Wassatteyya* is what its adherents say it is. We can then follow their self-descriptions to discover what supporters take to be its essential elements. At their heart, these self-definitions identify the *Wassatteyya* as a cultural/institutional configuration, which emerges from a unique Islamic historical tradition that has gained new life as part of the much broader Islamic Awakening of the 1970s. The transnational mainstream tradition comprises a complex of elements, both intellectual and organizational,

¹ This article draws on my forthcoming book, which was researched while a Carnegie Corporation Islam Scholar, *One Islam, Many Empires* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

linked by shared centrist commitments, and a “network of networks” of interaction. These elements form a composite conceptual unit, a “difficult” whole, with a common orientation to Islamic reform, resistance, and a constructive global role, expressed in a shared vocabulary. As a manifest historical tradition, the *Wassatteyya* can be critically evaluated, measuring pronouncements against actions, with all the usual tools of historical and social scientific analysis. It is, however, impossible to elaborate the comprehensive meaning of such a unique historical phenomenon in advance. A concept of this kind must be identified gradually from its individual elements and verified empirically as the analysis unfolds. The “final and definitive concept” in such analyses, as Max Weber has pointed out, “cannot stand at the beginning of the investigation, but must come at the end.”²

It is impossible to know the *Wassatteyya* without knowing those who speak and act for it. They are the human resources through which the *Wassatteyya* comes into being, develops, and changes. Muslims are called by the revelation to define themselves as “the people of the center,” eschewing extremism and striving for balance in their lives and their communities.³ In every age and at every location where Muslims live, there have been men and women who have heard this call. As a majoritarian force, they responded in ways that turn Quranic injunctions to tilt to the center and avoid extremes into lived human realities, however incompletely realized they might be. Where one finds Islam, one finds as well the Islamic mainstream.

Muslims as people of the center today are called to use their reason in the task of *ijtihad*, efforts to understand how to bring these truths of the sacred texts to realization in their lives and communities. The essential challenge of Islam for a flawed humanity is therefore neither theological nor philosophical. It is rather the practical one of living such lives and building such communities. Outside of community there can be no Islam. It is mainstream Islam that has protected these communities through the centuries.

Throughout Islam’s 1,400-year history there have always been extremist minorities that shadow the mainstream. Their excesses reflect the flawed character of humanity that Islam frankly recognizes. Those excesses are neither exotic nor somehow characteristics of Muslims alone. The human species, as we in the West know especially well from our own bloody history, is prone to murderous violence. In the Islamic world, extremists do

² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner, 1958 [1904–1905]), 47.

³ Quran, 2:143.

temporary damage to the *ummah* of varying severity. However, it is the centrist mainstream that ultimately repairs and secures the *ummah*, defining the character of particular communities of Muslims as circumstances require. In our late-modern world, centrist communities of reform and resistance have arisen throughout Islamic lands spontaneously and without close coordination to meet that need. On the one hand, their efforts cohere around self-directed initiatives to reform and revitalize the heritage of Islamic thought and practice, to make it speak more effectively to the needs of the moment. On the other hand, communities of resistance aim to counter foreign occupations and violent assaults that would deprive Muslims of the capacity to make their own futures. It is these centrist communities of both reform and resistance that constitute the indispensable material force of the Islamic Awakening.

The collective power generated through these communities cannot be understood in reductionist political terms. It is a composite power with intellectual, psychological, and moral dimensions, though it cannot be reduced to abstract ideas, raw emotions, or other-worldly impulses. It cannot be apprehended as simply a political ideology or one more variant of identity politics or yet another social movement. Most emphatically, Islam cannot be reduced to governments or movements that take the Islamic label. Rather, it is simply Islam, a lived spiritual force capable of moving everyday men and women to do extraordinary things. The *Wassatteyya* is as insistently ordinary as the everyday dreams of the common people who respond to its call as it is inspirational in the ways in which it moves these same ordinary souls to brave resistance to tyranny and foreign domination. In this precise sense, the Islamic Awakening is as defiantly spiritual as it is insistently worldly. It is the *Wassatteyya* that makes it so.

At just this point, Western scholarship averts its eyes. Of course, we do now know that after decades of trumpeting humankind's secular future by Western social science, that conceit is unfounded. The Westphalian separation of religion and international politics, the aberrant product of Western history and a Western worldview, is neither universal nor likely to endure. Still, the discomfort with religious ideas and feelings as powerful motivating forces in human history persists in academic work. In standard Western accounts of Islamist governments and movements, Islam itself is almost always a proximate and never an ultimate explanation. Islam does not make history. It is the passive material on which other historical forces act. Neo-conservative analysts of Islam, for example, argue that the forces that drive Islamic movements are rage and envy. Islamic movements, by these lights, are purely reactive, and the reactions come in instinctual,

non-thinking ways. It is the glittering spectacle of Western prosperity and democracy that prompts these impulses and, while they may find reinforcement in certain retrograde elements of faith and tradition, Islamic movements are essentially caused by factors outside Islam. In parallel fashion, the liberal mainstream attributes the rise of Islamism to uneven development, oil wealth, or simply poverty.

Islam is oddly absent from these causal explanations. Absent, too, are the real-life cultural and spiritual motivations of Muslims, all shaped by Islam. When we think of our own future, it is all about reasons that define our agency and beliefs that shape our sensibility. For Muslims, it is all about causes over which they exercise little or no control. Islamic movements are always understood in terms of some other substratum of influences, never Islam itself. We need a new approach that places Islam at the center of any assessment of the current wave that finds Islam everywhere claiming a larger and larger share in public life.

Classical orientalism, it should be remembered, provided precisely that focus on Islam that is now lacking. It did so, however, in unhelpful ways. In this tradition Bernard Lewis, for example, has argued that “in Islam...there is from the beginning an interpenetration, almost an identification, of cult and power, or religion and the state: Mohammed was not only a prophet, but a ruler.”⁴ Western scholars like Lewis and the late Nadav Safran, my own mentor, believe that this characteristic defines a fault, a roadblock on the path to modernity. It provides as well a shorthand explanation of what supposedly went wrong with Muslim societies. In sharp contrast, mainstream Islamic scholars and thinkers see it, quite rightly, I believe, as a strength. While departing in some ways from the tradition in which I was trained, I have retained considerable respect for the emphasis of my early mentors on reasonable mastery, not just of sacred texts but also of the classical Arabic language in which they are expressed. In my case, Arabic became a passport not only for direct, if labored, access to those texts but also to interaction with both Islamic scholars and ordinary Muslims. While I do share with Lewis, for example, an appreciation for the absence of a divide in Islam between the political and the sacred, though I conceptualize and value it differently, the parallels in our thinking go no further. While my studies of Arabic began with the Quran, the Arabic in which I have lived for decades now is colloquial. When Lewis evokes Islam, he does so in an essentialist way, that is, Islam has certain core and unchanging characteristics to which his own analysis

⁴ Bernard Lewis, “Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview” *Journal of Democracy* 7 (April 1996), 52–63, at 60.

gives transparent access. Texts in classical Arabic are the gateways. Given my interest in Islam as a worldly force, I have been much more interested in how Muslim communities of interpretation, particularly those of the mainstream, interpret those texts and determine their meaning for everyday life. Such social narratives are always articulated in the various colloquial dialects. The language is fluid and changing, and so are the communities of Muslims who make it so. I reject the essentialism of the orientalists and the misplaced certitudes about direct knowledge of Islam that go with it. In their place, I put the work of the historical *Wassatteyya*, with its fully human, evolving centrist interpretations of the faith. These are the meanings of Islam that have been most influential in the history of the faith. The difference is crucial. For one thing, the *ijtihad* of the *Wassatteyya* can be documented with a plethora of pronouncements and a copious and accessible record of actions taken. That this record includes debates and deep disagreements, expressed in both classical and colloquial Arabic, should be no cause for surprise.

The refusal to take Islam seriously or to do so only in essentialist ways comes with terrible costs. America today finds itself deeply involved in an Islamic world it does not understand. It is difficult to see things if you refuse to look. Matters are only made worse when you already know things with great certitude that simply are not true. Unlearning such “truths” is all the more difficult when the standard ways of knowing, particularly in the social sciences, are ill-suited to making sense of a fluid and supple movement of massive change that has a spiritual message at its very core. But surely the greatest dangers come when you entertain the illusion, as important segments of the American policymaking establishment clearly do, that you can use unmatched military power to replace recalcitrant realities in Islamic lands with new and more-malleable facts on the ground.

Given the tidal wave of new Western studies in the wake of September 11, it may be hard to imagine that a knowledge deficit about Islam persists. It does. Al Qaeda made its criminal assault explicitly in Islam’s name. Islam could no longer be ignored, and the study of Islam, or so it seemed, came into its own. In fact, the bulk of those new works with “Islam” in the title simply papered over the knowledge deficit, usually in one of two ways. First, we now have a voluminous literature that aims to correct Western misperceptions of Islam. Much of it is insightful and instructive. In the end, however, this literature by its very nature tells us far less about Islam and the Islamic world than about ourselves. Second, the literature that does address Islam directly does so with a defensive posture against extremism and an apologetic tone that makes the positive force of the mainstream of the Islamic Awakening all but invisible.

Two primary structuring ideas frame defensive explorations of the sources of upheavals in Islamic lands. Explanations cohere around the notions of “Islam as terror/resistance” and “civil war in Islam.” Neither approach tells us much about the wellsprings and prospects of the Islamic Awakening. The undoubted contributions of the terror literature come from the focus on the character and origins of extremist groups. They are real. They are dangerous. They are important to know as fully as we can. However, they are marginal and unlikely to shape the future of Islam. In the end, they are a lethal annoyance rather than drivers of history. The civil war approach, for its part, highlights differences within Islam, making difficult a holistic view of the Awakening of our time. Inevitably, it also magnifies the weight of extremism by making it implicitly an equal contender in an imagined struggle to define the faith. Knowledge of this kind has always been of great interest to those, whether local rulers or foreign occupiers, who benefit from manipulating divisions in the *ummah*.

The focus on terror or civil war turns attention away from the unifying powers of Islam. It looks away from the mainstream and its preponderant influence on the overwhelming majority of Muslims. One symptom of the problem is the rarity of any serious engagement with the work of mainstream Muslim scholars, other than those trained in the Western social sciences as well as traditional studies and writing in Western languages. There are exceptions, of course, but the bulk of Western scholarship conveys the clear message that Islamic scholars have produced little of interest, unless they happen to live as émigrés in Europe or America and write in ways responsive to Western agendas. The result is denial of access to the bulk of the heavy lifting of Islamic scholars of the Awakening whose work does provide an alternative and more-instructive framing.

Islamic scholars do not avert their eyes from Islam as a force in history. No movement of Islamic inspiration, they make clear, can possibly be understood without careful attention to the distinctive features of Islamic thought and action. Nor, they reason, can the identity of Muslims be confined to its political dimensions. Islam should not be reduced to Islamic political movements, no matter the numbers they command. It is far more and far more powerful. In assessing the surprising strength of contemporary Islamic movements, almost always facing formidable odds, Islamic scholars signal that analysts need to pay close attention to the ways in which Islamic movements always emerge as part of the broader efforts of the *ummah* to actualize its potential and defend itself. All such efforts flow into a constantly renewed reserve of exertions across the centuries and around the world to preserve and protect the *ummah*. Particular battles won and lost, whether moral or military, always have more

than local significance. They speak today to the survival of the *ummah*, just as they have through the centuries. They give added weight and heightened significance to sacrifices made. These distinctive features of Islamic movements differentiate them from generic social or ideological movements. They are most clearly imprinted in the remarkable pattern whereby defeat, over and over again, is transformed into more-expansive and more-effective resistance. We are more surprised by these outcomes than we should be. There are profound lessons of spiritual and social import to be learned from the 1,400-year history of Islam. No social or ideological movement has such a reserve. When Islam makes itself felt in public life, it comes not as a stranger and not as some emergency condition. Nor does it come clothed in political garb. No Islamic movement, however impressive its following or bold its exploits, ever speaks definitively for Islam. Islam as spiritual power cannot be owned or narrowly defined in this way. It is far too fluid and mutable in the infinite ways it makes itself a presence in worldly affairs.

