



Time for Arab History to Follow its Course

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America is now more than ever engaged in a historical dynamic it has so far failed to fathom. At present, the single most important source of international instability is America's problematical relationship with the Muslim world generally, and with the Arab world in particular. The sheer volume of American news headlines concerning this relationship eclipses all other world issues. However, to the majority of Americans, the true causes of this conflicted association remain inscrutable. From their worldview, all would be well if one were to simply eliminate the violent minority, epitomized by Usama bin Laden, which subscribes to radical Islam and engages in terrorism, and dictatorial governments were to embrace democracy. Indeed, such a simplistic belief is enforced by Washington's rhetoric on the War on Terror and on the latest Iraq War. Surely, the thinking goes, none could refuse America's liberal democratic ideals and its vibrant culture—hence the American bewilderment at the recent violent resistance to America's "benevolent travail" in Iraq, once again blamed on terrorist elements or radical clerics.

To Muslim Arabs, however, the perception and understanding of the present situation is very different. The Muslim worldview finds its roots over a millennium ago, in the Prophet Mohammed's effort to establish an Islamic state where the divine laws of God would be implemented as prescribed in the Quran and Sunnah. All latter Islamic political and religious

endeavors, by the Prophet's companions or subsequent followers, sought to emulate the functioning of that perfect first Islamic polity.

With the death of the Prophet in 632 AD a predicament was born that has proven exceedingly difficult to resolve, and that has direct consequences for the present state of affairs. The predicament revolves around the Muslims' struggle to balance the exigencies of temporality with the transcendental requirements of the

Shari'ah, the Muslim holy law. Muslims believe their polities must be governed by the divine regulations dictated to the Prophet.¹ However, with some exceptions, these provide only finite generic principles; what are God's answers to the increasingly complex necessities of life? To respond to the specific contingencies of their governments, Muslim rulers in the past adopted an expedient principle called *Siyasa*, where worldly utility was used for state policy and public law positivation, as long as it contradicted no explicit *Shari'ah* statement. On the other hand, the Muslim clerical class maintained its autonomy to dictate the application of Islamic principles in the private sphere, acting as the ultimate authority on the concurrence of law with the *Shari'ah*. This uneasy equilibrium remained

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until the seventeenth century, when the balance of power between Europe and the Muslim world shifted, and the Christian West expanded.

The slowly intruding Western influence upset an Islamic politico-religious poise that had taken centuries to develop, and set in motion a transformation process, the effects of which can be felt today. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, several Muslim polities witnessed a rapid change in their legal systems. For example, a modernizing Ottoman empire, eager to catch up with its European competitors, gradually displaced the traditional Islamic legal system, adopting a Western penal code and expanding Western legal positivization. The shockwaves of

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such Western interference reverberated in the Muslim world—particularly among the intellectual elites—and revived the debate on Islamic governance and legislation. The nineteenth century crusading activist, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, traveled tirelessly across the Muslim world, warning his coreligionists of the threat of European domination, while preaching the necessity of an inner revival. Indeed, al-Afghani was instrumental in formulating a line of

thought later carried by Mohammad Abduh. He postulated that Islamic society was undergoing a particular decay; Muslims had to reform, and the answers to their predicament were to be found within the all-encompassing and comprehensive sources of the Islamic scriptures.² From this was born the movement for an Islamic development orthogonal to the European path, one that differentiated itself from its Western antagonist, and sought to divest Muslim societies of pernicious European secular influence.

Simultaneously, however, these Muslim reformists admired other European ideas, and realized the strengths of such concepts as parliamentary democracy or public opinion.

Consequently, the reformers absorbed these tenets, creating a parallel development to the West. Nonetheless, these European ideas were made to be derivable from Islamic principles for purposes of legitimacy; in other words, they were said to be taken from Islamic scriptures and traditions so as to be acceptable to Muslims. An instance of this integration of Western concepts into an Islamic idiom can be seen with the transformation of the old Islamic *Shura* custom, or consultation, into full parliamentary democracy.³

The shock of expanding European power therefore resulted in an Islamic revival and reform movement which has until today only defined itself in relation to the West. Moreover, this revival has consisted of the superposition of two mutually antagonistic components—the orthogonal ‘anti-Western’ and the parallel ‘pro-Western’—that have produced an inherent contradiction. The West became simultaneously the object of emulation as well as of revulsion. The tension between these two contending perspectives characterized all subsequent reformist Islamic legal and political thinking. Always measured by its deviation from, or proximity to, Western principles, it has thus become impossible to analyze Islamic political—and by extension legal—thought on its own merit. The West is always the lens through which it is considered. Western imperialism and Western freedom drive Islamic civilizational discourse.

