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Issues in Islam: Islamists and the West: Co-existence or Confrontation?

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Issues in Islam

Islamists and the West: Co-existence or Confrontation?

By Faisal Kutty

Dr. Hassan Turabi writes, "Whenever religious energy is ... suppressed, it builds up and ultimately erupts either in isolated acts of struggle or resistance, which are called terrorist by those in power, or in a revolution. On the other hand," he continues, "when Islam is allowed free expression, it will bring about social change peacefully and gradually."¹

He notes that since Islam is based on sincere conviction and voluntary compliance, an Islamic state cannot be imposed on a reluctant society. In essence, therefore, an Islamic state can only be created through the will of the people. Turabi, one of the prime architects of the resurgence of Islam emanating from the urban centers of Turkey to the rural hinterlands of Xinjiang (China), claims that Islamists will create a civil society if given the chance.

Can Islamists be trusted? What is the alternative? Are Islamists out to destroy democracy, freedom, justice and liberty? What are the consequences of the lack of communication between the proponents of Islamic revival and the West? These and other questions must be considered in order to deal with this development in the Muslim world in ways that protect international stability and the right to self-determination.

Many Muslims see the Islamic reawakening as an alternative to secular materialism, a reassertion of their identity and a return to their roots. For its part, the West perceives Islamic resurgence negatively, as the so-called "Islamic threat" or "green peril." This fear is compounded by the fact that since the demise of communism, Islam appears to be the only alternative system capable of transcending ethnic and national barriers. This fear is further fanned by the alarmist writings and speeches of some scholars—with perhaps Harvard professor Samuel Huntington as a prime culprit—journalists and leaders in the West and the Muslim world. The reprehensible actions and anti-West hyperbole and rhetoric spouted by some Islamists does not help.

The Western obsession with a perceived threat of Islamic fundamentalism and the undertaking to combat it at any cost has led many to forget that secular liberalism is one world view but not the only one. The assumption of liberal secularists that "all human beings by nature possess the capacity and desire to become liberals when free to do so,"² and the imposition of this view on others only leads secularists to commit a variation of the very crime of which they accuse Islamists: what can be called "secular fundamentalism."

Western stereotyping of Islamists as fundamentalists, terrorists, and inherently anti-Western is both inaccurate and counterproductive. As John Esposito writes, "[T]o equate Islam and Islamic fundamentalism uncritically with extremism is to judge Islam by those who wreak havoc—a standard not applied to Judaism and Christianity."³ Such a characterization and the corollary lack of dialogue in fact confers legitimacy on extremists within the movement.

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Secular liberalism is one world view but not the only one.

Although the Islamic movement, like any other, has its share of radicals, most Islamists seek peaceful and democratic change. Shaikh Rachid Ghannouchi, the exiled leader of the Tunisian Islamist party *Hizb an-Nahda* (the Renaissance Party), sentenced in absentia to life in prison for his democratic opposition, contends that in seeking to reform their societies, Islamists are committed to social justice, human rights, pluralism and an end to dictatorships.⁴ He and many other Islamists point out that rather than being fundamentalist, their movement is more akin to the European Renaissance in a Muslim context.

Far from being monolithic, the movement is composed of divergent groups ranging from the rejectionist and extremist minority to a mainstream committed to working peacefully within the existing order. There are significant differences among adherents over their visions of an Islamic state and the routes to achieve it. While the extremists espouse violent overthrow of the existing leadership at any cost, the mainstream seeks Islamization through education, and social and political activism.

There also is discord among the extremists. In Egypt, for instance, the two groups on the fringe, *Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Group) and Islamic Jihad, differ over tactics, compete for funding and even have an ongoing rivalry.⁵ The only common denominators between the various groups are their identification with Islam and their opposition to the secular elites.

Islamic thinkers realize it will not be possible to create the society they wish without going through some birth pangs. Indeed, they point out that the transformation of the Western world into civil societies was brought about not only through intellectual but also bloody political revolutions. Why are stricter standards applied to the Muslim world?