Islam's remarkable adaptation to the new conditions of globalization belies the persistent myth that Islam is "stubbornly resistant to change, except on its own terms."⁵ In fact, Islamists have been among the most effective in making use of all the wondrous technologies from cassettes to the computer, from UTube and the social networks to satellites. Yet, even Andrew Bacevich, one of the most perceptive of American critics of U.S. imperial policies in the Islamic world, cannot shake this pervasive stereotype. Neither the assertion nor even the qualification is accurate. Since the late eighteenth century, Islam has undergone four successive waves of sweeping reform and renewal.⁶ It has been in a constant state of change, often adopting ideas and concepts from others, always adjusting with great flexibility to environments it cannot control. Almost never in recent centuries have the changes come on Islam's own terms. In the fourth such wave underway since the early 1970s, the pace of change brought on by the forces of globalization has quickened. Islam can in no way dictate or determine the terms or character of these changes, as Islamist intellectuals calmly acknowledge. Yet, Islam has responded to the dizzying acceleration with startling successes, most notably in using the new information technologies. "Knowing" Islam as stubbornly resistant

⁵ See Andrew J. Bacevich, "9/11 Plus Seven," 9 September 2008, accessed at <http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/174974>, 16 August 2009.

⁶ See Tareq al Bishry, *The Characteristics of Islamic Political thought in Contemporary History* (Arabic) (Cairo: Dar al Sharouq, 1996), 14–24; Tareq al Bishry, "Islam and the Era," *al Musawwar*, 25 September 1992. See, more recently, the interview with Bishry in *Masri al Yaum*, 14 October 2012.

to change makes it hard to discern the patterns of creative adaptations that alone can explain how the message of the Quran has survived these fourteen centuries and, more importantly, how its relevance has sharply and unexpectedly increased in our own time.

Lest this characterization of Islam seem abstract or even mystical, one need only remember that Islam in the global age has at times presented itself as a military force to be reckoned with, as both Israelis and Americans have on occasion discovered. There is nothing ethereal about the power of Islamic resistance. In Lebanon, a Shiite movement of national resistance drove out the occupiers and inflicted the only military defeat Israel has ever suffered at Arab hands. In Iraq, it was a Sunni-inspired resistance that initially spoiled the American “mission accomplished.” But ultimately, the Shiite forces of Muqtada al-Sadr also made a bid to capture the banner of Iraqi nationalism by reaching out to Sunni and Kurdish leaders and playing a leading role in the drive to force the American withdrawal. However, in the long run, Sadr’s ties to Iran will be a major handicap. In blockaded Gaza, Hamas leads Palestinians in their refusal to surrender to the cruel and humiliating Israeli power that controls their lives.

Yet, for all its obvious worldly effect, the power of the Islamic Awakening remains elusive in standard Western analyses. Islam eludes the fragmenting optics of the structuring ideas of terror and civil war and the rigid typologies to which they give rise. The impulse to divide, to pin down, and to classify Islamists makes it impossible to bring the Awakening as a world-historic energizing wave into view. The Islam of the Awakening, as interpreted by mainstream Islamist thinkers, is a flexible and mutable rather than a rigid and fixed entity.⁷ Like a biological organism, Islam does what it must to attend to its own survival and it does so in the most varied environments, facing down threats of all kinds. At times, Islam retreats into a quiescent, almost hibernating state. At other times, Islam emerges from its lethargy with creative engagements with the human and natural resources at hand.⁸ The 1,400-year history of Islam reveals recurrent, uneven patterns of successful adjustment to the most-diverse circumstances, adept adoption of elements from other cultures and traditions, as well as the stunning ability to give all these accommodations an authentically Islamic character.

We have been living in such a creative time for Islam since the 1970s. The triggers for such shifts are not always clear. As a spiritual presence, Islam requires only the Quran and a community of Muslims who respond

⁷ Bishry, *Characteristics*, 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*

to its divine message as exemplified by the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Emergent Islamic communities are self-generated and self-organized, unrestricted in their social creativity by rigid blueprints for particular political, social, or economic systems. Muslims may choose or be forced by circumstances to be imitative and traditional, but their faith requires neither. The communities Muslims create, just like the mosques that grace them, inevitably have distinctive features that capture local nuances. They are beautiful in a myriad of ways that bear the stamp of countless locales that Islam has made its own.

Because of its worldwide reach, Islam can be usefully unpredictable in both the timing and locus of its actions and reactions to dangers. Struck in one place, it may choose to respond in quite another geographic location. The West has been forced to recognize this creativity, most notably in the actions of the violent militants. The inventiveness of Islamist militants is legendary and often works its improbable effects with the slenderest of resources. The notorious improvised explosive devices employed in Iraq and Afghanistan mean that weapons easily assembled for the price of a couple of high-end coffees in Beirut have stalled a military machine costing billions. With bunkers, tunnels, intelligence, and sheer will, fighters in occupied southern Lebanon outfought the world's most-sophisticated, ruthless, and practiced army of occupation. Islam inspires groups with the capacity for self-organization, without the need for overt leadership or stable hierarchy. Manhunts and targeted assassinations that aim to decapitate Islamic networks of resistance invariably go from one "success" to another and always with far less impact than imagined.

Democrats and non-violent freedom fighters in Islam display the same ingenious adaptability, though the networks of centrists and the work they do attract far less attention in the West. Ultimately, however, it is this quieter work of the centrists that will define Islam's future. Today, there are important centrist Islamist movements in a variety of sites in just the Arab Islamic world, notably the Renaissance Party in Tunisia, which has reestablished itself in Tunisia in the wake of the revolution, and the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, which is already claiming more of the public arena. Important as well are the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, the Reform Party in Algeria, the Jordanian Islamic Action Front, the *Ummah* Party in Kuwait, and the Yemeni Reformist Union. Egypt acts in many ways as the most-influential and most-inclusive node of an informal network that links centrists today and will provide the essential "wiring," both intellectual and activist, for more-extensive and more-inclusive interactions in the future. Egypt's New Islamists, the most-influential of the schools of centrist intellectuals, has

created an impressive body of contemporary *fiqh*, with wide applicability on such critical issues as the rights of women and minorities, democracy, and resistance to imperialism that is read and debated throughout the *ummah*.⁹ When in January 2011, ordinary Egyptians by the millions created an enlarged public space to advance their claims to freedom and justice, it should be no cause for wonder that Islam was everywhere. The Islamic mainstream as we now encounter it arose in the late nineteenth century and transformed itself from an elite to a mass phenomenon by the mid-twentieth century. It made itself a world-wide force in the decades from the 1970s to the present. A gallery of major intellectuals provided moral guidance and intellectual direction, leaving an impressive body of accessible literature for the generations that followed. Those who made a contribution include Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shariati, and Abul A'la Maududi. Standing on the shoulders of these pioneers and selectively drawing from their diverse legacy, the mainstream today consists of a complex network of centrist Islamist scholars, groups, and movements that share a common orientation of legitimate resistance to Western intrusions into the Islamic world while allowing for accommodation with superior Western power on the global level. Everywhere the centrists, most notably in Tunisia and Egypt, stand with the people to face down Western-backed domestic tyrannies. At the same time, the mainstream continues to push for reform of the inherited Islamic tradition while holding fast to Islam's great promise for humanity.

The Islamic mainstream, with its platform of resistance and reform, played an important role in the nationalist movements that wrested independence from the occupying colonial powers in the post-WWII period. Islamic movements of the center struggled alongside secular nationalists, securing mass followings in the process. At mid-twentieth century, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and the Jamiat-I-Islami in Pakistan represented prototypes for such Islamist mass movements, which appeared throughout the Islamic world. They combined in varying proportions intensive social welfare and cultural activities with political agitation and militant resistance, for the most part non-violent. Despite their contributions to the battles for national liberation, these Islamic movements remained in the shadow of the secular nationalists. It was the secularists who came to power almost everywhere, often with the direct support of the Islamists. However, once in power, they turned against their Islamist allies, seeing

⁹ Raymond William Baker, *Islam Without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

them correctly as the most-potent potential challengers to their rule. The eclipse of the Islamists, however, did not last long, despite the shocking but largely ignored brutality of their suppression. The failure of the secular regimes to achieve genuine independence and autonomous development, not to mention their degeneration into brutal tyrannies, opened the way for the expanded role of the Islamists in the public arena since the seventies. The successes of the people's revolutions in the spring of 2011 have opened the door even further for centrist Islam to claim an enlarged public space.

In the context of these promising upheavals, with calls everywhere for freedom and social justice, a new approach is needed that places mainstream Islam and the ordinary Muslims it inspires at the center of any assessment of prospects for the future in Islamic lands. This approach requires overcoming secular biases and fears and engaging Islam itself. The faith, moreover, must be liberated from the proprietary domain of theologians and specialists in religious studies. Islam in our time has taken to the streets.

ISLAM'S EPOCH-DEFINING STORY

Centrist Islam is today narrating an epoch-defining story. It has moved millions across the Islamic world.¹⁰ For all those who have responded, no matter their diversity in almost every other respect, this story of Islam is a Quranic story. It is at the same time a worldly story. The Quran, all Muslims know, was given to humanity by God. Jesus, the Savior of Christianity, returned to his Father in heaven. The holy Quran, however, remained on earth to provide guidance in human affairs. This difference is crucial for all that has come from the message of Islam.

The first verse of the Quran commands Muslims to "read, recite."¹¹ Muslims are *not* called to worship the Quran. Rather, they are summoned to use their minds to understand the guidance that the Quran provides for the ordering of their worldly as well as spiritual affairs. In this effort, they also find assistance in the *hadiths* or prophetic traditions that record the exemplary sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad as spiritual and political leader of the first community of Muslims.

It is revealing that Muslims date the Islamic era from the time that the Prophet led his followers from Mecca to Medina to found the first Islamic

¹⁰ This section on the centrist story as well as the assessment of the Obama Cairo speech draw from my book *One Islam, Many Empires*, forthcoming, Oxford University Press; these discussions update earlier versions in Raymond William Baker, "The Islamic Awakening" in David S. Sorenson, editor, *Interpreting the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Worldview Press, 2010), 253–258, 260–261.

¹¹ Quran 96:1.

community rather than from the time of the first revelation or of the birth of the Prophet. Community building is at the heart of the message of Islam. It is quite impossible to be a Muslim alone. These fundamental requirements of the faith reinforce the bonds of the *ummah*, the community of believers. They strengthen the capacities of individuals to live well together as Muslims, while making their lives part of something larger. Muslims around the globe all pray in the direction of Mecca, no matter where they find themselves. Every year, some two million Muslims or more give this symbolic union physical reality when they come together in Mecca from the ends of the earth to share the experience of walking the ground where the Prophet Muhammad received the revelation. When they set aside money to meet the obligatory financial support for the community, *zakat*, Muslims know that they are fulfilling an obligation along with their fellow Muslims worldwide. Fasting, too, during the month of Ramadan enhances this sense of a faith shared among all the world's Muslims. All of these practices remind Muslims of the larger purposes of their collective lives.

Muslims are called not only to worship God but also, as the Quran makes clear, to act through their communities as God's vice-regents on earth to complete the "building of the world."¹² *Istikhlaf*, the divine mandate to humankind, charges humanity with the task of developing the earth to its fullest. For this task, they will have the guidance of *sharia*, the general provisions of the Quran and the *hadiths* that speak to the rightful character of Islamic community. These elements from the sacred texts must be interpreted by human reason. Over the centuries, a great body of such interpretations has come into existence, known as *fiqh*. The distinctive responsibility of *istikhlaf* distinguishes humans from all other creatures. It means that as Muslims make their history, they are explicitly directed to have one eye on the sacred text and the other on the mundane human and natural world around them. Worldly Islam today calls ordinary Muslims to reform and to resistance as the path to fulfilling their responsibilities of *istikhlaf*. The big story in the Islamic world has been the daily struggle of ordinary people throughout the region using whatever means available to them to create better lives for themselves and their children. They actively yearn for more-just economic and political systems. They seek to create societies rooted in inherited Islamic values but open to the world, pluralistic and tolerant, and with greater freedoms and more widely shared prosperity.¹³ They are, when the moment is right,

¹² Quran 2:30; Quran 57:7.

¹³ Rami al Khouri, "The Arab Story: The Big One Waiting to Be Told," *Daily Star*, 21 July 2007.

as it was in the spring of 2011, willing to take great risks and exhibit extraordinary bravery, to secure these ends.