The seed of reform, with its internal contradiction vis-à-vis the West, produced two extremes, each supporting maximum efforts to respectively adopt or remove Western influence from Muslims' lives. Indeed, a liberal wing, epitomized nowadays by Abdulahi An-Na'im⁴ and Khaled Abu el-Fadl,⁵ calls for a secularism and liberal democracy not unlike the American experience. These reformers see no contradiction between the principles of the *Shari'ah* with Western concepts such as individual freedom, human rights, and liberalism. In fact, they believe the tenets of Islam would find their finest expression within the framework of secular liberal democracy. On the other side exists a radical current—for lack of a better adjective—whose only purpose is to efface all Western intrusion.

This movement, represented by Sayyid Qutb⁶ in the 1960s, and Usama Bin Laden today, carries no programmatic project for a modern Islamic polity; its revulsion of the West has become its *raison d'être*. This politically activist Islamic current maintains that no reform, and no Islamic state, is possible in the presence of any Western political interference, be it military or diplomatic. Only when the West is forcibly extracted will the development of Muslim polities be possible. The spectrum of Arab opinion spans the two extremes, but America is now playing the leading role in shifting the balance away from the liberal and towards the radical group.

For the sake of stability, maintaining the status-quo, and ensuring a constant flow of oil, America today supports authoritarian Middle Eastern dictatorships and monarchies whose sole purpose is political survival. Much as it did with the Shah's Iran, America now provides the sheikdoms of the Gulf, along with authoritarian rulers such as Hosni Mubarak of Egypt or King Abdallah of Jordan, with high levels of intelligence and military assistance, most of which is used to suppress legitimate internal dissent. Today, only Syria and Lebanon escape this pattern. The Muslim belief in an American plan of domination is further strengthened by the unending support the United States provides the colonial state of Israel, which subjugates the Palestinians and expropriates Arab lands for Jewish settlements. Given these circumstances, there is no doubt among Arabs that America's activities in the region constitute an extension of historical Western subjugation and previous European colonial domination. From this perspective, held by a majority of modern Arabs, America is a predatory entity that is absorbed in subjugating them for her interests by expropriating their strategic resources. Furthermore, her support of tyrannical and corrupt governments is preventing the realization of Muslims' true potential.

In this mindset, America is inherently evil. Consequently, the resistance to the new empire must be total. No good can result from American principles, which are perceived to be subtle and subversive colonial instruments aimed at ruining

Muslim civilization. It is hence no surprise that at present, the liberal faction enjoys hardly any support in the Middle East. America's policies have redirected the internal dynamic of Islamic reform towards a resistance to Westernization. The United States' recent war in Iraq only intensified this process: it is a further proof of America's rapacious and deceitful character, for it claims to bring freedom to the Iraqis, all the while supporting Israel and other tyrannical clients in their oppression of Arabs. Given the present environment, where Islamic reform defines itself in opposition to America, every American policy is doomed to fail. The messenger is distrusted, and her messages are thus considered inherently treacherous.

The case of Iran

The Iranian experience highlights other consequences of Western influence on Islamic thought, and perhaps suggests a solution to the present American-Arab predicament. As mentioned earlier, America had been heavily involved with the Shah of Iran, providing his government with a tremendous military and security organization. As a result, the Shah was very successful in clamping down on all political dissent within his realm. Most severely hit were the Communists and the Muslim clerical opposition, among whom Ruhollah Khomeini was preeminent. From forced exile, Khomeini developed his political ideas, all heavily infused with the spirit of resistance to Western imperialism.⁷ Once again, Islamic political and legal discourse was defined in relation to the West. Indeed, in a very close parallel to other Sunni Islamic thought, Khomeini advocated the removal of the Shah of Iran, an imperialist agent, in order to end the spread of Western values in Iranian society. In 1979, for reasons beyond the scope of this essay, Khomeini's revolutionary effort succeeded in

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deposing the Shah and capturing the reigns of the state.

This event marked a watershed—it was the first instance of a Muslim state shedding all Western political interference since the birth of the Islamic reform movement. A government emerged that was prepared to fully implement an Islamic ideology. Most importantly, this event separated the West from the development of Islamic thinking. Islamic legal and political thought could now stand on its own and develop naturally, by itself and in itself, as opposed to in reaction to exterior Western stimuli. Khomeini's Iranian Islamic Republic, however, was faced with the same conundrum mentioned earlier:

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How does one implement the transcendental principles of Islam in the temporal context of a nation-state? How does one interpret, then positivize, the indefinite Islamic *Shari'ah*, all the while responding to the contingencies of a modern state? Islamic thought, having met its first challenge of divesting itself of Western interference, now faced its true dilemma.

