CHANGES IN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE WEST AND ISLAM

IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

Relations between Islam (Muslims) and the West have changed in the twentieth century more than in any other century. The primary reason for these dramatic shifts is the cycle of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial relations all within the same century, or a century and a half, between the states of the Muslim World itself and the West. One might hypothesize that these Muslim-West relationships will never again change quite as dramatically and as sweepingly as they have in this century.

To describe things in this fashion is already to make an important observation: it suggests that relations between "Islam" and the West have very little to do with theology, and a great deal to do with international politics. And indeed, that is my contention. While there are significant theological differences between Islam and Christianity, these differences are not an important in any conflict between the Muslim World and the (ex) Christian world. Indeed, Muslims and Christians to a considerable extent share an ethical and moral outlook that represents one of the more encouraging aspects of relations between the two worlds. As I have pointed out in my book A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West, religion tends to be the *vehicle* of conflict rather than the *source*, a thesis in direct contradiction to that of Samuel Huntington.

The major shifts in relations between Islam (Muslims) and the West are essentially expressed in four different phases:

- the transition from the colonial era to the post-colonial era;
- the "neo-imperialism" of the post colonial period;

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- the process of modernization and democratization of the Muslim state;
- and finally, the role and impact of Islam *in* the West.

These changes in relationship between the Muslim World and the West can be viewed as positive or negative, and indeed they contain elements of both. In some ways these changes have improved relations between the two sides, but in other respects they have caused a sharpening of relations. For the sake of clarity, I will separate this discussion into two parts, the first devoted to the phenomenon of sharpening of relations, the second to the softening or smoothing of relations.

The Sharpening of Relations

By the beginning of the twentieth century, virtually every Muslim country (except Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia) had already fallen under the control of Western colonialism. This marked the beginning of a half-century of conflict between the Muslim World and the West in a struggle of anti-colonial liberation. Islam of course played a significant role in this anti-colonial struggle; it provided a major part of the ideological justification and served as a unifying cultural force in areas where there had not always been any clear national borders, a modern state or any kind of nationalism in the Western sense. Thus from a Western point of view, Islam provided an ideology of opposition and resistance in a guerrilla context, thus associating Islam in Western eyes with ideological fervor against Western power. In practical terms, however, Islam was not struggling against Christianity, but against the West as a controlling and dominating force in the Muslim World. This struggle against Western domination characterizes the entire century, even though the forms that Western domination has taken has evolved with time.

The second highly negative development sharpening Muslim attitudes against the West was the founding of the Israeli state. Muslim anger was particularly strong because it has clearly been the West, with its long history of discrimination and persecution of Jews culminating in the holocaust, that created the stimulus for the foundation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In effect, Muslims were asked to pay for Western crimes. Whatever the case may be for the Jews themselves to have a homeland in Palestine, the presence of Israel and the wars it has unleashed has been a key factor of instability and conflict in objective terms in the region. The inability of the United States to find an equitable solution has kept the

Arab-Israeli dispute a burning issue down to the present day, affecting all other aspects of Western-Muslim relations in the region -- Gulf policy, problems with Iraq, with Iran, etc. Nearly all policies of the West in the Middle East, and especially of the United States, are perceived as essentially designed to serve the interests of Israel. This is not to say that all problems between East and West would disappear if there were no Israel, but Israel remains at the center of the conflict.

Third, even though nearly all Muslim countries had achieved independence within a decade after the end of World War II, the dominance of the West still continued in the economic, political, military and cultural spheres. This post-colonial Western dominance, known in Marxist terms as "neo-imperialism," has remained a key grievance to most of the Muslim World. Indeed, this term has had particular impact even upon contemporary Islamist thinking which is at least as much concerned about Western cultural domination as it is with Western military or political power. Even though the Muslim World has gained its formal independence, Islamists have perceived the first generation to take over the newly independent Muslim governments to be essentially "clones" of the West in their desire to perpetuate the "Westernizing agenda" within their countries. Many Muslims of course would reject the accuracy of this view, but it has been a strong current of thought within Islamist thinking to this day. This concept too, has tended to perpetuate the idea of basic Muslim cultural hostility towards the West -- or vice versa -- that was not erased with independence.