Application of the Shariah

Ismail and Lamyā Faruqi wrote, "Islamic law made Islamic civilization, not vice versa."⁶ This fact explains why the focus of the Islamic movement has been on implementing the *shariah* in all spheres of life. This call evokes three reactions from contemporary thinkers and policy makers in the West and in the Muslim world, ranging from outright opposition to its approval as a viable alternative.

One group believes Islamism is simply a reactionary anti-modern movement aimed at taking civilization back to an age of barbarism, and that the supposed golden age of Islam was a mythical utopia or a way of life with no practical relevance today. Writers such as Abdullahi An-Na'im, whose views are featured in numerous legal and international affairs journals, argues that introducing the *shariah* would be disastrous for international relations and human rights.⁷ They overlook the fact that Islamic law has been created through interpretation, or *usul al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence), and hence the legal rules (as opposed to the underlying principles) can be reformulated, if needed, to meet contemporary situations. Islamist and some Western scholars counter that this fear of "reactionary Islam" is the legacy of the Crusades and has no basis in reality.

A second category of thinkers classifies the return to Islam as fundamentalism, a label rejected by themselves because of the negative connotations implied by its modern usage. In the Islamist view, the term "fundamentalist," if at all applicable in the Islamic context, would be restricted to the ultra-conservatives and extremists who, in the words of the late Ismail Faruqi, naïvely believe that Islamic laws have been fully evolved and "the methodology was absolutely adequate and that the problem of the Muslim World was merely one of human reluctance to realize the values of Islam."⁸ It is ironic when the term is used to refer to Islamic revival movements led by reformers who wish to reinterpret Islamic law in keeping with the long-established Islamic traditions of *tajdid* (renewal) and *islah* (reform).

The third group, including most Islamist leaders and even some Western scholars, acknowledges the valuational and conceptual differences between world religious and philosophical systems and believes that the Islamic system can be a viable alternative. Jill Crystal argues, "Islam clearly has values and traditions that are compatible with the kinds of rights protections that the pro-democracy liberals endorse."⁹ She concludes that equality, respect for the rule of law, respect for private property, social justice, and a tradition of tolerance of debate and argument are established in Islam, although some Islamists today may repudiate this latter principle.

Islamist Agenda

Islamists claim they have an agenda that includes changes in the economic, political and social spheres, but that they have not been able to demonstrate that their program goes beyond mere rhetoric. They point out that the only way to know whether the "Islamic solution" is workable is to provide them the opportunity to implement their vision. Such an opportunity was lost when the Algerian military cancelled the second round of national elections in 1992, banned the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS—Islamic Salvation Front), jailed its leaders and unleashed repression when it realized that the FIS was on the verge of winning power at the polls. This would have been the first democratically elected Islamist government.

Many observers attribute the resurgence of Islam to a reaction against deplorable economic and social conditions in some Muslim societies. They think—and hope—that economic improvements will check the appeal of the movement and diminish its pool of recruits. But the evidence suggests that Islamic resurgence is not restricted to economically depressed states. Islamic influence is pervading all levels of society in Malaysia, for instance, even as the economy is booming. Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who is set to become the country's prime minister, was an Islamic activist and still is of that orientation. Similarly, in 1994, the Islamist *Refah* (Reform) party won municipal elections in 29 large Turkish cities—including cosmopolitan Istanbul and Ankara—with 19 percent of the total votes in Turkey, a secular nation with an overwhelmingly Muslim population.

In fact, the movement finds its greatest support among university graduates and young professionals of both genders. American scholar John Esposito notes that most recruits are from the faculties of humanities, law, medicine, science, engineering, and education rather than traditional religious faculties.

The conclusion that Islamism is not limited to the economically and socially deprived is reinforced by the fact that professional associations of lawyers, engineers and physicians are the first to fall to the Islamists. In Egypt, for example, all three are under their control. When members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the 62-year-old officially banned Islamist party, won the elections in the lawyers syndicate in 1992, the government stepped in by "tightening" election procedures in all professional associations.¹⁰

Economics

In the economic arena, the Islamists will attempt to institute an interest-free banking system. They contend that the cornerstone of modern banking—interest—only serves the rich. Ironically, interest-free financing schemes suggested by Islamists are gaining acceptance even among hard-core capitalists.