What makes these everyday struggles so remarkable is that they take place in circumstances of domestic tyranny and foreign invasions. The Arab Islamic world groans under authoritarian rule while facing periodic assaults from the West. The struggles for ordinary lives are waged under quite extraordinary conditions. It is these exceptional circumstances that make the lives of Arab Muslims seem so different and so incomprehensible to Westerners, rather than the dreams themselves. It is these battles for normalcy that foster resistance, including the forceful resistance that so many in the West find baffling. These are national and not civil rights struggles. The invaders and the occupiers leave little room for non-violent resistance. There is no constitution or even shared values to appeal to, as the occupiers no less than the local dictators routinely ignore international human rights law and treat the subject people as not quite human. How can one live a normal life in the face of such tyranny and degrading oppression? It makes no sense at all to fault Arab citizens and the movements they support for the duality of their commitments, at once to the fulfillment of quite common everyday dreams of adequate food, shelter, health care, and education for their families while at the same time fostering resistance to local tyrants and foreign invaders, embracing non-violence when possible but using force as circumstances require. Their situation demands no less.

None of this is meant in any way as a whitewash of Islamist resistance movements. The record of the human rights violations of both Hezbollah and Hamas, the most important Islamist movements of resistance, have been fulsomely documented by the most-respected regional and international human rights organizations.¹⁴ These recurrent acts of criminality have been extensively covered in the international press. Those on the

¹⁴ On Hezbollah human rights violations, see, for example, "Israel/Lebanon Under Fire: Hizbullah's Attacks on Northern Israel," Amnesty International, 14 September 2006, accessed at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde020252006>, 31 October 2009; "Lebanon: Hezbollah Rocket Attacks on Haifa Designed to Kill Civilians," Human Rights Watch, 18 July 2006, accessed at <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/07/18/lebano13760.htm>, 31 October 2009; "UN Envoys: Israel and Hezbollah Broke Human Rights Law in War," *Haaretz*, 3 October 2006, accessed at www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/769953.html, 31 October 2009; "Israel/Lebanon: Hezbollah Must End Attacks on Civilians," Human Rights Watch, 5 August 2006, accessed at <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/08/05/lebano13921.htm>, 31 October 2009. On recent Hamas human rights violations, see, for example, www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/08/05/gazaisrael-hamas-rocket-attacks-civilians-unlawful; Human Rights Watch, "Gaza: Hamas Should End Killings, Torture," Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, 22 April 2009, accessed at www.euromedrights.net/pages/571/news/focus/69818; 6 August 2009, <http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/280431,rocket-attacks-on-israel-war-crime-human-rights-watch-says.html>; http://www.lightstalkers.org/human_rights_watch_on_gaza, 13 June 2007.

short end of a power imbalance are often brutalized by their circumstances and often engage themselves in brutalities. There is no question that there have been excesses, at times criminal excesses, by both Hamas and Hezbollah. They do tarnish the cause of resistance. They also sow confusion about the Islamic justifications for legitimate defense and rightful conduct in warfare, for Islam is a presence in these battlefields. They do not, however, in any way rationalize the far greater crimes of state terror. For all of their shortcomings, both Hamas and Hezbollah are legitimate movements of national resistance, however their adversaries choose to label them.

These unlikely and unforeseen resistance movements, together with the popular revolutions of 2011 with their marked Islamic dimensions, have made Muslims important players in world history once again. Unequal, heroic contests against foreign invaders and local tyrants have become part of the meaning of the Islamic Awakening, though they are not the whole of it. Centrist movements also turn inward to renew Islam and reform Islamic thinking and practices in ways that will determine how the expanded public role of Islam will be played. Resistance movements of Islamic inspiration against occupation are a source of well-deserved pride throughout Islamic lands. In parallel fashion, centrist Islamist movements have asserted themselves in local struggles for greater freedom and more social and economic justice. The prominence of the New Islamists of Egypt, such as Fahmy Huwaidy, Yusuf al Qaradawy, Kamel Aboul Magd, Selim al Awa, and Tareq al Bishry, in the struggles of the spring of 2011 was quite remarkable, though rarely noted in academic or press coverage in the West. At the same time, these prominent Islamic intellectuals work more quietly to renew and reform Islamic thought. Achieving balance between these conflicting imperatives is neither easy nor always achieved. Yet, in both reform and resistance, the Islamic Awakening has registered considerable advances, and those tangible gains, no matter how costly, have raised the status and enhanced the appeal of centrist Islamist forces.

Those who have responded to the call of the mainstream include Sunnis, who represent about 85 percent of the world's Muslims, Shia, who comprise 15 percent, as well as those from both main branches who have turned to Sufism, Islamic mysticism. The major division in the *ummah* between Sunni and Shia arose early, and it is instructive that the division arose initially from struggles over political succession rather than theology. The great Sufi orders or *turuq* are spread throughout Islamic lands, with important orders in such far-flung places as Central Asia, India, and Africa, as well as the Arab, Turkish, and Iranian heartland areas. They played an important role in earlier waves of Islamic renewal in the eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries, and they do so today.¹⁵ A diffuse and pervasive Sufi influence makes itself felt throughout much of the Islamic world. All these communities, whatever tensions occasionally arise among them and however distinctive their traditions have become, are communities of Muslims. They are part of the *ummah*. All have been touched by the Awakening and have contributed to it. The Awakening, with the *Wassatteyya* at its core, is not Sunni, or Shia, or Sufi. It is not Arab, or Iranian, or Turkish. It is all of these things and others as well.

Yet, throughout these years of Awakening, the West, led by the United States, heard only its own very different drum beat. For the eight years of George W. Bush's leadership, the United States was obsessed with the ill-conceived global war on terror. This war provided justification for violent and counter-productive intrusion of American power into the very heart of the Arab Islamic world, with the overtly imperial aim of transforming the entire region by force. The Bush administration fixed world attention on "noisy" criminal Islam that provides the indispensable enemy required to make such imperial wars on Islamic lands seem defensible to Western publics.

In the early months of his presidency, Barack Obama gave the war a cumbersome new name, replacing Global War on Terror with Global Counterinsurgency Against Extremism. He also strengthened its diplomatic and economic dimensions, while speaking a new, more-nuanced language that appeared, at least initially, to take more-realistic account of the limits of American power. However, even on the rhetorical level, there has as yet been more continuity than change in Obama's vision of America's role in Islamic lands.

The President's historic address to the Islamic world in June 2009 is often cited as signaling a sharp departure in U.S. relations with the Islamic world. In fact, for all its symbolic importance, the address pointed more to continuity than to change in U.S. *policies* toward the Islamic world.¹⁶ It is most important for what it reveals about the limitations of the thinking of the new administration, which have become clearer and clearer as the months have passed since Obama made his way to Cairo. In Cairo, Obama delivered two messages, the first on Islam as religion and civilization, the second on the policy issues that bedevil American relations

¹⁵ John O. Voll, Forward to J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

¹⁶ For the full text of the Obama speech, see *The New York Times*, 4 July 2009. For a more-extensive analysis of the speech, from which this section is summarized, see Baker, "The Islamic Awakening," 252–257.

with the Islamic world. The first could not have been more welcome for its new language of rightful respect and appreciation for Islam, despite some troubling echoes in the ring of the words. The second message on policies, however, brought almost no change at all. The contrast between the two messages defined the almost-universal reaction to Obama's address among ordinary Muslims. Would the words that lifted their spirits, they asked, be expressed concretely in more-balanced and just policies? The question eloquently expressed the deeply felt doubts that so many had.

From his Cairo platform, Obama, to great effect, translated the symbolism of his person and his biography into a historic call for a new relationship between the West and Islam. The speech was remarkable in many ways. No American president had ever before spoken with such respect and understanding of Islam and the meaning of the Islamic heritage for humankind. The Quranic passages recited by the President summed up the most uplifting dimensions of Islam's universal message and meaning for the moral and material progress of humanity. They were quoted with an aptness that was breathtaking in its impact. No shoes were sent flying through the air, like those thrown at President Bush during a speech in Iraq in 2008. Instead, the world heard a youthful voice from the balcony of the university hall call out "We love you, Obama." Here was a widely felt, emotional appreciation for the new language of respect for what Islam has brought to human history and what Muslims, at their best, have contributed to human civilization.

However, for many thoughtful public intellectuals and scholars, even these sweet words about Islam left a lingering aftertaste. Was the aftertaste simply the effect of well-justified suspicions of American intentions? After all, George W. Bush had described Islam as a religion of peace¹⁷ and invoked good Muslims to offset the bad Muslims that Osama bin Laden represented. Was there poison in the honey yet again, they asked? Had Obama, described by Henry Kissinger as a master chess player in the realpolitik tradition,¹⁸ adeptly changed the subject from politics and policies to faith and culture and thereby obscured the real sources of Muslim grievances with America? And just how deep was the commitment to these changed views of Islam? Many of the same intellectuals invited to attend Obama's address had heard Condoleezza Rice's striking admission at the American University in Cairo on 20 June 2005 that America's record of supporting regional tyrants for six decades was wrong and would

¹⁷ Office of the Press Secretary, 17 September 2001. "Islam Is Peace" Says President. Press release.

¹⁸ Cited at <http://presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=99988§ionid=3510203>, accessed 18 July 2009.

be reversed.¹⁹ They had heard her unequivocal pledge of American support for democracy, only to see it abandoned with little show of anguish just months later, when the local tyrants pushed back and internationally supervised elections brought Hamas to power in occupied Palestine in 2006. The United States refused to recognize that peaceful electoral outcome and actively sought to reverse or undermine it. America favored democracy for the Arabs, it turned out, provided such support did not impede the dirty work of useful tyrants or produce electoral outcomes not to American or Israeli liking. Thoughtful listeners in Cairo University's great hall and outside wondered if Obama's respect for Islam and empathy for Muslims would suffer a similar fate. These misgivings, it soon became clear, were fully justified. In fact, they were clearly foreshadowed in the second part of the President's speech.

Obama's second message on specific policies was far less ambiguous and far more negative. Here the message was continuity, all the more chilling for what had come before. Obama made it clear that the basic framework he proposed for going forward represented little change in the recent American policies that were most painful to Muslims worldwide. There were, as has been widely noted, some striking new phrases and even small departures on some specifics, most notably in the language the President used to address the question of Palestine. However, the essential narrative that undergirded the American assertive imperial policies after September 11 remained completely intact. So too did all the justifications for America's tacit support for Israeli settlement of the West Bank.

It has been easy enough for those so inclined to exaggerate the policy changes signaled by Obama's speech. Among such departures, the President acknowledged, for example, that in 1953, "in the middle of the Cold War, the United States played a role in the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government."²⁰ Most notable were changes in the way in which Obama discussed the Israeli-Palestinian question. Obama did catch up in important ways on some clear realities long acknowledged by rational people around the world, though rarely in America and never by American presidents in the early months of their terms: the West Bank and Gaza are occupied, Hamas should not be labeled a terrorist organization, Palestinians are suffering without a state of their own, all three of the great monotheistic faiths should be welcome in Jerusalem, Israeli

¹⁹ Secretary Condoleezza Rice, Remarks at the American University in Cairo, 20 June 2005, accessed at <http://merln.ndu.edu/archivepdf/NEA/State/48328>. 18 June 2009.

²⁰ *The New York Times*, 4 June 2009.

settlement activity is an obstacle to peace and must cease. It is a measure of the backwardness of American political discourse on the Arab–Israeli conflict that any of these ideas represented “breakthroughs.”

Moreover, to take the incremental and marginally positive elements in Obama’s speech as the heart of the Obama message requires inattention to the underlying narrative within which these phrases were embedded. The problem with Obama’s address was not one of words versus implementation. It was the words themselves and the story they told. On these most-essential issues of America’s direct imperial role in Islamic lands, there is almost seamless continuity between the vision Obama projected in Cairo and the policies of Bush’s second term, when the current era of counter-insurgency and more-restrained language began. When President Obama turned in his Cairo speech from generalities about Islam to actual policies at the heart of tensions with the Islamic world, the thread of the old, grand narrative that justified the militarism of the war on terror ran through all his remarks.

Yet again, the world was told the familiar story of America as a gentle giant, sleepwalking in all innocence and good intentions across the globe, uninterested in bases or resources, though notably lingering in the Islamic world. The giant moves protectively, hand in hand, with a very small, vulnerable junior partner with a tragic past and threatened future, a tiny ward that does only what it must do to defend itself. The inhabitants of distant lands, in this familiar fable, are unable to understand such a powerful yet selfless and well-intentioned force for good and all the gifts the giant and his diminutive companion seek to bring to the world and one of its most troubled regions. Out of jealousy and envy, some among these misguided peoples respond to his misunderstood presence in the region with murderous strikes on the very symbols of the giant’s benign power back home, killing thousands. They do so from their sanctuary in a far-off mountainous land. The giant has no alternative but to respond. The self-defense of a betrayed innocent fully justifies the death and destruction the giant is forced to rain on that distant refuge for the evildoers, just as it rationalizes, despite some equivocations, the extension of the assault, with all the calculated fury of the giant’s unrivaled power, to neighboring territories that also must be rescued from evil and secured for the civilized world.