The concept of "neo-imperialism" of course has not been limited to the cultural sphere. British and American policies in the Gulf in the eyes of many Muslim observers, both Islamist and non-Islamist, are perceived as designed to maintain Western "control" over Gulf oil and its pricing. Ruling families in the Gulf are often portrayed as instruments of Western policy, while the US struggle with both Iran and Iraq are perceived as justification to maintain a major American military presence in the area, and to sell large amounts of American arms to these states. These suspicions too, continue down to this very day.

In this sense, it is difficult to speak of any major improvement in the West's relations with the Muslim World, even after independence. One might say that suspicions of Western intentions in the region are at least as strong as before, and the populations of the region are now better educated, more informed and aware of grievances against the West. In other words,

education and knowledge has contributed to an intensification of anti-Western grievances. Prominent leaders of the Middle East also exploit these ideas among the population in support of their own ideologies and interests: Gamal Abd-al-Nasir, Hafez al-Asad, Saddam Husayn, Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi, the Ayatollah Khomeini and others have all helped perpetuate anti-Western ideas along the lines of the "neo-imperialist" rationale. This is not the place to debate the correctness or incorrectness of their ideological positions, but to suggest that their ideas and slogans have often found fertile ground in the region.

While these ideas are usually associated specifically with the Middle East, they are also closely linked with a lot of general rhetoric in the Third World, and can be included within the framework of "Third Worldism." "Neo-imperialist" concepts have not only regional but global relevance. They focus on economic penetration, particularly in the form of globalization of the international economy today, but also in the cultural realm, or "McDonaldization" and "Hollywoodization" of the Third World. But the question remains, why has the intensity of these ideas remained stronger in the Muslim World than in almost any other part of the world? Is the level of "neo-imperialist" sensitivity actually higher in the Middle East or is there a deeper cultural resistance to the West in the Muslim World than within any other non-Western culture?

Anti-Western thinking was yet further intensified even in the campaign of many Islamists against the state in the Middle East. Some Islamists have often portrayed many of the modern Middle Eastern regimes -- sometimes accurately -- as oppressive, harsh, incompetent, corrupt, and illegitimate. And many of the leaders of these regimes are portrayed as fulfilling the Western agenda, exploiting the West's fear of fundamentalism as an excuse for abuse of human rights and absence of political liberalization. Unfortunately, the West has been susceptible to these fears in many cases and has given support to regimes such as Algeria out of fear of radical fundamentalism, even in violation of its own professions of belief in democracy as a universal good. Sweeping US support for Cairo has also been partly influenced by these same calculations. Fortunately, Washington may slowly be growing more sophisticated in its understanding of the "problem of fundamentalism." In Turkey, for example, even though Washington has no fondness for the Islamist Refah Party, it has very publicly criticized the Turkish government and the military for using extra-legal means to eliminate and ban the Refah party, maintaining that such

steps are bad for Turkish democracy and may only strengthen radicalism within such Islamist circles.

The result is, however, that in Islamist eyes bad governance in the Muslim World has come to be associated in certain cases with pro-Western policies and the support of the West itself. Some Islamic groups or leaders have even portrayed the West as the first source of the problem, arguing that it is the West that keeps such regimes in power and emboldens them to stand against their people. We hear this argument from the FIS in Algeria, in the ideology of the Gama'a Islamiyya in Egypt or from the Saudi dissident Usama Bin Ladin. In the arguments of these groups, to strike against the US is seen as an Islamic obligation as part of a broader struggle against "neo-colonial regimes" in order to attain a "just order" or Islamist government in the region. Here again we see an intensification of anti-Western feelings, this time not only as part of the foreign policy debate of these countries, but as part of the *internal* ideological debate as well. This phenomenon, whether justified or not, has been a major post-independence trend that has involved strengthened anti-Western feelings. The absence of American impartiality in the Arab-Israeli situation has of course intensified these emotions. But if the Arab-Israeli problem were to be resolved with some degree of justice for both sides, would these elements of anti-Western thinking then disappear completely?