In Malaysia, the Islamic banking system—based on profit and risk sharing between the lender and the borrower—competes with conventional banks and has attracted large numbers of non-Muslim depositors. Even in England, banks such as Kleinwork Benson, Citibank, ANZ Grindlays and Midland Montague have set up Islamic banking units. The demand is so great that Kleinwork Benson has established a research center to develop new Islamic trade finance instruments in consultation with Islamic scholars.

Social

Islamists also challenge the status quo in the social realm. Their goal is establishment of a social welfare or a modified free-enterprise state. The main objection comes from those who allege that women will be oppressed. But here again blanket indictment of the Islamic movement is unwarranted. Unlike the radicals, most Islamist leaders call for the full and equal participation of women in society. Dr. Hassan Turabi writes on the plight of Muslim women: "Male jealousy is just one aspect of masculine capricious tendencies which inculcate the myth that women, by nature, suffer from excessive incapacity. Men use that fantasy as an excuse to ban women from active participation in the broad spectrum of human life" (*The Message*, July 1993). Turabi, a legal scholar with advanced degrees from London and the Sorbonne, and secretary-general of the Khartoum-based Popular Arab and Islamic Congress, is of the view that Islamists must reform traditional Muslim society, especially with respect to the deplorable state of women.

Obviously, the status of women cannot be elevated overnight in these male-dominated societies. But the mainstream Islamist position as articulated by its leaders is in favor of full participation by women. As expected, this is opposed by extremists and even many ordinary Muslims who are not interested in reforming their cultural ways. In fact, Turabi is branded a heretic by many Muslims for his views on women. A society cannot be forced to change, it must be allowed to evolve; the Islamists have elevation of the status of women on their agenda and can only be expected to strive toward it.

Politics

Politically, most Islamists from Algeria and Tunisia are committed to democracy or a variation thereof (*shura*). In Algeria, the Islamists were set to take power using the ballot rather than the bullet, when this was subverted by the military with Western acquiescence. In fact, the West's hypocritical ambivalence in the wake of the hijacking of the democratic process in Algeria only served to radicalize many of the grass-roots members. As Ghannouchi says, "excluding [the Islamic movement] from the democratic process will only impel it toward extremism, which will kill the democratic experiment altogether."

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the pioneers of political Islam in this century, are committed to democracy. Unfortunately, the extremist fringe gets most of the Western publicity. For instance, when fanatics went on a killing spree of Coptic Christians in Egypt, this was exploited by the Western media as an example of Islamic intolerance. Very little was written about demonstrations organized by the Muslim Brotherhood against this violence. Nevertheless, as the main Islamist party in Egypt, the Brotherhood enjoys far greater legitimacy and support than the radicals.

When they articulate reforms, mainstream Islamists find themselves rejected by the West as extremists, while the real religious extremists and ultra-conservatives oppose their progressive message. For example, the civil war in Sudan is characterized as a religious war between the Islamic north and southern Christian and animist rebels upon whom they would impose the *shariah*. In fact, it is a political rebellion in which Christian, animist, and even some Muslim southerners challenge the legitimacy of the government. When the Sudanese government went the extra mile and offered a degree of autonomy, representation in the cabinet and non-applicability of the *shariah* to the south, the proposal was rejected outright by the rebel Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which seeks total independence (*New African*, October 1993).

By alienating the Sudanese leadership under the pretense of opposing its alleged religious persecution of Christians and animists, the West is making it easier for more radical elements to come to power. In fact, in Sudan some of the conservative forces oppose what they perceive as the "liberal" Islam proposed by the Islamists in power.

The West must realize that Islamists will not be able to create the just society they envision without some birth pangs. The West itself went through such bloody experiences. What the movement seeks is the right to self-determination. This is no different from what the Western world has enjoyed for centuries, governing itself according to its chosen philosophy: secularism.

The West would also benefit from acknowledging that, as stated by Ghannouchi, "It is on the common principles we share that Muslims and Easterners can establish a mutually beneficial relationship. There can be no escaping the reality that the destinies of our respective civilizations are intertwined."

To prevent the further radicalization of the Islamic movement, and facilitate the exercise of self-determination in the Muslim world, it is imperative that the West begin by accepting the global reality that Islamists are going to be long-term players in the future of many Muslim nations. Consistent with this reality, the West must rethink its attitude toward the revival.