All of the misguided rigidities of the Bush years reemerged in this unchanged tale from the mist of the warm rhetoric about Islam. In this familiar narrative, violence begins with September 11 and the irrational and unforeseeable attack that brought the twin towers down. The core problem of the area is the violent extremism of Islamist movements rather than the

provocative work of imperialism, colonialism, or brutally repressive client regimes. America seeks neither oil nor bases but rather the transformation of the region into an island of peace, democracy, and prosperity, open to global investment and trade. Israel acts only to defend itself and to survive the essential threats it faces. The age-old conflicts and irrational hatreds that define the Islamic world have made the realization of this disinterested and benign vision unattainable without the cleansing, transforming assertions of American and Israeli power to end terrorist states, to annihilate terrorist movements, and to eliminate the capacity of extremists to threaten Israeli security and to export terror to America's shores.

There was no room at all in the narrative for even a hint that U.S. foreign policy is the main motivation for the various forces, and not just the extremists, that resist American policies in the Islamic world. Any reasonable accounting of the sources of tension would include U.S. and Western exploitation of the region's energy resources, unqualified support for Israel and its expansionist aims, U.S. active support for the brutal police states that rule in much of the Arab and Islamic world, U.S. support or compliant acquiescence in the oppression of Muslims by other great powers, like Russia, China, and India, and the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other Muslim countries.²¹ The unchanged Obama narrative gives no space for even an acknowledgement of the horrific price paid for the false gifts of "freedom and progress" by the Muslim peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq, not to mention Palestine. There was no repudiation of the disastrous and explicitly imperial policies of the Bush years that took the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians, as well as over 4,000 young men and women from the American military. The President did not mention the terrible and totally disproportionate violence unleashed on the essentially defenseless people of Gaza just six months before his address, or the separation wall, or the rampant Israeli settler violence against Palestinians on the West Bank.²² The only violence that must be ended, he said clearly, was Palestinian armed resistance. In politics and foreign policy, narrative is everything. But there was no new narrative here. The President displayed no new thinking to make sense of the moral and political failures of U.S. foreign policy in the region. He offered no insight to guide a more-rational and more-modest foreign

²¹ Micahel Scheuer, "Statement Before the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities," 18 September 2008, accessed at http://armedservices.house.gov/pdfs/TUTC091808/Scheuer_Testimony091808, 15 October 2008.

²² See Ira Chernus, "Palestinian Violence Overstated, Jewish Violence Understated. Time to Change the Story," posted 25 June 2009, accessed at <http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175088>, 30 July 2009.

policy course, an alternative to the violent pathways of colonization and empire. There was instead a more-elegant retelling of the old story that had brought Muslims such pain by a confident and charismatic American President with a warm smile and a gift for words.

Having understood these essential continuities in U.S. policy, few in the Islamic world were taken aback by the President's humiliating backpeddling on the Palestinian question. Neither Israel nor Israel's friends in the United States would have anything to do with the idea of restraining West Bank settlements or taking Palestinian security needs, alongside those of Israel, seriously. Obama soon dropped any serious efforts to support a Palestinian state and acted in ways that clearly signaled the opposite. As he geared up for his re-election campaign, Obama made it clear that the conduct of U.S. policy on the Arab-Israeli question was securely in the hands of Israel's far-right government, whatever the strategic cost to the United States.

Given this brutal clarification of what "change" under Obama would mean for the Arab and Muslim world, the dismal American response to the great democratic openings represented by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions that came in 2011 did not come as a surprise. The Tunisians provided the spark but it was the Egyptians who transformed the political landscape with their uprising in the very heart of the Islamic world. The earth moved in Tunis and Cairo, yet American officialdom did its best to keep things clamped down. Egyptians and others throughout the Islamic world took note that Vice President Joe Biden pointedly declined to label Husni Mubarak a dictator.²³ They listened in disbelief as Hillary Clinton explained that Mubarak was not only an ally but a patriot, committed to the welfare of his people. "Our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people," Clinton told reporters in her first comment on the unrest on 25 January. A week later, she added that "I really consider President and Mrs. Mubarak to be friends of my family." Worse, until the very last minute, the Obama administration scrambled behind the scenes to achieve an "orderly" transition, that is, to transfer power from one aging, corrupt, and subservient general to another.

A unique historical opportunity had presented itself to an undeserving America. Once again, wordy and insensitive fantasies trumped timely action. The gentle giant had spent billions shoring up the regime and financing its brutal instruments of repression, notably security forces reportedly

²³ Cited by Dan Murphy in *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 January 2011.

larger than the army itself and a torture machine second to none. When the people of Egypt rose up against the tyrant, the Obama administration stood by America's man in Cairo, no matter his regime's massive crimes against the Egyptian people. Only when it was more than clear that ordinary Egyptians, taking to the streets by the millions, would succeed in sweeping Mubarak from power did the President pronounce that Mubarak had to go. In an immediate rewrite, the President pronounced that in Egypt, the United States had stood on the right side of history. No one was fooled. Little wonder that when Secretary Clinton sought in March 2011 to meet with the young Egyptian revolutionaries who had dazzled the world with their courage and inventiveness, she was snubbed. On Facebook, the youth group said, "The US administration took Egypt's revolution lightly and supported the old regime while Egyptian blood was being spilled."²⁴

Muslims had not failed to notice that President Obama had accepted both the undeserved Nobel Peace Prize and the wars in the Islamic world of his predecessor. In doing so, Obama signaled that Islam's future as a global force was secure. Whatever the empirical evidence about the actual wellsprings of violent acts of terror, the United States needed Islam as threat to give the notion of a war on terror the appearance of rationality. Without the war on terror, American imperial assertions were left naked. Muslims, for their part, would turn to their faith to defend Islamic lands and peoples under assault. An imagined Islam as bestiality and a renewed Islam as inspiration for resistance were both guaranteed an outsized role on the world stage.

THE ISLAMIST IMAGINARY

Sometimes when an idea like "imagined Islam" is elusive, it is appropriate to give it an ambiguous label. In this way, one avoids a false concreteness and suggests something of the complexities that can be blamed for the clarity not quite achieved. Such is the case with the notion of an imagined Islam, the "Islamist imaginary." Imaginary of course refers to something conjured up in the mind's eye, in this case, the powerful, threatening Islam of the American imperial project.

The Islamist imaginary has deeply penetrated the American psyche. Imagined Islam and empire are locked in deadly embrace. The entanglement of Islam and empire will surely shape the future of both, though with Osama bin Laden dead, the devil most probably will have Iranian features.

²⁴ Cited in *al-Ahram Weekly on line*, 5–11 May 2011.

The connection has an intricate chain of precedents, far more complex than is usually thought. Edward Said provided a useful starting point for analyzing these complex linkages with his frequently quoted assertion that ours is an age of “many Islams.”²⁵

The dominant notion of civilizational conflict between the Islamic world and the West rightly highlights the Islamic roots of the most-persistent resistances to American global dominance. However, this same notion obscures a parallel history of instrumental connection between Islam and the United States. American assertions of imperial power have had a consistent and compliant Islamic dimension, now rarely acknowledged, that is at least as important for understanding the relationship today of the Islamic world and the West as the contrary record of the oppositions to American hegemony inspired by Islam.

Of the “many Islams,” America has for decades actively fostered and manipulated its own useful preferences. The consequences of these manipulations of Islam have not always been those intended, at least in the long run. They have often entailed violence that in the end was turned back first on U.S. clients and then on the United States itself. Yet, for all these qualifications, it remains true that preferred Islams, cultivated by the United States, have been critical to the post-World War II projections of American power. At each prior critical strategic moment, America had found an Islam on the ground that could be bent to serve its needs. The Saudi connection yielded a royal, reactionary, and repressive Islam with which America has cooperated without complaints for decades. The American-backed campaign against the Soviets in Afghanistan, in contrast, called forth an assertively violent rather than simply repressive Islam, and America did its part to bring into being and support the networks that could play this role. At the same time, the subservient post-nationalist regime of Anwar Sadat in Egypt needed a domesticated “house Islam” that would support the right-leaning, authoritarian government that would preside over the remaking of Egypt in a neo-liberal mold and facilitate the ruthless pacification of the Palestinians. As a result of the successful American-supported guerrilla war against the Soviet Union, transnational extremist groups proliferated around the globe. The United States did not create these movements, as is sometimes falsely claimed. However, it did provide them with important support. Everywhere they wreaked havoc, not least on September 11, 2001. Those terrible events were quite clearly reprisals for American Middle East policies and the

²⁵ Edward Said, “There Are Many Islams,” *Counterpunch*, 16 September 2001.

work of assassins whom the United States initially encouraged and even in some cases trained in furtherance of its own Cold War ends.

Whatever the precise facts of the plot itself, the crime against humanity committed on September 11, 2001 had the unintended consequence of serving the breathtaking expansionist plans of the neo-conservatives who dominated the Bush administration. Only a plausible enemy was lacking to make their execution possible. Islamist terrorists conjured up in a believable form for a frightened America the “threat to civilization” that every empire requires in order to justify its own depredations in the interest of economic and political expansion. The contemporary Islamist imaginary in the service of American empire was born. The administration used all the resources of media manipulation at its disposal to make sure that no links were made between the September 11 crime and unjust U.S. Middle Eastern policies and the bloody instrumentalities the United States forged to enforce them.

Plans for the United States to topple Saddam Hussein and “end” the Iraqi state had taken shape alongside encouragement of the Israelis to “resolve” the Palestinian issue by force. They were all in place before September 11. The most-expansive version of the neo-conservative agenda to advance U.S. and Israeli interests found forthright expression in a position paper written for the newly elected Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu of the Likud Party, in 1996, entitled “Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm.” The paper called for a “clean break from the peace process” and the annexation of the West Bank and Gaza and the elimination of Saddam’s regime in Iraq as prelude to regime changes in Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. The authors all became influential players in the second Bush administration.

President Bush’s elaboration of a strategy of global hegemony came in 2002 in a document called “National Security Strategy of the United States.” The United States would never again allow a hostile power to approach parity with U.S. capacities, and it would take the offensive to ensure its continued dominance. Endlessly repeated images of September 11 provided the backdrop for a doctrine of “preventive” wars that would give a defensive coloration to what were in reality projections of American imperial power. The President rallied a cowed Congress to a strategy of endless wars to ensure global hegemony, “full spectrum dominance,” in the language of the Pentagon. As cover, the administration announced the worldwide war on terrorism, whose features, while murky, were still recognizably Islamic.

An innocent and wounded America recast its public role in the Middle East as the champion of democracy and the bulwark against the Islamic

wellsprings of irrationalism that ostensibly fed global terrorism. The established American practice of manipulating extremist interpretations of Islam was given a creative twist. This time, strategic planners for the Bush administration departed significantly from the established pattern. In each of the earlier instances, the Islamic dimension critical to American projections of power had always been a “found Islam” that originated initially to meet the needs of local actors. Such an Islam had its own independent roots in the soil of the Islamic world and served, in the first instance, identifiable aims of already-existing regimes or movements. In a bold departure, the Bush administration sought to pioneer a distinctive variant on this general pattern, in ways that would clarify the new cultural and intellectual dimensions of its exercise of global power. Iraq was to be the case in point.

The preferred Islam of the Bush administration comes into view most clearly and authoritatively in a Rand Corporation study. With the engaging title of *Civil, Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies* and under the auspices of Rand’s National Security Research Division in 2003, Cheryl Benard takes the reality of an Islamic threat as a premise of her argument. Her analysis begins with a presentation of the self-imposed predicaments of the Arab Islamic world that threaten to spill over and endanger others. In Benard’s formulation, the entire world, and not just the United States, is the innocent yet vulnerable witness to the tumultuous internal disorders in the Islamic world. “What role,” she asks, “can the rest of the world, *threatened* and affected as it is by this struggle, play in bringing about a more peaceful and positive outcome?”²⁶ To face this threat, she argues that American strategic planners must make Islam itself a resource. In short, like her predecessors in the business of strategic manipulations of Islam to serve American ends, Benard evokes a malleable Islam that can be turned into an instrument to confront the Islams of resistance. What is new in Benard’s work is abandonment of the old strategy of reliance on a “found” Islam that can be turned to American ends. In place of an Islam that can be reshaped, Benard counsels that imperial America should create *de novo* the Islam it requires. What is needed, she explicitly argues, is an Islam made in the West and then exported to the Islamic world. It would be a “de-fanged” Islam, compliant and incapable of generating opposition to the American remaking of the Middle East. The language to describe the remaking of one of humanity’s

²⁶ Cheryl Benard, *Civil, Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2003), .iii (italics added).

greatest religious and cultural traditions is particularly blunt and vulgar: “It is no easy matter to transform a major world religion,” writes Benard. “If ‘nation-building’ is a daunting task, ‘religion-building’ is immeasurably more perilous and complex.”²⁷ For such a project, almost unbearable in its arrogance and cultural disdain, Benard argued that intellectual resources would have to be imported into the Islamic world from the West. Islamic scholars living in Muslim-majority states would not be up to the task of creating the required “good” Islam that could act as handmaiden to American power on the ground in the region.