The phenomenon of terrorism in the Midde East (and outside the Middle East as well) has also exacerbated relations with the West. The US is given to declaring "war against terrorism" without always fully considering the full causes of those terrorist incidents. Secondly, large proportions of leaders in the Middle East, including Netanyahu, actually prefers to deal with "terrorism" than to deal with political opposition. Terrorism is a black-and-white issue, one need show no mercy, make no compromises, and wins nearly automatic support in the West, whereas dealing with political opposition is a far more complex task involving real compromises. If a "war against terrorism" takes top priority in US relations with the Middle East, it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy, opening the door to a real "clash of civilizations." There must be a struggle against terrorism, but it must come in the context of building genuine support for Western policies in the area, something that is lacking today.

The Western confrontation with Saddam Husayn also presents an interesting problem. The overall frustrations of Muslims with the West are such that Saddam enjoys a great degree of sympathy within the Muslim

World. He justifies his quest for domestic and regional power in terms of building "Arab" or "Muslim" power against the West. Thus the ongoing Western military confrontation with Saddam also intensifies anti-Western feeling in the region, as if Muslims believed that the Iraqi people do not somehow deserve something better than Saddam.

In conclusion, as we look over the last century, it is hard not to see a sharpening, rather than a softening of hostility between the Muslim World and the West in many respects -- at least in terms of ideology. And because popular awareness of these anti-Western grievances are growing, we might hypothesize that the overall growth of democracy will probably intensify anti-Western feelings *in the short to medium term*.   This is understandable since their populations as being too pro-Western and doing so primarily to gain external support to stay in power will blame many regimes today allied with the West. Over the longer run, however, it is my belief that the spread of political liberalization in the Middle East will in fact lead to political development, social evolution, and greater political maturity that can only benefit long-term relations between the Middle East and the West.

Factors of Rapprochement between the West and the Muslim World

If there has been an intensification of relations between the Muslim world and the West -- at least at the ideological level -- the picture is not entirely negative. There are many elements in the interrelationship we can point to which suggest rapprochement has taken place as well.

First, movements for Muslim reform at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as that of Jalal-al-din al-Afghani, clearly sought to strengthen the Muslim world vis-à-vis the West. In some ways these reform efforts were
a reaction against some early colonialist moves by the West into the Muslim World, but full-scale colonialism, especially in the Arab world, was yet to come.   Secondly, al-Afghani and others were not so much condemning the West, as seeking to strengthen the Muslim World vis-à-vis the West. In one sense it was *defensive* in character, in another it represented a desire to Westernize.   Westernization was associated primarily with technical knowledge, social organization, democratization and public support, and ultimately with military power. At that time the Muslim critique of the West was limited to its more aggressive military intentions and confrontations with the weaker Muslim world. It did not involve a critique of Western civilization as a whole, and in general the

West was not associated with support for regimes that were seen to be operating against the interests of the people. Blanket condemnation of the West as a culture was still far off.

In this sense, there is a legacy of admiration for many aspects of Western society. That legacy continues down to today for a majority of Muslims who admire Western education, technology, democracy and civil society, strength and stability even if they do not embrace all aspects of Western culture and lifestyle. Most of the Muslim intelligentsia have traveled to the West, even been educated there. They are familiar and comfortable with many aspects of Western life, but they are also critical of many aspects they see of social decay, moral confusion, and a continuing drive for global hegemony. And the grand question remains: what is the degree of connection between the two faces of Western culture? Can one adopt the "good sides" of Western culture without "the bad?"

Second, during the Cold War the West it self began to develop an appreciation for some of the moral strengths of the Muslim World. In an era of struggle against the Soviet Union and the ideology of communism, Western policy makers began to understand, probably for the first time, that Muslim life and beliefs were a strong bulwark against communism, a power ideological weapon against communism, even when some Muslim countries for geopolitical reasons showed some support for Soviet policies in the region. The culmination of this perception was evident in Afghanistan where the West strongly backed Muslim mujahidin in a successful guerrilla warfare against the Soviet occupation. Many in the West at this time recognized, perhaps for the first time on the ideological level, that there may be at least a few shared political values between the West and the Muslim World.