The Iranian Islamic revolutionary state has, so far, failed to overcome this

obstacle. The present Iranian government has applied mixtures of Western and Islamic legal systems, all of which have created much friction in the workings of the state. The Republic has also reverted to the classical Sunni *Siyasa* practice to solve the need for expedient legislation. The failure of the Iranian Islamic state is further compounded by its growing illegitimacy in the eyes of its people.⁸ Iranians today, in their majority, have lost faith in their Islamic government, questioning the very essence of its legitimacy. Writings by Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar⁹ advocating a secular liberal democracy are most popular in Iran, especially among the young, in blaring contrast to the

unpopularity of such liberal discourse in Arab states.

Lessons for the United States

What lessons does the evolution of Islamic political and legal thought in the case of Iran hold for the United States in the present day? Firstly, America must realize and admit to itself that, *nolens volens*, it has inherited a colonial legacy in the Arab world. Its actions are perceived through the historical lens of past experiences. America's worldview clashes with the Arabs' and it is important that America understand that its every action will be perceived as reinforcing the neo-colonial structure. Even if formulated with genuinely “good” intentions, America's policies can only have negative effects in a world defined by its opposition to Western intrusion. Current Arab reactions to events in Iraq and elsewhere only prove this point.

Realizing that every further involvement only deepens the chasm in such a reactionary environment, America should break its direct linkages and disengage from the Middle Eastern realm. America should end its military and political cooperation with Arab dictatorships and monarchies. Normal diplomatic or economic relations could be maintained, as long as no support is shown to any party in Arab internal struggles. Potentially emerging popular Islamic governments may very well be, at first, anti-American. However, over the longer term, this should not prevent the flow of oil to the United States; Middle Eastern states will always need to trade their most valuable commodity with the world's greatest consumer. Furthermore, if America ends its support for corrupt governments and colonial Israeli policies, there would be no reason for long term popular animosity towards the U.S. to remain.

The Muslim world must find, on its own, a native and natural system of government which will allow it to express its civilizational spirit. The effort to reengineer societies of the Middle East so as to reflect Western ideals is but a baneful and deadly delusion. Too defined by its opposition to the West, the Muslim world will never permit exterior reformation. External, and hence

artificial, political engineering only strengthens the internal position of the radical camps. Arab liberal democrats, viewed as Trojan horses, have virtually disappeared. American-supported governments are, and will always be, perceived as colonial viceroys.

Only when genuinely native governments emerge will the internal historical Muslim debate redirect from its present anti-Western vector towards a search for genuine inner development. This may well mean that several Islamic governments may come to life. Nevertheless, this may be the best America could achieve given the present situation. As the Iranian case demonstrates, such a development could prove to be positive over the long run. The West has won millions of supporters for the principles of democracy since the revolution of 1979; if given the choice, most Iranians would replace their theocratic state with a Muslim liberal democratic government in order to secure their personal freedoms and enhance their economic prosperity. Turkey, whose regime does not depend on Western assistance, is also governed by an Islamic party closely attached to the principles of liberal democracy.

A direct intervention to create a liberal Arab order will only backfire, as the Iraq case is slowly proving to be. America's longing to export its values will be better served by giving Arabs a real opportunity for self-determination. Maybe it is time the United States practiced what it preached and allowed Arabs to determine their own future, free from interference. Maybe it is time to let go, strip the neo-colonial mantle, and allow Arab history to follow its course.

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- 1 It is important to emphasize here that Islamic political and legal thought are intertwined, due to the Muslim belief that the interpretation and application of God's laws on earth necessitate a proper Islamic political setting.
- 2 Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2nd edition, 136.
- 3 *Ibid*, 137.
- 4 See Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law*, (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press); see also An-Na'im, "Sharia and Positive Legislation: Is an Islamic State Possible or Viable?," in *Yearbook of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law*, ed. Eugene Cotran and Chibli Mallat (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2000), vol. 5, 29-42.
- 5 See Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women*, (Oxford: Oneworld).
- 6 For a sample of Sayyid Qutb's writings, see *Milestones* (originally published as *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq*) <http://www.youngmuslims.ca/online_library/books/milestones/index_2.asp, last accessed 18 November 2004.
- 7 Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, translated by Hamid Algar (Berkeley, California: Mizan Press), 149.

8 For a critique of the Iranian Islamic Republic by Iranian Islamic scholars, see Charles Kurzman, "Critics Within: Islamic Scholars' Protests Against the Islamic State in Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 15, no..2 (Winter 2001): 341-359.

9 For a sample of Mohsen Kadivar's writings, see "The Velayat-e Faqih and Democracy," <http://www.kadivar.com/Htm/English/Papers/Velayat-e%20Faghih.htm>, last accessed 18 November 2004.