Meanwhile in the homeland, the Islamist imaginary, the “bad” Islam needed to justify those imperial adventures in the first place, has taken on a domestic role. The Islamist imaginary stalks the land and threatens the homeland from within. Islam as bestiary has made its way to America’s shores and infiltrated the American Muslim community. The anti-Islam campaign, initially the plaything of the lunatic fringe, moved first into the circles of ultra-right Zionists and extremist Christian fundamentalists. It then established itself securely in the conservative mainstream. The phenomenon has nothing at all to do with Islam. It originates in the fear deliberately injected into American public life in the wake of September 11 and the adamant refusal to address the American policies that had quite clearly precipitated the decline of American global power. Again and again, Americans are told that they face an existential threat in Islamic extremism, rather than the deadly nuisance of a criminal minority that sober analysis would suggest. Over and over, they hear that our wars in Islamic lands are registering success after success, rather than the clear failures the world saw in Iraq that now repeated themselves in Afghanistan. Clearly, it becomes natural to think that there must be subversive forces of betrayal at work. President Obama clings to the improbable ideas that military means provide the only antidote to Islamic extremism, that our military power knows no limits, that we can have both global war and a prosperous democracy at home.²⁸ These deadly illusions are the only existential threat the American republic faces. The refusal to face the limits of our power has opened the way to the madness of blaming Islam for our woes. How else but by violent *jihad* abroad and subversive *jihad* at home are we to explain how our missions accomplished, our successful surges, and our uplifting battles for hearts and minds have all ultimately collapsed into thorough-going defeat in Iraq?

²⁷ Ibid., 3.

²⁸ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books), 208.

Given the perverse alchemy that turns cultural resentment against Muslims into domestic political capital, it should be no cause for surprise that the right-wing media has made the issue its own. Prominent conservative commentators have taken to issuing warnings that Muslims are out to destroy America. Ten percent of all Muslims worldwide, the attentive public learned from one television and radio commentator, are terrorists. That figure, plucked from the air, would mean that an army of some 150 million is mobilizing to engineer our violent demise. What is more disconcerting is that political figures of national stature have helped to legitimate such sentiments with sober but completely unfounded warnings. Candidates vying for the presidency explain how we face not only hardcore violent terrorists abroad but also the subversive plots of American Muslims, bent on undermining our educational and legal institutions. A former Speaker of the House warns against the menace to American society of “creeping sharia,”²⁹ while another potential presidential candidate defiantly announces that Americans would not stand for the implementation of Islamic law.³⁰

Only with an appreciation for this climate in early twenty-first-century America is it possible to make sense of the report, “*Shariah: The Threat to America*,” issued by the Center for Security Policy, and the credulous reception it has received in some quarters of the political establishment and the media. The report takes the form of a portentous global threat assessment that claims that extremist Islam represents an existential threat to America. With great solemnity, Center President Frank Gaffney instructed Americans at the conference unveiling the report that Muslim radicals were intent on no less a goal than “destroying Western civilization from within,” aiming to impose *sharia* through force if possible but through “a more stealthy technique” if necessary. The report pronounces baldly that *sharia* is “the preeminent totalitarian threat of our time.” *Sharia* is characterized in the report as a totalitarian code linked to a global plot for the resurrection of the caliphate. “There is ultimately but one *shariah*,” the report avers, and “it is totalitarian in character, incompatible with our Constitution and a threat to freedom here and around the world.” Quite extraordinary measures are proposed for dealing with the subversive threat posed by allegedly compromised elements of the vulnerable U.S. Muslim community, including banning Muslims who

²⁹ Cited in Daniel Luban, “Forget Ground Zero: It’s the Great Sharia Conspiracy Team B Report,” accessed at <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=52863>, 4 January 2010.

³⁰ See Juan Cole, “Palin Fear Mongers on Iran, Sharia,” 13 September 2010, accessed at <http://www.juancole.com/2010/10/palin-fear-mongers-on-iran-sharia>, 3 January 2010.

“espouse or support” *sharia* “from holding positions of trust in federal, state, or local governments or the armed forces of the United States.” The report goes on to recommend prosecuting those who espouse *sharia* for sedition, and banning immigration to the United States by those who adhere to *sharia*.³¹ In substantive content, the representation of Islam and *sharia* owes far more to the rote thinking of retooled Cold Warriors who have recycled their attacks on the rigidities of Marxist-Leninism and the Stalinist state than it does to Islam.

For Muslims, *sharia*, as we have seen, is the transcendent expression of God’s will for humankind in the struggles to build fair and just societies.³² Implementation of *sharia* is a complex notion with both divine and human dimensions. The transcendent dimension comes from its Quranic origins, and for Muslims, *sharia* in this regard is always fair and just, reflecting God’s will. The interpretive dimensions, in contrast, represent the efforts by human beings to understand those divine precepts. They are thus fully human and inevitably incomplete. Recognition of the imprecision of any human efforts to understand God’s purposes and intentions rescues *sharia*, as the mainstream understands it, from any possible lapse into totalitarianism.

For all its interested ignorance and calculated offense to the world’s Muslims, it would be a mistake simply to dismiss the report on these intellectual grounds. What gives it weight and makes it dangerous is the way these groundless conclusions are packaged. The Center that commissioned the report positions the study as a successor to the well-known Plan B of the Cold War era that represented a more dire assessment of the Soviet threat than the proponents of detente at the time allegedly held. While ultimately discredited, the findings of the first Plan B report were based on access to high-level intelligence assessments. In contrast, Plan B II used open-source materials only and did so with an extreme right-wing political agenda. Innocent of any real understanding of Islam, the report depends instead on the titles and reputations of a galaxy of right-wing, national security luminaries from government, the military, and intelligence, all listed as co-authors. They include a former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, a former Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, and a former Director of Central Intelligence. The group’s broad conclusions strain credulity:

The fact is that, under both political parties, the U.S. government has comprehensively failed to grasp the true nature of this enemy—an

³¹ *Shariah: The Threat to America. An Exercise in Competitive Analysis—Report of Team ‘B’ II* (Washington, DC: The Center for Security Policy, 2010), 16.

³² Quran, 90:13–16; 24:33.

adversary that fights to reinstate the totalitarian Islamic caliphate and impose *sharia* globally. Indeed, under successive Democratic and Republican administrations, America's civilian and military leaders have too often focused single-mindedly on the kinetic terror tactics deployed by al Qaeda and its affiliates to the exclusion of the overarching supremacist ideology of *sharia* that animates them.³³

No matter how often debunked by serious scholars of Islam, such seemingly authoritative pronouncements on radical Islam as the totalitarian threat for our time will long linger in the air. Undoubtedly, future historians will regard such rantings as among the clearest signs of an American empire in precipitous decline.

THE NETWORKS OF WORLD-WIDE ISLAM

The realities of Islam as a world-wide phenomenon bear no resemblance at all to these manipulated fantasies. Such dark imaginings only serve to make it more difficult to bring global Islam clearly into view. Were it not for these interested obstructions, no great imaginative effort would be required. The actual character of Islam as a global faith is well known to scholars of Islam. Islam's global extension derives from the universality of its message, not unlike the call to Christianity. The *ummah* is a timeless, worldwide community, open to all peoples. The Quran addresses all humanity, *al nas*, refusing all divisions of space, time, or human beings. The call to the faith is open but not forced. There is complete clarity in the Quranic prohibition of any coercion in religion.³⁴ Today this 1,400-year-old ideal stands unchanged. In fact, it has been realized more fully through the new forms of connectivity of the Information Revolution. Throughout history, the patterns of inter-relationships binding the *ummah* have varied in character, scope, and depth. However, networks to connect the disparate and dispersed parts of the *ummah* have always existed. Through those networks, mainstream Islam has made itself a presence everywhere Muslims are found. It connects but does not unify all parts of the *ummah*. It plays an important role even in those parts of the globe where Muslims are a minority.

It should be neither an innovation nor a surprise that Islamic networks in a global age constitute themselves in ways that respond to the new capabilities of the information age. It is important to take note of these contemporary changes in the nature of Islamic networks. However, it is unhelpful to exaggerate the ways in which they shape the character of

³³ *Shariah: The Threat to America*, 9.

³⁴ Quran, 2:256.

Islam. There is an unwarranted breathlessness in even the best and most thoughtful work about the new information technologies and the global connections they make possible. These innovations, or so we are told, have precipitated an unprecedented break in human history. Now, suddenly, everything has changed. A new epoch is upon us. Muslims, a leading Western scholar has announced, must now come to terms with a “globalized Islam.” The human experience is now all about networks, notably the network society and the network culture that sustains it.³⁵ Muslims are called to “the search for a new *ummah*.”³⁶

In reality, connectivity through networks of communication and knowledge has always been a part of all human communities, including the *ummah*. These networks have often taken forms quite as intricate as the new electronic spaces intellectuals and activists now inhabit, though never as extensive in their reach or as rapid in speed. Still, change, including dramatic change, has always been intrinsic to the *ummah*. Networks do rightly command our attention in the study of the Islamic Awakening, provided we recognize that they have always had a role.

A further word of caution is in order. The disappointing truth now, as in earlier periods, is that focus on the architecture of networks per se tells us surprisingly little about the people who inhabit them. It is unwise to expend a great deal of effort on the mapping of the externals of networks. Network analysis inevitably promises far more than it can deliver. It is easy enough to plot the pathways of the scholars and merchants who crisscrossed the Islamic world in earlier centuries. However, without the vivid personal accounts that these travelers have left, just how meaningful would those mappings be? The limitations of external mappings of networks apply with particular force when aims are pragmatic rather than speculative, that is, when the goal is interaction with people for specific purposes rather than simply the theorization of their circumstances. Analyses of important networks of our global age are no exception. The manuals on Islamic networks produced by the Rand Corporation, for example, have about as much depth and insight into human feelings and motivations as your average run-of-the-mill x-rated film.³⁷ It is all about the most-routine and repetitive actions, viewed from the outside and void of soul and spirit.

Meaningful knowledge of Islamic networks cannot avoid genuine human encounter, requiring at minimum a sense of specific histories,

³⁵ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

³⁶ Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

³⁷ Angel Rabasa, et al., *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2007).

languages, geographical settings, and cultural contexts.³⁸ The task is daunting. Little wonder that even more-scholarly works than those of the Rand teams revert to the focus on the structures of the electronic networks themselves. Much of the traffic on the network sites is in English or some other Western language, as well as Arabic. Documents and communications of all kinds are posted. Connections between sites can be plotted. The overall structure of the network can be sketched, and the frequency of connections can be tallied. On these sites, people and events are endlessly described. However, unless we have insight into the actual meaning to particular groups of all these electronic postings and the grids that enable them, how much of value have we really learned for humanistic or, for that matter, any other serious purposes? How can we be sure that the seasoned violent extremist who has just issued a manifesto is not really a precocious pre-teen showing off to friends in a Cairo gated community?

Abandonment of the unproductive goal of a comprehensive mapping of the networks of global Islam clears the way for a more-pragmatic approach. The great pragmatist thinkers, like John Dewey, did not entertain unrealistic goals of transparent knowledge of others, particularly those from whom one differs in substantial ways. The pragmatists focused instead on the acquisition of just enough understanding to facilitate peaceful interactions or to avoid conflict at a minimum, and to promote joint activity where that might be possible. Dewey wrote with Marxism and Soviet communism in mind as the intellectual and political challenge of his time. He recognized the external threat. However, he gave equal or even greater attention to the dangers from those within who sought to exaggerate the threat to justify the unbridled use of force abroad and to undermine the democratic restraint on the powers of government at home. Dewey was clear that the best thing we could do for freedom in the world was to strengthen our own experiment in freedom at home.³⁹

With these obvious parallels in view, the injection of pragmatism into inquiries on Islam and Islamism may not, therefore, be as great a stretch as might initially appear. Dewey explained that the researcher with pragmatic aims should interact with others, directly or indirectly, to clarify significant differences but also to discover values and purposes that are shared. The aim is to identify and cooperate in practical projects that advance these shared beliefs and behaviors. Pragmatism, understood in its philosophical sense, is not opportunism, despite the persistent misuse of the term in that way. There must always be a larger moral framework to

³⁸ Roy, *Globalized Islam*, 8.