Third, Western political ideas have filtered into contemporary Islamist politics. Faced with increasing exposure to Western ideas, Islamists have begun to accept the logic of certain kinds of Western political institutions that they now perceive as valuable to them. Foremost among these ideas are those of democracy and human rights. The reason for increasing acceptance of these ideas among many -- not all -- Islamists is the fact that the Islamists themselves have often become the primary victims of the absence of these political values in their own societies. Most Islamists feel that they would be the net beneficiaries of greater democracy, and that they would not be jailed and tortured to the same extent if there was greater observance of human rights. This is not to say that Islamists in

power will observe democracy and human rights; that depends on the country, the movement, and the circumstances. But it does mean that the value of these concepts are growing even in the eyes of many Islamists, which suggests at least one area of greater appreciation of Western political values.

The degree to which society should tolerate bad governance is another key area where Western ideas have infiltrated into Islamist thinking. There is, of course, a centuries-old debate over the question of rebellion against "unjust government" or bad governance. 'Ulama, usually closely linked to the state in the course of most of Islamic history, have emphasized the idea that anarchy (*fitna*) is worse than oppression (*dhulm*). This concept, of course, serves the interests of the state. But in more recent decades there has been a reexamination of this debate. As in any religion, there are philosophical approaches and texts in Islam that justifies the importance of stability. But there are also ideas suggesting that a state can be illegitimate --- often defined in terms of oppression, incompetence, corruption or absence of consultation; -- under such conditions, Muslims may then have a right, if not an obligation, to overthrow such illegitimate rule. These concepts (*takfir al-hukkam*) are important in the thinking of many radical Islamist movements today.

While there is no doubt that these ideas of latent revolt against unjust governance can be found within Islam, it is almost surely exposure to Western political doctrine that has encouraged the reexamination of Islamic political thought in the interests of deriving Islamic justification for action against the unjust or illegitimate state.   Such ideas echo very much Jeffersonian political thinking in the Declaration of Independence which has influenced not only the American Revolution, but European political thinking as well -- that there is a positive obligation to overthrow unjust rule. If many Islamist movements today speak in terms of the overthrow of unjust rule, acceptance of the Jeffersonian rationale (even unconsciously) has probably helped the search and promulgation of equivalent ideas in Islamic political thinking.

These concepts of greater democracy and human rights of course do not have to be borrowed wholesale from the West but can be derived from Islamic sources as well. But the impetus for understanding and promoting them may now come primarily from contact with Western governance. This then, is a form of "ideological rapprochement" that will probably grow in importance over time.

Fourth, despite the exercise of Western hegemony in much of the world order today, the West has nonetheless come to accept the sovereignty of Muslim states as well as their integration into the international order. While "power politics" still characterizes the international order, and to some extent always will, Muslim states can now feel themselves to be fully respected players on the international scene. Western and Muslim statesmen are comfortable with each other in most cases, and in the post-Cold War world we are even moving towards a greater degree of consultation and cooperation. This fact represents a major step forward in improved relations between the Muslim world and the West.

Fifth, any discussion of rapprochement between the Muslim World and the West would not be complete without an examination of Muslim emigration to the West. While Muslims who live in the West, especially in Europe, have some grievances about their social acceptability in those societies, they are there in the West by choice, and they value many aspects of Western life beyond the material. Acceptance of many Western ideas by these Muslims is slowly having an impact upon the societies from which they come, and to which they often return. Tolerance of bad governance -- corruption, incompetence, and oppression -- is no longer acceptable in their eyes after exposure to life in Western societies.

Muslims in the West are becoming now a familiar part of the scene, particularly in the UK and the US. Islam is recognized as one of the major religions of the US, there are Muslim chaplains in the US military, the president congratulates the Muslim community on Muslim holy days, and the White House now holds iftar dinners during Ramadan. Muslims may still be far from fully integrated into Western life, but their presence is increasingly familiar and taken as commonplace.