Support for Democratization

First, the West must extend the concern for democracy to the Islamic world. For far too long the West has ignored the calls for democracy in the Islamic world because of fear of Islamists coming to power. Islamist parties are banned outright or seriously restricted, leaving them no choice but to choose the bullet. As American political scientist Graham Fuller said: "Let Islam come out of the underground and learn to survive in electoral politics as it now does in Turkey, Pakistan and Egypt. Give the process a little time. Political evolution always has rocky periods, but Islamic politics may not be the bogeyman Westerners fear."¹¹

Human Rights

Second, the human rights violations and atrocities committed against Islamists must not be tolerated. While openly, and rightly, condemning the atrocities committed by radical segments of the movement, the West has ignored human rights violations perpetrated against Islamists in Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt which are documented by organizations such as Asia Watch, Amnesty International, and the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights.

Channels of Communication

Third, a dialogue must be opened with the Islamist leaders toward establishing a relationship of cooperation and coexistence. The attitude of distrust and lack of respect between the two sides cannot persist. Some Islamist leaders have said they are open to such dialogue. Turabi, for instance, came to Canada in 1992 for this purpose. The reception he got illustrates the present state of disrespect: He was assaulted in broad daylight at the Ottawa airport and his Sudanese assailant was acquitted in a Canadian court.

There are many in the higher echelons of the movement who seek a dialogue with the West, including Rached Ghannouchi, Hassan Turabi and Mahfoud Nahnah. Shaikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, for instance, has stated: "[Dialogue with the West] is a mandatory obligation for us in order for it to understand what we want for ourselves and our people." He also has said, "Were we to convince Western leaders and decision-makers of our right to live according to our faith—ideologically, legislatively, and ethnically—without imposing our views or inflicting harm upon them, we would have traversed an immense barrier."¹²

Unless these steps are taken, the distrust between the West and the Islamic world will only lead to international instability. Radicals who call for confrontation and a new cold war will replace leaders such as Turabi who claim, for instance, that the "West has developed many positive values of Islam—free, consultative government, dignity to the individual, free enterprise," and who call for coexistence and emulation in some respects. The choice is up to the West.

NOTES:

¹ Hassan Turabi, "Principles of Governance, Freedom, and Responsibility in Islam," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 4:1, p. 1.

² Peter O'Brien, "Islam vs. Liberalism in Europe," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 10:3, pp. 367, 379.

³ John L. Esposito, "Political Islam: Beyond the Green Menace," *Current History*, January 1994, pp. 19, 24.

⁴ Rached Ghannouchi, "Islam and the West: Realities and Potentialities," in Ahmed Bin Yousef and Ahmad AbuJobain, eds., *The Politics of Islamic Resurgence: Through Western Eyes*, The United Association for Studies and Research, Springfield, Virginia, 1992, pp. 45, 48.

⁵ Caryle Murphy, "Egypt: An Uneasy Portent of Change," *Current History*, February 1994, pp. 78-79.

⁶ Ismail Faruqi and Lamy Faruqi, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam*, MacMillan Publishing, New York, 1986, p. 279.

⁷ See for example Abdullahi an-Na'im, "Islamic Law, International Relations, and Human Rights: Challenge and Response," *Cornell International Law Journal*, vol. 20, p. 317.

⁸ Ismail Faruqi, "Islamization of Knowledge: Problems, Principles and Prospectives," in *Islam: Source and Purpose of Knowledge*, IIIT, Herndon, Virginia, p. 34.

⁹ Jill Crystal, "Authoritarianism and its Adversaries in the Arab World," *World Politics*, pp. 262, 286.

¹⁰ Caryle Murphy, *ibid.*, p. 80.

¹¹ Quoted in Shaikh Rached Ghannouchi, "The Islamic Movement Isn't an Enemy of Democracy," *The Ottawa Citizen*, Jan. 28, 1992.

¹² *The Politics of Islamic Resurgence*, p. 40.

Faisal Kutty holds a law degree from the University of Ottawa. Together with Shaikh Ahmad Kutty, he is working on a book entitled Human Rights: International Law and the Shariah.

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