³⁹ John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1939).

any genuinely pragmatic efforts, as Dewey clearly understood in his own time. Such a framework leans against the reckless demonization of the enemies of the moment. Today, the new realities of global civil society and the possibilities of worldwide struggles for freedom and a modicum of social justice, enabled by the new information technologies, provide the possibility of just such a moral and practical horizon for joint efforts. For all his attention to the likelihood of civilizational conflict in our own time, it is almost always forgotten that my mentor, Samuel Huntington, remembered for his hostility to the Islamic world, advocated that core states in his world of civilizations search for “commonalities” as an explicit and desirable objective across cultural divides, including the one with Islam.⁴⁰ Extremists on both sides inevitably attack such attempts and their prospects for success are always slim.

Just beyond the lingering state centrism of Huntington’s views lie the even greater possibilities for direct activist cooperation that would bring those with a peace and justice agenda from the West into contact with parallel forces in the Islamic world. The world caught a glimpse of what that might mean, inevitably controversial, with the efforts by mostly European and American internationals and an Islamic charitable organization in Turkey, the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), to break the illegal blockade of occupied Gaza with peace flotillas. It mattered greatly that the Turkish ruling party has Islamist roots and the IHH had close connections to influential figures in the Turkish government. The presence in both Turkish official and non-governmental structures of centrist Islamists made all the difference. Tragically, the effort ended in the murder of nine activists at the hands of the occupying power that enforced the blockade with lethal force. Yet, that tragic event did succeed in putting the denial of fundamental rights to the Palestinians of Gaza on the radar of the world’s conscience in a new and dramatic way. At the same time, Turkey’s demand for an apology and refusal to grant Israel the now-commonplace recognition of its “exceptional” status when it comes to international law earned the Turkish leader respect and admiration throughout the Islamic world. Through this incident, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party illuminated the ways in which centrist Islam, with peaceful means, can make the critical point that Palestinians, too, have human rights that cannot be violated with impunity, no matter how the power equations tilt against them.

⁴⁰ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster, 1996), 315–317.

The new information and communication technologies brought such cooperation on a global scale within reach of non-state actors who act on behalf of human security rather than of the national security states that litter the planet. These possibilities empower prophetic minorities, oblivious to boundaries and drawn from the West as well as the Islamic world, with a global consciousness that arises spontaneously, committed to the peaceful remaking of themselves, their own societies, and unjust political and economic structures. The Islamic moral universe, like our own, is saturated with humane values, though the practices of Muslims, like our own, too rarely embody them, and their state structures, like our own, even less frequently. Still, in those moments when that coincidence occurs, opportunities do appear that should be seized. Such actions, always against the odds and often at great cost, preserve the hope for repairing the world that mainstream Islam, like all the great faiths and humanist traditions, urges.

Networked centrist Islamists most consistently speak for such humane values. Clearly, we need greater awareness of their work and better understanding of how they function. The challenge is daunting, since the networks are so far-flung and often submerged in hostile settings. No one scholar is likely to have the linguistic and contextual knowledge required, while, as we have seen, the focus on the abstract networks themselves is ultimately unproductive. One practical alternative strategy would aim to build a depth of understanding about one significant node in the transnational networks of centrist Islamists. That node could then be used as the point of entry into the network of networks that is the transnational *Wassatteyya*. In this way, companions whom one has come to know could be engaged to travel together through the networks we seek to understand. To be sure, all that we might learn would be partial, and inevitably seen from a particular angle of vision. Those who view the social sciences through a positivist lens will undoubtedly find knowledge with such limitations unworthy of pursuit. Others with a pragmatic view would welcome the opportunity such an approach might provide of connecting with the real human beings who populate centrist networks, hopefully giving us some insight into the character of their thinking and the internal meaning of their experiences. We would have the prospect, at least, of developing an appreciation for the personalities that matter, the thinking that has weight, the experiences that are judged worthy of evaluation as persons, ideas, and experiences swirl around us as we move through the networks. Occasionally, we might even have the opportunity to reflect with our New Islamist companions on the nature of the networks themselves, how to maintain them, how to strengthen their weight in the lives of Muslims worldwide. There are just such reflections in the prolific writings

of historian and Islamic thinker, Tareq al Bishry, who played such an important role as a brave critic of the Mubarak tyranny and supporter from its inception of Egypt's revolution.

The effort to revitalize the connective tissue of the *ummah*, Tareq al Bishry explains in a particularly revealing 1997 interview, has a very personal dimension.⁴¹ Bishry observes that the Islamic community is grounded not only in shared belief, history, and common cultural heritage but also, as he puts it, in “a collective psychological identity” that brings it alive in the present. The notion of a collective identity is familiar enough in everyday experience. “If someone walks alone,” writes Bishry, “his self-awareness is represented in his body and feelings. When he walks with a group or rides in a car, his self-awareness extends to the group or the body of the car. If he is on a ship the whole body of the ship becomes ‘himself.’”⁴² Bishry argues that those who do feel this sense of belonging have as their “most serious responsibility” the task to “spread this awareness and to enhance what already exists of it.” The aim, Bishry explains, will not be accomplished until the “Islamic circle is unified in the public awareness and you feel you have a permanent place in this circle and follow its affairs as part of your own affairs.” Bishry signals that preserving this sense of connection is more challenging than it might appear, explaining first that this world of Islam has been systematically undermined and then proposing ways by which that deterioration can be reversed.

Bishry, ever the meticulous historian, eschews cosmic speculations to draw attention to the quite tangible and material elements that have diminished awareness of the larger Islamic world, such as press coverage, trade patterns, and the public education curriculum. He notes that even a casual glance at the electronic and print media shows that, for the most part, the West is now taken to be “the world” and world news emphasizes either Western actions or the effects they have produced around the globe. Such should not be the case. He reports:

During my studies of certain historical issues, I used to follow events in old newspapers from the last quarter of the 19th century though the first third of this century. I used to look at events of the Islamic world in the Far East and Africa. These issues were subject to continuous press coverage at that time. Only in the post-W.W. I era did this coverage decline and our international focus become Europe and then America after W.W. II.⁴³

⁴¹ Interview with Tareq al Bishry conducted by Amer 'Abdul Mon'eim, *al-Sha'ab*, 21 March 1997.

⁴² Tareq al Bishry, “Introduction” in Seif 'Abdul Fatah and Nadia Mustafa, eds., *My Nation and the World* (Cairo, Egypt: Civilization Center for Political Studies, 1999), 7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

Bishry then surveys key social and economic indicators that all point like the spokes of a wheel to links to the West as “center” rather than to connections among the Islamic parts. Trade patterns for Arab states, for example, follow this general model to an extreme degree, even though Bishry points out that talk of an Islamic Common Market preceded that of Europe.⁴⁴ Finally, Bishry draws attention to parallel adverse developments in education. He argues that the crisis of education stems not only from the inability of the schools to teach abstract critical thinking skills but, just as importantly, from the lack of substantive historical and cultural content in the curriculum that would cultivate a sense of civilizational identity. Furthermore, weakness of instruction in Arabic is compounded by the neglect of Turkish and Farsi that once were widely studied. Bishry concludes that these patterns in the media, economy, and education add up to the loss of language and memory as indispensable elements of any vital sense of being a part of a living Islamic world.

Bishry is quite aware that his invocation of the memory of a world now threatened with loss will be regarded as both unrealistic and backward. Such charges, he reflects, are themselves part of an established pattern, whereby “the West changes our reality ... and then declares our thinking about it ‘backward’ and unable to ‘catch up.’” He concludes that this is precisely what happened to the very idea of an Islamic world. As a political and cultural entity, it was first weakened and fragmented. Then, the concept of an Islamic community capable of engendering a sense of belonging was attacked as an impractical idea that was no longer feasible. In response, Bishry urges “counter actions.” He calls for resistance by living the reality that others seek to destroy, that is, by “actively preserving awareness of it, talking about it, and paying attention to its various surviving manifestations in order to strengthen and enhance them so that the awareness of belonging to an Islamic world remains living among us.”⁴⁵

Bishry understands the difficulties of this effort to revive the Islamic identity, given the competing power of the nation-state system and the national identities to which it gives priority. Nevertheless, those who are part of the Islamic world, he believes, can draw strength for that effort from the submerged realities of history and geography. “Whenever international affairs confuse me,” writes Bishry, “I resort to history and geography. I always find in them some important answers.” Bishry notes that a world map reveals that Muslims live in a broad belt in Africa from Nigeria to Morocco and then east through all of North Africa to Sudan

⁴⁴ See *al-Ahram*, 20 September 1996.

⁴⁵ al Bishry, “Introduction,” 9.

and Somalia. The land of the Muslims extends into Europe through the Balkans and through the Middle East into Asia, where it is a considerable factor. The territory that Muslims occupy has importance not only because of its expanse and the number of its inhabitants. Bishry notes that the Islamic lands extend “like a broad belt around the West of the old world.”⁴⁶

With quiet irony, Bishry notes that when Islamists evoke these geographic realities, they are derided as backward and unrealistic. Yet, an appreciation of the importance of this geographical space is never lost on the West’s most forward-looking strategic thinkers. Bishry recognizes that this territory has been cut up by the contemporary state system that alone is supposed to absorb the loyalties of people. However, he also knows that just below the surface of these artificial boundaries imposed by the West lie alternative realities. The artificiality of dominant structures contributes to the durability of these submerged historic alternatives. The governing criterion for the creation of the nation-state system, explains Bishry, was not economic, geographical, or cultural but rather the balance of power among the colonizing Western states. The liberation movements, while asserting limited political autonomy, left the inherited state system intact, even though in much of the Muslim world, it does not “represent a coherent community.” Therefore, once-vital and organic remainders of an earlier world haunt these contemporary realities established and maintained by force. These successor states, Bishry points out, are made up of people who “originally belonged to one nation and they are inevitably drawn to the idea of integration.”⁴⁷

Islamic history, Bishry continues, can help sustain the multiple identities and commitments that such an effort of reassertion and revival will require. “Islam,” he explains, “does not deny different identities and affiliations, whether regional or national.” It is a common mistake, in Bishry’s view, to consider an Islamic identity as somehow in conflict with an Arab or national one. On reflection, he asks, isn’t it clear that a human being always has multiple identities that come from family, religion or belief system, region, nation, or ethnic group. It is the special genius of Islam to embrace these multiple identities and the complex institutions that generate them because, as Bishry notes, “Islam contains all these things. It completes them all, both recognizing them and allowing them to run their own affairs.” In a characteristic New Islamist formulation, Bishry concludes that the task of reviving the sense of belonging to a shared Islamic

⁴⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 11.

world “just needs patience and alertness to the keys to bring people together in ways that empower them”⁴⁸

THE WASSATTEYYA AND THE WORK OF REFORM AND RENEWAL

Egypt's New Islamists have been among the most important of contemporary keepers of the “keys,” and they have used them to great effect. However, major Turkish, Iranian, and other centrist intellectuals and activists from throughout the Islamic world have done so as well. Cairo and the company of Egypt's New Islamists will serve our purpose in accessing the network of networks of the *Wassatteyya*, provided we remember that Istanbul, Qom, and a half dozen other cities throughout the Islamic world would do so as well. The choice of the Egyptian capital carries no implication that Cairo serves as some kind of center of global Islam's networks. Networks, of course, do not have fixed centers. To seek to identify one would be as anomalous as looking for the focal point of an arabesque design. Yet, networks do have nodes and not all nodes are of equal importance. Clearly, Cairo, with the presence of the New Islamist School and its ongoing contributions to contemporary *fiqh*, commands special attention. Their interpretive scholarship addresses the wide Islamic public. They write as Islamic intellectuals, with their roots in Egypt but with a reach that extends to Islamic lands beyond. Moreover, they move comfortably through civic spheres throughout the *ummah*. In doing so, they follow in the footsteps of Islamic scholars throughout the centuries who have judged that for all the diversity that marks the collective experience of Muslims across the globe, Islam has left an indelible, unifying imprint. The Quranic notion of *tawhid*, the oneness that is God, inspires in Muslims the aspiration for an *umma* that transcends the geographic, ethnic, and societal reality of fragmentation, a moral community that does not require a unified political and military framework to organize itself.⁴⁹

Such aspirations are made real in our time by the continuous movement of scholars and activists throughout the centrist networks. In a period of material weakness in the Islamic world, they also enhance the importance of the venerable notion of *jihad*. In its broadest meaning, *jihad* connotes the striving of Muslims, individually and collectively, to fulfill their responsibilities to Islam and to the *ummah* within the framework of Quranic values. Extremists have sought to capture the notion and give it a violent, expansionist character. Ironically, these efforts are affirmed

⁴⁸ See the Interview, Tareq al Bishry, *al Ahram*, 13 January 1997.