Life in the West has furthermore offered Muslims an unprecedented experience to develop Islamic thinking, in total freedom, for the first time in the history of Islamic society. There is no other place in the world where Muslims can meet, congregate, write, employ the media -- TV, radio, the press, internet, etc. -- to discuss and debate any and all aspects of Islam, reform, justice and good governance. The reform or "modernization" process of Islamic practice is likely to sink intellectual roots in the West before anywhere else and represents a major chapter in the intellectual history of Islam. These trends further assist a rapprochement between the Muslim World and the West.

Finally, there is slowly emerging a body of individuals in both the West and the Muslim World who have an interest in a formal rapprochement between Islam and the West, or Islam and Christianity. Interestingly, this movement in the West has begun in conservative or religious circles who share with many Muslims a concern for crises of modernization that are manifested in the West as well as in the East, particularly as they relate to preservation of values, and problems of the derivation of moral systems in a secular society. In short, the West is arrogant if it thinks that it has the answers to modernization or that it offers the real model to the Muslim World. The West itself is suffering from a crisis of modernization -- at a more advanced level, to be sure -- that is not entirely different from the crisis in the Muslim World. We now hear on both sides the idea of a "common" Abrahamic tradition" that brings Christianity, Islam and Judaism together in an effort to overcome small differences in an effort to confront the larger common problems. An effort to share discussion of these problems and seek common approaches and solutions will do a great deal to affect a rapprochement between Muslim and Western societies.

Conclusion

On balance, I might argue that the confrontation between the Muslim world and the West has grown over the century -- the logical result of the decolonization process in which the Muslim World sought greater independence and sovereignty in a world order created and dominated by the West. But today we witness fully sovereign modern Muslim states able to challenge Western efforts to dominate the international order. And today, after the Cold War, these Muslim states have greater independence and military strength than during the Cold War, or even before. We now have a Muslim nuclear state in Pakistan. Today Islamist ideology is more explicitly anti-Western than ever before. This confrontation need not lead to conflict, but it does suggest a growing tension, requiring Western powers to take Muslim thinking and attitudes more deeply into consideration than ever before in history. If the confrontation is the bad news, the good news is growing recognition by the West of this reality of a diversification of world power.

The ideological confrontation with the West from Islamist ideology will change, in my view, when two conditions are satisfied. First, the Muslim World must itself undergo broad political liberalization or

democratization, granting voice to the public at large to participate in the political decisions of their country. At present people have extremely limited or no input into that process, resulting in a sense of fatalism towards the political process in which people are objects or even victims of the political order rather than participants. Thus the broader Muslim public lacks political responsibility since there is no opportunity to exercise it. When it can achieve greater voice over its own fate, the hope is that members of Middle Eastern societies will be able to react more constructively and creatively towards the challenge of the West.

Second, the architects of the global order will need to take the opinions and concerns of other countries of the world more into consideration in the management of global problems. The Cold War set a bad precedent in which the US was the main power making decisions on behalf of much of the world. Today American preeminence on the international scene is receding somewhat, since American interests are diminishing in the absence of a global threat and the interests of regional players are growing. Issues once vital to the US are now merely important at best, but have become truly vital to the states directly involved.

Americans themselves are also less willing to spend the energy, blood and treasure to maintain a position of absolute leadership in global issues. These two factors mean that the US voice will become less prominent, although of course still important. Under such conditions, Third World countries will be less confronted with situations of US intervention, thereby lessening the scope for friction between the two societies.

Finally, the non-Western world must recognize that the West did not "invent Westernization" Westernization flows out of the experience of Western evolution and could not be significantly deterred. Today the entire world is undergoing such change -- in the social, economic, political, technical, demographic realms -- leading nearly all countries, in one way or another, down the paths of modernization that bring good as well as ill with it. The dilemmas and problems of modernization confront us all. The gap in social structure across the globe will eventually diminish, although there will always be winners and losers on the international scene.

If, then, the past century has been one of increasing confrontation between Islam (Muslims) and the West, the next century may be like to witness the diminution of that confrontation as the processes for change in both the Muslim World and the West outlined above begin to take effect.