⁴⁹ Quran, 112:1–3.

in the inclination of Westerners to see *jihad*, quite misleadingly, as “holy war.” For four decades, the New Islamists have leaned against such an intolerable view of a precept that represents, as the *hadith* pronounces, “the summit and pinnacle of Islam.”⁵⁰ All of the major figures of the school have, at one time or another, intervened to correct some distortion of the idea of *jihad* and have sought to clarify its contemporary meaning and importance in diverse real-world contexts. At times, they have done so in dialogue with the extremists, at other times to refute Western misreading, and at still other times simply to amplify for the mainstream its contemporary significance. These efforts culminated in the massive study published in 2009, *The Fiqh of Jihad: A Comparative Study of Its Rulings and Philosophy in Light of the Quran and Sunnah*, by Yusuf al Qaradawy. The two-volume work aims for an authoritative presentation of the *Wassatteyya* conception of *jihad*. Qaradawy locates the origins of the concept in the Quran and Sunnah, exploring as well the contributions of *fiqh* to its elaboration. He seeks to elucidate the meaning of *jihad* at a time when the Islamic world suffers from tyranny and foreign assault.

Qaradawy positions the centrist understanding of *jihad* between the extremes of those who wish to eliminate the concept from Islam altogether and those who wish to turn the notion into permanent war against the whole world. He relies heavily on the work of a fourteenth-century scholar, the eminent Ibn al-Qayyim, student of Ibn Taymiyya, in order to clarify the multiple levels of meanings of *jihad* and the imperatives for behavior that each implies. In broad strokes, Qaradawy’s exegesis explains that the greater *jihad*, the *jihad al akhbar* or *jihad al nafs*, is the personal and social struggle to make oneself a better person in a better community. The lesser *jihad*, the *jihad al asghar* or *jihad al dafa*, enjoins striving to defend the Islamic community. Qaradawy explicitly rejects the notion of *jihad al talab*, offensive *jihad*, that the violent extremists have sought to impose. He goes to great lengths to undermine the claimed grounding of this aberrant conception in the Quran and Sunnah.⁵¹

The centrist understanding of *jihad* that Qaradawy elaborates deplors war and violence of all kinds. It does recognize, however, that both may be unavoidable. The justifications for the resort to violence are all strictly circumscribed. Muslims are enjoined to use all the means they possess

⁵⁰ Shaikh Rached Ghannouchi, “What’s New About Qaradawi’s Jihad,” 24 September 2009, accessed at <http://faisalkutty.com/editors-picks/what-is-new-about-al-qaradawi%E2%80%99s-jihad-by-sheikh-rached-ghannouchi/>, 1 January 2011.

⁵¹ Yusuf al Qaradawy, *The Fiqh of Jihad: a Comparative Study of Its Rulings and Philosophy in Light of the Quran and Sunnah*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Dar al Wahba, 2009), 143–173.

to defend themselves and their community, provided those means are deployed in ways that meet clearly spelled-out ethical guidelines, such as prohibitions of attacks on unarmed women, children, the elderly, and religious figures. In perhaps the most daring of his interpretations, Qaradawy restates his well-known view that martyrdom operations against *military* targets of a foreign invader are justified. He is clear and forceful in explaining the rationale. Such operations are the weapon of those who have no other option. They may be undertaken when one is deprived of weapons equivalent to those of the enemy in order to defend family and home in the face of violent expropriation and murderous assault. He reasons that God's justice does not allow the weak to be completely deprived of any defense, hence the permissible use of one's own body as a deterrent weapon. In all such cases, the ethics of *jihad* must be respected and only combatants can be targeted, though he recognizes that modern warfare has blurred the distinction between civilians and the military.⁵²

Of course, not all threats to the *ummah* are external. There are also internal divisions, including violent dissensions and fears that undermine unity. Well before the revelations of WikiLeaks, for example, it had become clear that the governments of Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan were all urging strikes against Iran. Iraq, with its Sunni ruling elite, had stood as a bulwark against Iranian Shiite influence. The consequences of removing that barrier would have been clear had the Bush-era grand strategists shown any interest at all in mere realities on the ground in the critical Gulf region. For the New Islamists, the threat posed by the revitalization of the dangerous Shia–Sunni divide within Islam became the overriding issue. Yusuf al Qaradawy had given an authoritative definition of the centrist position on the matter when he explained that Shia, like Sunni, took the Quran as the word of God, embraced Muhammad as God's Prophet, and prayed in the direction of Mecca. All the rest, Qaradawy pronounced, was detail, and the Shia joined hands and hearts with the Sunni as Muslims.⁵³ The same Qaradawy had praised the Shiite Hezbollah for driving the Israelis out of southern Lebanon in 2006, pronouncing that by their courage, they had restored the stature of the *ummah*. He pronounced that support for the movement had become a religious obligation for all Muslims.⁵⁴

Given this background, the response was electric when Qaradawy expressed concern in the summer of 2010 over allegations of Shiite efforts

⁵² Qaradawy, *The Fiqh of Jihad*, vol. 2, 1085–1092.

⁵³ Yusuf al Qaradawy, *Our Umma Between Two Centuries*, 2d ed. (Cairo: Dar al Sharouq, 2002), 206–210.

⁵⁴ Yusuf al Qaradawy, "Qaradawy on Hezbollah Victory," *al Masry al Yaum*, 19 August 2006.

to win converts from the Sunni of Egypt. Qaradawy's remarks did not go unchallenged, despite the high regard in which he is held. The rebuttals came from Egyptian New Islamists whose weight in the *Wassatteyya* is comparable to his own. The critique was sharp, forthright, yet civil, as major figures of the New Islamist School publicly took Qaradawy to task for his ill-advised breach at a time when mobilization was underway to justify the strike against Iran that Israel was urging. Fahmy Huwaidy, Selim al Awa, Kamal Abul Magd, and Tareq al Bishry, all major figures in the centrist New Islamist School to which Qaradawy belongs, made public statements, reasserting the mainstream view on the unity of Shia and Sunni.⁵⁵ All interlocutors carefully avoided personal attacks but were forceful in defending principle and speaking for the unity of the *ummah*. It was instructive to have this kind of debate within the *Wassatteyya* made public in so pointed and authoritative a way.

New Islamist intellectuals have made reassertion of the reality and coherence of the *ummah* a central challenge of the Awakening. The figures who move through the mainstream networks are recognizable human beings, rather than ghostly abstractions like the elusive “moderates” and useful “terrorists” who people so much of the literature on Islam. They engage the most important issues confronting the *ummah*, notably *tawhid*, democracy, development, and freedom as well as the overall relationship between Islam and the West. They do so with an awareness of the prevailing Western view that, as Huntington put it, in the end, the global Islamic resurgence “will have shown that ‘Islam is the solution’ to the problems of morality, identity, meaning, and faith, but not to the problems of social injustice, political repression, economic backwardness, and military weakness.”⁵⁶ Tareq al Bishry notes, in this regard, that “up until now Western thought [has been] self-centered. It cannot imagine any intellectual contributions that could contribute to humanity unless they are derived from the West. The West is unable to conceive of any progress outside of its own intellectual, moral, and institutional frameworks. In past years, we found some who would sympathize with our quest for political independence and even autonomous development. But very, very few ever sympathized with our civilizational and belief autonomy. Unless our political, social, and economic activities operate according to the Western terms and concepts, they are considered backward.” Bishry concludes that “until the West recognizes that

⁵⁵ See especially Tareq al Bishry, *al Dustour*, 27 September 2008; and Kamal Abul Magd, *al Dustour*, 30 September 2008.

⁵⁶ Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 121.

there are other civilizations, other cultural reference points and other beliefs that human beings can benefit from, I do not think there can be a reciprocal dialogue.⁵⁷

For Islam to flourish in the face of the contemptuous power of the West, its efforts must reaffirm its own unique character as faith and civilization, while at the same time addressing the needs of the age. In the thinking of the New Islamists about Islam's future, the issues of the material well-being of the *ummah* and the enhancement of freedom loom large. Both struggles, they argue, must be creative initiatives that reject the mechanical application of historical models from the heritage as well as mindless imitations of the experiences of others. Moving through the centrist byways of the *ummah*, the New Islamists are alert to promising experiments that point to the required creative and imaginative solutions. In some ways, the economic realm is the most daunting, as the backwardness of so many Islamic societies suggests. The way out, the work of the New Islamists suggests, requires both deep thinking about the nature of the economic order in an Islamic framework and then frequent travels to Kuala Lumpur with its incredible skyline and powerhouse economy. The story of Malaysia is only rarely told for its relevance to the development of Islamic centrism. It should be understood in this light. So too should the Turkish experience loom large in thinking about Islam and democracy. This endlessly debated question of democracy in Islam takes the New Islamists to sites throughout the *umma*. None are more important than Turkey, which, alongside the Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque, boasts the most-promising democratic experiment in the Islamic world.

In thinking about economics, New Islamists reject the prevailing view among Western commentators that Islamic economics comes down to efforts to bring Western conceptions and the financial products they generate into compliance with *sharia*. To the contrary, centrist intellectuals have staked out a quite-distinctive notion of an Islamic economic realm with fundamental structuring ideas that radically challenge prevailing Western conceptions. As Max Weber understood, the fundamental categories of Western economic thinking are essentially cultural and often responsive to deeply held religious beliefs. The notion of the "invisible hand," so pivotal to the way markets are understood to work, represents by these lights a re-inscription of the Christian faith in God's mysterious workings that bring about a natural order. Without the invisible hand,

⁵⁷ Interview with Tareq al Bishry conducted by Amer 'Abdul Mon'eim, *al Shaab*, 28 March 1997.

how would it be possible to entertain the belief that individuals pursuing radical self-interest could nevertheless contribute to the social whole? Islamist centrists reject both the theologically based, mystical notion of the invisible hand and the extreme individualism it rationalizes. They put in its place the Quranic conception of *istikhlaf* and the concomitant emphasis on reasoned, collective action for the common good that it enjoins. In Islam, the market becomes an instrument to achieve ends set by the larger moral framework provided by the Quran. In the shadow of the Quran, human self-interest can be tempered by *al jihad al akbar*. Present on the earth, the Quran provided guidance to the struggle to be a better person in a community that comes as close as possible to the values of compassion and justice rather than naked material gain.

Islamists cannot fully claim the Malaysian economic miracle. However, the New Islamists argue that through the coalition politics pursued by Mahathir Mohamad, Islamists did play an important role at the very highest levels, though the Prime Minister's relationship with the Islamist currents was often troubled.⁵⁸ As a Muslim-majority country registering rapid economic growth, Malaysia was a destination for the New Islamists, eager to assess its lessons and disseminate them throughout centrist networks. Little attention has been given to the linkages between the New Islamist thinkers of the *Wassatteyya* and the Malaysian economic experience. These connections are both long-term and extremely important for both parties.

Despite persistent criticism of his authoritarian style and cronyism, few question the impressive overall record of Malaysia's economic performance under Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003), particularly for its high-single-digit gross domestic product growth in the period from 1988 to 1997. The Prime Minister is rightly praised for the skillful management of ethnic differences, critical in this complex, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. During his rule, Malaysia diversified its economy from dependence on raw material exports to manufacturing, services, and tourism. When Mahathir took office, poverty levels were high, as were the tensions among the diverse ethnic and religious groups that make up the country's population. During his tenure, Malaysia registered quite remarkable progress on both issues, and few questioned that the credit arguably belonged to the Prime Minister. Reports on these achievements and their relevance to other Islamic countries and to the theoretical questions of Islam and economic progress circulate through moderate Islamist networks.

⁵⁸ Fahmy Huwaidy, *al Ahram*, 16 February 1993.

Mahathir himself has frequently remarked that Western reporters and analysts repeatedly questioned whether Malaysia was really an Islamic country, given strongly held Western views that Islam constituted a barrier to economic progress. Mahathir reports:

When we do affirm the country's Islamic identity, they astonishingly insist on disbelieving us:

They don't want to see an Islamic country introducing a successful model, be it in the field of co-existence with the different ethnicities and religions, or of achieving high rates of productivity and advancement. They want to convince us that [Malaysia is] not an Islamic country. And because we insisted on sticking to our identity, they started saying that we are an exception; a real Islamic country should be totally different; it should be a country daunted by misery and backwardness.⁵⁹

Major Egyptian New Islamists have made a point of studying the Malaysian case first-hand. Fahmy Huwaidy first visited the country in 1968. In subsequent decades he provided close reporting on developments there.⁶⁰ Huwaidy's keen eye has focused on the reasons for the Malaysian success and the lessons for other Muslim-majority countries.⁶¹ Kamal Abul Magd served with distinction on a special presidential commission charged by Mahathir to help defuse religious tensions precipitated by an extremist challenge to the moderate mainstream.⁶² Yusuf al Qaradawy's works on Islamic economic theory made a lasting imprint on Malaysian intellectuals and, based on a series of lectures and exchanges with financial and banking institutions in the country, the Securities Commission published a book on his theoretical work in economics.⁶³ In December 2009 Qaradawy was awarded Malaysia's prestigious Higma Award in recognition of his "extensive knowledge and selfless contribution to serve Islam and Muslims, the development of Islamic culture for the benefit of the Ummah."⁶⁴ When Mahathir voluntarily retired from public life, itself an extraordinary gesture, he established an institute to study the intellectual and practical wellsprings

⁵⁹ Fahmy Huwaidy, *al Ahrām*, 29 October 1996.

⁶⁰ Fahmy Huwaidy, *al Ahrām*, 28 May 1991.

⁶¹ Fahmy Huwaidy, *al Ahrām*, 16 February 1993.

⁶² Interview with Kamal Abul Magd, *al Shaab*, 13 May 1994.

⁶³ "Book Review: Islam and Current Issues, Views of Dr. Yusuf al Qaradawi," accessed at <http://www.iol.ie/~afifi/BICNews/Afaiz/afaiz17.htm>, 4 January 2010.

⁶⁴ "Qaradawy Wins Malaysia's Higma Award," 15 December 2009, accessed at http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1260257992606&pagename=Zone-English-News/NWELayout, 3 January 2011.

of the Malaysian success in the country's Islamic cultural background. Yet another Egyptian New Islamist, Muhammad Selim al Awa, was invited to give the inaugural lecture for the new center as a reflection on the meaning of the Malaysian experience for the Islamic world. Such close attention and active involvement meant that the lessons of the Malaysian experience could circulate in authoritative form through centrist Islamist networks.⁶⁵

The issue of democracy draws the New Islamists to experiences at a variety of sites in the Islamic world, though none more important than Turkey. Given Turkey's recent rise to new levels of prominence on the world scene, the essentials of the story of Turkey's democratic evolution are now well known. Here, the aim is simply to sketch how the New Islamists place the Turkish story into the larger context of the Islamic Awakening.⁶⁶ From the New Islamist angle of vision, the Turkish case exemplifies the extraordinary flexibility and adaptability of Islam. For Islamists of all stripes, the triumph of a particularly chauvinistic, exclusionary, and brutal secularist nationalism in Turkey at the end of WWI was the nightmare of choice. With Mustafa Kemal Attaturk's abolition of the Caliphate, the *ummah* "fell apart, shocking a wide sector of Muslims, especially in Asia, and leaving a vacuum."⁶⁷ The fate of Islam in Turkey seemed sealed in the face of a frontal attack that was perhaps the most forceful and unrelenting of any throughout the Islamic world. Remarkably, it was Islamic mysticism in Turkey that met the challenge and triumphed. Sufism preserved Islam's presence in Anatolia. Rather than confronting the extreme secularism of the Attaturk regime, Islam in its more mystical incarnation simply gave way, or so it seemed. On the surface, Turkey was remade in the Western secular mode, and the Turkish model of modernity became the preferred solution for all those Western scholars interested in overcoming the moral basis of backward societies, as the denigrating Western phrase went, in order to secure a passport to modernity. Turkey, by these lights, demonstrated how a civilization that had gone wrong could be righted.

Subterranean realities, the New Islamists argued, were quite the contrary. Turkish Islam, taking inspiration from the work of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, retreated in the face of the assaults of Attaturk's secular extremism into the strongholds of individual piety, the essentials of belief, and pacific avoidance of confrontation at a time when the forces

⁶⁵ Muhammad Selim al Awa, *al Araby*, 11 September 2005.

⁶⁶ Fahmy Huwaidy, *al Ahrām*, 27 December 2005.

⁶⁷ Fahmy Huwaidy, *Al Sharq al Awsat*, 3 January 2009.

of secularism were too powerful to resist directly.⁶⁸ A faith that had taken on these characteristics found a secure place in the enduring Islamic commitments of ordinary Turks, with their faith relatively untouched by the anti-Islam campaign of the Westernized elite. The majority of Turks, especially those from the urban lower classes and the peasantry, held tight to a Sufist Islam in the most private, inaccessible spheres. In this way, Islam survived in Turkey, thus fulfilling Nursi's greatest aspiration. Like water, Sufism soaked deeper and deeper into Turkish soil, blending with nationalist sentiments to yield a pliable but resilient strain of Islam that would before long come into its own. The stronghold of secularism in the military was able to slow the advance of Islam's political expression, but it could not stop it. A succession of political parties with Islamic roots moved inexorably toward power, culminating in the victory of the Justice and Development Party in 2002, with Erdogan assuming the prime ministership in 2003.

The New Islamists followed these developments closely. They reported on Erdogan's rise with considerable sympathy. The secular elite, Fahmy Huwaidy noted, could forgive Erdogan his modest background, even his working as a street vendor in his youth. However, what was impossible to accept was "his education in the religious school, Al Imam wa Al Khatib, and his subsequent joining the Rafah Islamic Party, established by Professor Necmettin Arbakan."⁶⁹ However, for some time the New Islamists held back from the full embrace of Turkish Islamism and the government that embodied it. They feared that what was emerging in Turkey might represent a Trojan horse of Western design that would, in the end, subvert true Islamism with a dangerous mixed breed, a "moderate" Islam that was more Western than Islamic.⁷⁰ In the end, Prime Minister Erdogan and the remarkably talented governance team he assembled overcame the most important of these reservations on the part of the New Islamists, though not completely those of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers. Criticisms did linger among the New Islamists as well, notably of the non-Islamic character of Turkey's economic system that Qaradawy judged as borrowed wholesale from the West.⁷¹ Still, article after article appeared in the Egyptian press by Islamists who looked to the "lessons" of Turkish democratization. In Islamist circles, debates over the Turkish

⁶⁸ Bishry, *Characteristics*, 29; see also Yusuf al Qaradawy, *Secular Extremism in Confrontation with Islam: The Cases of Turkey and Tunisia* (Cairo: Dar al Sharouq, 2001).

⁶⁹ Fahmy Huwaidy, *al Ahrām*, 31 July 2007.

⁷⁰ Fahmy Huwaidy, *al Ahrām*, 29 January 2002.

⁷¹ "Book Review: Islam and Current Issues."

file were lively, particularly on whether the lessons of the Turkish case might be applied elsewhere. Fahmy Huwaidy, in particular, expressed doubts that the Turkish outcome could be replicated in Egypt, primarily because of the complete absence of both transparency in elections and inclusive political participation in pre-revolutionary Egypt.⁷² Still, the New Islamists celebrated the clear fact that whatever the special circumstances, democratic evolution in Turkey nevertheless spoke to those who had flatly argued that Islam and democracy were simply incompatible.⁷³ A continuous flow of these Turkish materials, accessible and verifiable, circulated widely in the networks of the *Wassatteyya*. Their general importance lay in moving the discussion of Islam and democracy into the practical real world and out of the misty, speculative universe to which it is usually consigned.

There are clear grounds for the optimism of the New Islamists of the *Wassatteyya* about the future of Islam. Islam in our time has suffered lacerating wounds inflicted from within and without. Yet, the faith is thriving in communities of reform and resistance that draw quite explicitly on the alternative realities of *tawhid* for which the *Wassatteyya* speaks and acts. The improbable vitality of the *al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya* taps into these submerged connectors as this energizing movement for world-historic change makes its way through Islamic lands, guided by the Islamic mainstream. It is unhelpful to see it either as a political ideology or a social movement. Rather, like a river, it flows from one Islamic land to another. It defers to none of the false boundaries that would limit the reach of its message. The *Wassatteyya* has ideas, it has practical experiences, and it has power. Above all, it has a compelling moral tale to tell that inspires multiple experiments and movements in the most-varied settings as it moves millions of ordinary Muslims.

With eyes averted and ears closed, the West has paid little attention to Islam's contemporary message. Why should it pay much attention? The West has, after all, successfully hijacked human history and brought it to an end with markets and elections. Grand narratives, all Westerners know, are a thing of the past. Upheavals in Islamic lands are about terror and civil war. They raise security and military issues, void of rational or moral importance. The *Wassatteyya* reminds ordinary Muslims throughout Islamic lands that they know a different, compelling truth. Whatever the fate of the West's grand narrative of "progress," the story of Islam

⁷² Fahmy Huwaidy, *al-Ahram*, 23 July 2007.

⁷³ Fahmy Huwaidy, *Islam and Democracy* (Cairo: al-Ahram Center for Publications and Translations, 1993), 1-9.

shows no sign at all of ending. The message from the Prophet Muhammad, indeed from all prophets, defines the essence of human purpose with the distinctive and endlessly renewable charge to build the world in ways consistent with the humane values of justice, compassion, and generosity. This truth, the Quran says, is already known to humankind through the succession of earlier prophets; however, humanity has failed to live up to its challenge. Islam, Muslims believe, comes as a reminder of these “known truths” and as a call to believers to realize them not only in their own individual lives but in the communities they create as well.⁷⁴

It is the power of this different truth that ultimately drives the Islamic Awakening as guided by the *Wassatteyya*. Whatever their material conditions, the Quranic injunction to wage a continuous struggle to become better human beings and to build more-humane communities stands. Muslims may find themselves, as they do today in so many places, faced with the need to battle poverty, tyranny, and foreign occupation. However, their struggles can never be simply about overcoming poverty, curbing tyranny, or repelling foreign invaders. The most important struggles are always and everywhere those of *al jihad al akbar*, the struggle to transform self and community on the most-profound levels. These are the core, energizing commitments to a distinctive conception of humanity and human community that give Islam its power and ensure its future. The pioneers of the Islamic Awakening as well its contemporary incarnations understand that they have been called by and must call others to the individual and collective battles of the *al jihad al akbar*, the struggle to be better human beings and to establish more-just societies. They understand, as well, that they must shoulder the obligation to struggle to defend Islam, *al jihad al asghar*, with whatever means they have from corrupt and cruel political leaders and rapacious foreign occupiers. These commitments and the reasons to act on them all flow from Islam itself, although worldly circumstances inevitably affect the shape of these struggles. These matters have more than historical interest. They speak to Islam's future.

The military and security approach of the United States to the Islamic world has failed, with its burdens now clearly threatening democracy and prosperity at home. The day will come when we will at last recognize the limits of our own power and seek to build a reasonable relationship with the Islamic world, as inevitably we must. At that critical moment, we will need to set aside our unhealthy obsession with Islamist extremism and our

⁷⁴ Quran, 80:11.

interested exaggeration of the threat it poses. We will have to abandon our delusions of transcending history, reinventing warfare, and creating new realities, including particularly dangerous fantasies of remaking Islam and the Islamic world in our own image. Before we can even rightly think of engaging the Islamic world in constructive ways, we must first have chosen democracy and prosperity at home over empire abroad. Both our democracy and our economy have fallen into dangerous disrepair, and with those erosions has come a decline in our stature in the world. We must abandon our costly and dangerous commitments to American and Israeli exceptionalism that seek to put us above the laws and moralities that apply to others and make us immune to what the Founding Fathers called “the decent respect to the opinions of mankind.” At that moment, and surely upheavals in cities across America now suggest it cannot be too far off, it will be imperative to bring into view the real sources of Islam’s tremendous power. They are to be found in its resilient and inventive mainstream. Islam of the center poses no existential threat to our national interest. Our own reckless militarism and our blind support for the expansionism of others do. When we can at last look clearly and in principled ways at the Islamic world, we will be called to seek out actively and deepen purposefully the commonalities from the best of our own traditions and the best of theirs. Such constructive striving will make possible mutual accommodation and perhaps even cooperation in efforts to advance social justice and democracy, that is, in joint ventures to “build the world.” Those exceptionally brave yet very ordinary Tunisians and Egyptians have shown us in the spring of 2011 just how numerous and just how valuable partners from the Islamic world could be.